

Abstract

The book entitled *Droga do Rosji. Spór o Imperium carów (1761–1839)* [*The Road to Russia. Debate over the Empire of the Tsars (1761–1839)*] attempts to synthetically present the question of Russia's identity, delineate the place, its culture and civilization hold in Europe and discuss the perception of Russia in the West.

The title of the book, *The Road to Russia*, is a reference to the *Digression in Forefathers' Eve Part III* by Adam Mickiewicz. The concept of a „road” refers firstly to a journey – the itineraries of wanderers and explorers crossing the vast areas of the Russian Empire. But the inner intellectual cognition of this country and the learning of its ways is also a road to Russia. Another perspective associated with a road is the confrontation between the realities of Russia and the mental images carried by newcomers arriving from the West; this is then, Russia „under Western eyes” just as in Joseph Conrad literature, perpetually oscillating between acceptance and rejection.

The work consists of four parts, each encompassing the reigns of particular tsars. Part one, entitled *Światła w ciemności (1761–1796)* [*Lights in the darkness (1761–1796)*] pertains to the enlightened reign of Catherine II; part two, *Parady (1796–1801)* [*Parades (1796–1801)*] focuses on Paul I; part three, *Tajemnice Sfinksa (1802–1823)* [*The Secrets of Sphinx (1802–1823)*] relates to the period of the Holy Alliance, Restoration and the reign of Alexander I. The book closes with the period of the Romanticism and harsh rule personified by Nicholas I: *Żandarm Europy (1824–1839)* [*Europe's Gendarme (1824–1839)*].

Each of the above parts is divided into two independent sections. The first contains a extensive synthetic commentary, written in the spirit of the Warsaw School of the history of ideas, explaining the intricacies and nuances of social, political, religious, scientific, cultural and civilisational issues pertaining to the reign of the given monarch. Thus, the golden legend of the Russian Enlightenment and the introduction of the Russian civilisation into the salons of Western Europe, are associated with Catherine II. Paul I imposed a theatrical tone on the socio-political relations within the Empire and answered the French Revolution's call to freedom with endless drills and military parades. Alexander I, whose reign is linked with the downfall of the „god of war” Napoleon I, presents a certain conundrum to historians. He mysteriously embodied two contradictory characters, the liberal monarch and the reactionary mystichated by the people of Europe; the leader of the alliance of three black eagles. Finally Nicholas I, known as the *palkin* (bludgeon-wielder) in Poland, who carried out Russia's historical mission to the full as Europe's arbiter and executioner. The Romantics questioned the tsars' Empire, which was so eager to promote its European cultural identity. In answer they heard another utopian myth of Slavonic unity, that of pan-Slavism, which as we know, together with pan-Germanism, would strike the match to ignite the First World War and the ensuing confrontation of these nationalisms would bury the inhuman tsarist system in the graves of millions.

The second set of issues which constitutes the descriptive and narrative part of the book is the presentation of debates which, in the author's opinion, were of crucial importance to Russia and Europe in that given era. All the presented polemicists expressed themselves in French (after all, French was the *lingua franca* of the Enlightenment and of the Romanticism). This can be misleading considering that they were respectively, German (Catherine II and A. von Kotzebue), Swiss (Ch.-F.-Ph. Masson), Sardinian (J. de Maistre), Polish (J. Potocki) and French (J. Chappe d'Auteroche, A. de Custine and H. Balzac).

The extensive *Introduction* contains a clarification of the historical paradigm of Russian identity and its fundamental socio-political core based on the authoritarian system. From the times of Ivan III, this system was based on three pillars: the Orthodox Church, the tsarist patrimonialism and the militarisation. These features, typical of the power wielded by the autocratic tsars, were often an object of admiration and even envy of Western European intellectuals. This boundless fascination has been aptly described as the „Russian mirage”. This issue recurs in the *Conclusion*, where four aspects of the utopian enchantment with Russia are highlighted. The first of those is described as the *novus ordo sœculorum*, the mirage of „history's point zero”; the second is the *tabula rasa*, the illusion of Russia being a pure, unwritten page; the third – based on deranged social engineering – pertains to the phantasmal idea of creating a „new man”, the prefiguration of the 20th-century *homo sovieticus*; and finally, the fourth is the Russian Eden, the utopia of earthly paradise, the land of perpetual happiness. The four-fold Russian mirage is a lure to ensnare the West and cause the disintegration of its unity. Russia was always perfectly versed in making use of such internal tensions and acting in accordance with the old maxim *divide et impera*. At all times, the West's weakness was Russia's strength.

The book's *Appendices* contains two types of source documents which round out the knowledge about the Empire of the North. *Appendix A* contains fourteen engravings by Jean-Baptiste Le Prince, which constituted a beautiful graphic supplement to the book *Voyage en Sibérie* by Chappe d'Auteroche. They are reproductions of plates included in the copy of this book held in the Kórnik Library of the Polish Academy of Sciences and are provided with explanatory commentaries. *Appendix B* contains a facsimile of the hitherto unknown letters by Astolphe de Custine to Eugeniusz Breza and their translation into Polish. This correspondence sheds new light on the origin of de Custine's *La Russie en 1839* and issues linked with its publication, as well as explains the nature of the relationship between Ignacy Gurowski and de Custine. In addition, these documents, discovered in the State Archive in Poznań, reveal many interesting details about the romantic love of Ignacy Gurowski and Isabel de Borbón, the Spanish infanta.

The book closes with the index of names and an extensive bibliography, which includes source materials and studies that provided the material basis for the monograph. The most important among the latter, are the works of scholars with whom the author has a particular affinity; Martin Malia, Richard Pipes and Andrzej Walicki.