

On Europe of Spirit

Hélène Carrère d'Encosse

Madame Hélène d'Encosse has had a remarkable, indeed, a unique destiny. Perhaps no other Russian émigré to France has attained such eminence. Heads of State turn to her for advice and politicians count it an honour to meet her. Her books feature both as set texts for University students and as background material for TV-programmes. Carrère d'Encosse is the permanent secretary of the Académie Française where she is regarded as the most influential woman among the "immortals", as its members are called and is also head of the Institut de France. For many years she served as a member of the European Parliament.

Born Elena Georgievna Zurabishvili, she traces her descent through two powerful noble families. One branch of her family tree includes the Russian Panins, Orlovs and Vassilchikovs, allied with the Ostsee descendants the von Palens; the other branch descends from the Georgian princes Zurabishvili, and Zereteli. Born in France and uniting the East, West and South of the Continent she is a true representative of the European élite.

Le Figaro once called her "the Parisian pythonesse". It is an apt description. Her book "The Fragmented Empire" was written in the late 1970's and proved to be prophetic in predicting the inevitable collapse of the Soviet Union. Many other studies followed, all dealing with different aspects of Russia: its people and rulers, its past and present, its relations with Europe and with Asia. These works have been translated into many languages.

Interview

The Herald of Europe Paris correspondent Kirill Privalov was privileged to meet Madame Carrère d'Encosse, who was kind enough to give an exclusive interview to our journal.

How is the European Union approaching the new century? Do you think that a century ago, when most of the Continent's rulers were related to one another, Europe had better chances for unification?

Jean-Pierre Raffarin, the present Prime-Minister of France has the following expression, "Europe of the people, not of its rulers". Your question concerns the Europe of the ruling élite. What you say is true. Except for the French Republic, all the European States were monarchies and their families were interrelated through dynastic marriages. The King of Denmark was often called the "grandfather of all-Europe"! However, as well as monarchs, emperors and kings, there was also a united, European, intellectual and aristocratic élite that expressed itself traditionally in the same languages, French and German. There was a unity. Nowadays, the Schengen Europeans are amazed that they can travel across the continent without

the need for visas, but a century ago there were no visa regimes in Europe. Or if they remained, they were very relaxed.

At that time the concept of Europe was different, not at all organised from above, as it is now. It was not administrative and it was not administered. No-one regulated the production of cheese or tomatoes. No-one specified the dimensions of cucumbers and water melons. The European ideal was for rapidly developing co-operation in the economic, political and social spheres. Alas, the First World War ruined all that. The assassination in Sarajevo marked the end of the old Europe. It was followed by revolutions – Bolshevik in Russia, Fascist in Italy, National-Socialist in Germany. The era of nationalism came. Nationalism had always existed but it was in the 20th Century that it became rampant. Nowadays we're unfortunately still reaping the fruits of the nationalist "pandemic" of those years.

What do you see as the main driving force behind the creation of today's European Union?

Fear is the key to understanding the motives for creating a united Europe after the Second World War. The French and German politicians – Jean Monnet, Robert Schumann, Konrad Adenauer – had the vision of reconciling the two peoples that had been at war with one another for so many years. It was their force of will that led to the creation of the European Union. The mutual economic interests were realised later. The Union and its associated European institutions are the fruits of these two ideas. Time has shown how fruitful they have been: Europe has become "the island of prosperity and tranquillity" in a stormy sea. Now it faces another task: to protect this isle of ours and to nurture its natural process of expansion eastwards in spite of the Americans' desire to be the only superpower and the world's referee.

Will Europe succeed in this?

At the very least, in the last 50 years Europe has succeeded in building the "European domain". Even the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 and the subsequent international reaction did not cause divisions within Europe in the immediate aftermath. Yes, it is true that there is now no longer a single European international policy, however, there is already a common defence and security policy.

Unfortunately, until now the geopolitical players from both sides of the Atlantic have tended to look backwards rather than forwards. It's become clear that contemporary wars are very different from traditional trench warfare. The West also had experience of the threat of terrorism, including that from Islamic Fundamentalists. Nevertheless, the events of 11 September terrified everyone. What was the reaction? Everyone recognised that a new chapter of history had opened but the conclusions they drew from that, if any, were just the same as in the past. That's why I'm saying that the European Union is above all a form of defence for the participating countries. However, this system can only be efficient when the interests of other European States which are not members of the EU are taken into account, including those of Russia.

Isn't Europe at risk of choking in the process of absorbing new countries in its expansion eastwards?

I don't think so. There should not be a single European bloc. Europe can move at several speeds, its final expansion will take place only when Russia is included in Europe. The European Union has no right to stop at Russia's borders: that's my basic point! Brussels and Strasbourg should find institutions that can adapt to this expansion and make compliance possible. A Europe of 6 states is one thing, Europe of 25 is quite another. In my opinion, the continent should consist, as it were, of large concentric circles: maybe there would be no single system that would be common to all countries. And no country can be left outside this sphere. What do we have at the moment? Even today the Western Europeans are divided by their different perceptions of their economic interests. For instance, in the field of agricultural policy, relations between France and Germany, Britain and Ireland, the Benelux countries and Italy are extremely complicated, and they won't become any easier in the immediate future. The accession of new countries such as Poland and the Czech republic will not mitigate these European contradictions; quite the contrary, it will aggravate them. Another important factor, that of Russia as an exporter of agricultural products, shouldn't be discounted either. That's a new factor in the common inter-European relations.

Are these relations designed to protect European space?

There's no doubt that the territory subject to the Schengen accords, i.e. the European space, should have protection against the growth in drug trafficking, uncontrolled immigration and ultimately, from the poverty that's knocking at our doors. Europe can't accept everyone – people from Africa, Asia, Latin America, but at the same time we should be able to help others. And here, to my mind, officials are too busy interfering in the activities of the existing European institutions. From my many years' experience as a Member of the European Parliament, I know only too well the kind of crude interventionism that the European administration is engaged in. The zeal of bureaucrats is being carried to absurd extremes. And the problem is that while Europe is expanding, its bureaucratic over-engagement keeps on growing. The countries of Eastern Europe have lived for half a century in poverty and need, without the advantages of peace and democracy. Now we see officials attempting to thrust them into the Procrustean bed of directives, limitations and prescriptions laid down by Brussels. There's a lack of fresh air, you know! In recent years the growth in administration has been excessive in Europe, over-regulated as it were. The regulations have become too cumbersome and that's dangerous, both a time of peace and even more in wartime.

I assume you are referring to the constant tensions in the Middle East and especially on account of Iraq?

Just as we recently miscalculated the dangers of terrorism and its consequences, we are now failing to consider the full impact of the war in Iraq, and its consequences. Many European countries are already having acute difficulties with their budget deficits. The war, even though faraway, will inflict even more damage on their economies. There's a risk of violating the fragile world balance, and we sim-

ply cannot predict what the outcome will be. Anything can happen with the European economy, which is not at all “a thing in itself” and is very much bound up with the American market. And there’s one more reality, which one can’t ignore: that is, building the “common European domain” at a time of tension. Some countries such as Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovenia joining NATO, which is, in my view, an absolutely unnecessary step for them. The Soviet Union is no longer a threat to anyone. The correct assumption on the part of these States would be to enter the European “island of tranquillity”, where security is organized collectively. Furthermore, it’s impossible to ensure the security of Europe alone if the interests of its neighbour Russia are not taken into account.

You know, I am constantly surprised at the way European politicians talk about the economic and financial projects of Europe yet completely ignore the single cultural project...

More to the point, there is no single European programme in the field of culture. There is a paradox here. It seems as though at the beginning of the Third millennium there are no longer illiterate people in Europe. The mass media especially as electronic and satellite communications are developed as never before yet. This has not raised the general level of culture in the population. Whereas a century ago, the European ruling classes shared a common culture, literature and music, today’s élite is completely devoid of a single cultural inheritance.

What about the “Europe of the masses”?

It has to be content with the make-believe world of Hollywood films and mindless entertainment. Everything is being done to ensure that “the Europe of the masses” is not responsive to beauty. In the past the models of behaviour and education in Europe were moral and religious and corresponded to a certain humanistic idea. But what’s going on now? The current models of cultural development for the masses are designed to appeal to the lowest common denominator of emotions at the most primitive level. The former models cultivated generosity, nobility, truthfulness in people, elevated them spiritually; now it’s the cultural ersatz to dumb-down and brainwash them as consumers. What is being created today for those de Gaulle called “the people from the metro”? It is not even a subculture, but a sort of Kulturträger consuming bubble-gum. Mindless violence and crude hedonism are being peddled instead of philosophical and humanistic ideas. Is that how it should be?

Forgive me, but it seems to me that such intellectual lamentations have nothing to do with building the European Union.

But they do! It’s this cultural deficit taken to extremes that is capable of hindering the further construction and development of the European Union. What is really happening? In the deepest strata of the population, primarily in the villages, there are many people who still hold to their traditional values. They do not accept the values of the consumer society as it is presented to them on radio and TV and in the newspapers.

What do you mean by traditional values?

They are the family, work and, of course, the Church with its moral and cultural traditions. Don't forget that Europe is the bulwark of Christianity. What I've told you isn't spoken out loud in Europe; it's seen as politically incorrect. Nevertheless, even though mass culture may be fooling people at the moment, Europe is expanding. Its centre is occupied by countries – Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovenia and Slovakia – with strong religious, and above all, Christian traditions. This gives rise to a kind of clash of civilisations, if you know what I mean. In France people are proud that Church and State are separate and that the overwhelming majority of people couldn't recite even one prayer in its entirety. I'm not sure that that's a good thing. In isolating the Church from the country's development, we've impoverished ourselves, first of all. The sad paradox lies in the fact that we've become witnesses of Europeans undermining the moral, cultural and religious values that have basically made Europe what it is. Its citizens have destroyed the "Europe of a common culture" before it has even been created. Nowadays no-one is asserting rights to it. No-one is even interested in it! But this common culture and these common moral assumptions were the medium that nurtured the growth of today's European Union.

So Europe has been orphaned!

Europe has orphaned itself because its inhabitants are not courageous enough to revive its traditions, to take advantage of its cultural heritage. After the Second World War there were many international forums, at which the slogan «Peace not War!» was voiced. At that time the mutual interest was in material advance not in ideals or culture. Of course, it was based on ideas one should admire: «What must we do to prevent people from killing one another? To ensure that war doesn't break out again?» But all that is already in the past. Now it's a question of how Europeans can find fulfilment together in such a complicated and threatening world? And, more generally, what is the European Union? This question has never been properly put.

Then let's put it! What is the European Union?

Today's European Union is the result of rationalism. It was created at the summons not of the heart, but of necessity. Many countries wanted in one way or another way to make public atonement for their faults. The Germans – for the gas chambers, the Italians – for Fascism, the French – for collaboration with the Nazis, the Spanish – for the Civil War. And they repented quite successfully. So successfully that a spirit of pacification still reigns in Europe today; they're saying, «we've made so much progress, we are so good now!» But under this aegis we can pile up new follies, if we just keep our heads in the clouds and don't reflect on the past. I don't know, but our Europe is evidently lacking something! The Europeans' desire to leave aside all the spiritual elements of life really annoys me. However, I'm delighted that in all countries, including those of Eastern Europe, there is a common desire for civil peace. On the whole, the break with Communism passed almost painlessly for the Central and East European countries.

Can this be attributed to Europe's assistance to those countries?

Hardly! Take Russia, for instance. At a time when Russia was really expecting help, Europe refused to offer any assistance during the hard transition period from totalitarianism to democracy. Not only did Europe not do anything positive for Russia, but it gave Russians the feeling that the Iron Curtain had been pulled down only for Western Europe to put them in isolation. And then there is the way that NATO has come closer to Russia's borders. The Atlantic Alliance is no longer dangerous for Russia, of course, but just from a psychological point of view, it's an unpleasant signal. It stirs up feelings of unease. In trying to isolate Russia at that time, Europe made a big mistake. I remember, as a member of the European Parliament, the calls I heard in Strasbourg such as: "Invest in Russia and you'll see a good return!" But that was as far as it went! Contrary to general opinion, I can tell you that relations between countries are based on more than economic considerations.

What is the basis of the Western attitude towards Russia? Is it fear or a failure to recognise its potential?

Even in the 16th Century, European travellers coming to Russia looked at Russians as if they were different people. They regarded them with curiosity, like freaks in a fairground. Of course, in every period there were some conscientious travellers like Madame de Staël or Honoré de Balzac. But the majority of European travellers were not distinguished for their objectivity or honesty. The most notorious among them was the French astronomer Jean Chappe d'Autroche, who travelled all over Russia during the reigns of Elizabeth and Catherine II. This man saw nothing in Russia beyond drunken serfs, beating their wives. As if there was a time when the level of alcoholism was any lower in French villages! I'm sure Chappe d'Autroche was sent to Russia on a special intelligence mission. He wrote exactly what Louis XV, who hated Russia, wanted to read. Honestly, it's like a typical Soviet scribbler, trying to second guess what his bosses want him to do! This is why the travel notes of Chappe d'Autroche, a book by an author welcomed by the authorities, were published in France in so many editions – to help legitimize the official view of Russia as a "barbarous country".

Needless to say, there were so many myths that emerged in the West about our Asiatic power!

There is a whole legion of Western travellers who invented tall tales about Russia. Isn't it paradoxical that none of the general public remembers the writings of Astolphe de Custin, but everyone recalls his tea party "under the cranberries" in the Moscow suburbs!¹ There are only two possible Western reactions to Russia: either to hate it or to feel inspired simply on hearing its name. But it's completely impossible to see this country as others see it. Russia may have been mocked under the Louis' and Napoleons but it certainly wasn't under Stalin. And when "the father of the people" invited well-known foreigners to Moscow and organized a reception for them, the western intellectuals and businessmen were absolutely delighted. Stalin managed to create a whole army of pro-communist collaborators, whose reaction bordered on the idiotic. "Now I believe in the dawn!" – exclaimed

the French writer Pierre Dièxe after his visit to the USSR. And that was at the same time as Victor Kravchenko's trial in Paris.

What do you think about the current Western myth of the Russian mafia?

The country has been looted and is still being looted! And not by those murdering cash carriers in dark alleys with grandfather's ancient axe. The true culprits are far more important people. In this respect Russia is no different from other countries that have undergone their first experience of the accumulation of wealth. When I mentioned that Jacob and Isaac Pereira were not bankers and politicians of the Second Empire but inveterate Mafiosi, my Parisian interlocutors hardly understood what I was talking about. It's more convenient for them to go on regarding these lucky swindlers, who gained millions from financial speculations and the building of railways, as respectable bourgeois with a Paris street named after them. One shouldn't pretend that Russians were the ones who invented mafia structures. There's nothing original in the dishonest business of the Russian mafia. And there's no need to travel to the banks of the Neva or Moskva rivers to study the criminal underworld. You only have to try to carry out some serious business like a building project in Sicily or in our very own Corsica. Such an agitation about the "Russian mafia" is blown up because of the Custin-like "cranberry" stereotype, treating the Russians as abnormal people.

But still there are many differences between Russia and the West. And a main one is that little attention is paid to rational criteria in Russia. In decision-making people very often address their hearts first, and then their reason.

Western rationality and pragmatism are mainly genetic categories. No country in the world has gone through so many changes in one century as Russia has. Bringing up three generations under Communism destroyed the nation's memory, made notches in the genetic code, and replaced it with something else. In China you can still meet people who remember the way people lived before totalitarian rule. There are no longer people in Russia who can remember that far back. Hence this amazing modern Russian eclectic in the perception of history and all that's linked with it. Hence this monstrous mixture in coats of arms and symbols. I don't think the pages of history should be erased, reason tells us we should accept the past as it was. It would be wrong to rewrite history. Except that the restoration of the Dzerzhinsky monument really does seem like taunting the memory of the millions murdered during repressions. That's quite disgraceful! But basically I don't think one should throw away all the statues of the Soviet era, apart from such monsters as the Iron Felix. They are all part of our historic heritage.

And what about the Kremlin red stars replicated on buildings even in the remote areas?

Let them be. They also belong to history. A civilised person should escape from destruction and should learn to live, facing up to the past as well as looking to the future. Russia was, is and always will be a Christian country. Doesn't repentance reflect the spirit of Christian humility?

You've started to speak about faith. You were awarded the highest decoration of the Moscow patriarchy – the order of Andrew the First-Called. Are you disturbed by the over-attachment of this Church to the State?

The Russian Orthodox Church has always served the State ever since the time of Peter the Great. Only in 1917 was there a slight flicker of freedom. It would be so exciting to search the archives of that period and to study the role of the Church during the brief rule of the Interim Government. The Russian Church always had a rigid and over-regulated structure. It's not the Bolsheviks who invented the Holy Synod! Nor is it the formalism of the Moscow patriarchy, but its intolerance that upsets me. Not long ago I travelled to Novosibirsk, from where a Catholic priest had been banished. While I was there I gave a talk to local university students. I told them about the Russian émigrés to France in the 1920s, about the "philosophers' ship"², about Father Sergey Bulgakov³, about the outstanding orthodox thinkers abroad. I also told them of the amazing evolution of Catholicism towards democracy and ecumenism. I told the students, "You should be proud of those Russian people who managed to protect the ecumenical traditions of Orthodox Christianity in exile".

Do you think your audience responded to your call?

Yes, absolutely! The young people of Russia are splendid. They are thirsting for knowledge and they understood me and they immediately grasped what I was talking about. Russia has always lived in search of the past. The Tartars were less destructive than the Communist regime. At least they didn't destroy the monasteries.

The Asiatic past and Communism are two indisputable givens of today's Russia. How long will they remain with us?

One ought not to wipe out the past. One should remember it so as not to repeat the same mistakes. Seeing high-ranking Russian officials making enthusiastic preparations for the "red letter day" celebrations of Vladimir Putin's birthday, I didn't know whether to laugh or cry! Gentlemen and comrades, even if you have no respect for yourselves, at least refrain from humiliating your President with this fawning adulation. As an historian, I can tell you that even the preparations for the Birthday festivities of the emperor were nowhere near as ostentatious. This is a genuine reversion to the personal cult. It's not a Russian tradition, it's more Asiatic!

Every so often the West is critical of Russia's Asiatic traits. The country has a rather poor inheritance!

It's not up to Europe to tell Russia how it should live. This country should choose for itself. It's the worst possible behaviour – to criticise your next-door neighbours, even to play dirty tricks on them in the quiet. Russia has no reason to have an inferiority complex towards Europe. Of course, serfdom existed in Russia until the mid-19th Century, but then it was still in existence in Germany and Sweden as well. Russia's history is not just a chronicle of barbarity.

Nevertheless, Europe has always tried to judge Russia.

Yes, but also the Soviet regime, which called itself the “future of the world”, judged the rest of the world. And the European intellectuals joyfully supported it. But ultimately the West never wanted to see Russia in Europe. Never! And America had no interest at all in restoring Russia after the USSR had collapsed: Russia was a potential enemy for it. There are few countries that Europe would regard as negatively as Russia. Louis XV said, «Let Russia disappear from all the world’s great political maps!» It’s quite axiomatic that the Muslim Ottoman Empire and Protestant Sweden were much closer to France than to Russia. The greatness of Catherine II lies in the fact that she managed to break through this siege around Russia when everyone wanted to see it as a marginal state of Europe. However, all that is in the past for me. I wrote my monograph about Catherine the Great, slammed the door behind me in the 18th Century and returned to contemporary history.

Have you written about Voltaire? He is one of my favourite historical characters.

Oh, Russia needs a new Voltaire so desperately! It needs a person everyone would listen to. Someone authoritative to stand up and say: “Compatriots, let’s think about our Motherland!” The tragedy is that the Russian intelligentsia keeps silent. Society no longer wants it! There are too many goods in the supermarkets for people to feel the need for spiritual nourishment as well. There’s an absence of great figures: Andrey Sakharov is dead, Alexander Solzhenitsyn is weary. If he had returned to Russia in 1991, I think that Russian history might have taken another turn. But he didn’t. However, this is a world-wide phenomenon: there are no moral authorities in other countries either.

It really is quite strange. When Russia is oppressed it makes its voice heard, but when the oppression ends, the voices fall silent.

Do you know what it was that saved Russia from a collapse of morale under the Communists? Well, I’ll tell you, it was the kitchen. Every evening the family would be gathered there, guests would join them, often just dropping in when they saw a light in the window, and people went on talking, arguing until midnight, shouting themselves hoarse! How many of my memories are connected with kitchens in Moscow and St. Petersburg! Russia kept itself alive because its culture and spirituality were protected during the whole of the 20th Century by the kitchen shelves, painted pots and pans, casseroles and teapots. Now the Russians have left for their dachas and their comfortable flats; they wallow in the troubles of the market economy. A new epoch has arrived! And without knowing why, I feel very sad, looking at this Russia.

¹ Translator’s Note.

Cranberries, of course, grow at ground level so Custin’s reference to a tea party under them is nonsense. The phrase has passed into the Russian language as an idiom for stupidity or misunderstanding.

² Famous act of Lenin’s government – in 1922 around 500 philosophers, thinkers and representatives of intelligentsia were deported out of Russia on a ship and settled all over Europe.

³ Sergey Bulgakov was an economist, Marxist and later became a devoted orthodox priest.