

MAREK MOSAKOWSKI  
(UNIWERSYTET GDAŃSKI, GDAŃSK)CLAUDE CARLOMAN DE RULHIÈRE AND HIS TESTIMONY ON  
CATHERINE II. DECONSTRUCTING RUSSIAN MYTHS IN  
EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY FRANCE

## ABSTRACT

Claude Carloman de Rulhière was a French diplomat and writer who was sent to Russia in 1762 as a secretary to the French ambassador. During his stay in St. Petersburg, he eye-witnessed the coup d'état staged by the future Catherine II to dethrone Peter III and to seize the imperial power. Upon his return to Paris, Rulhière publicized his testimony of the event. It soon became notorious and provoked controversy, splitting French elites into supporters and detractors of Catherine II. The agents of the empress attempted to persuade him not to divulge his text, but Rulhière did not succumb to their financial offers and resolved to reveal the truth.

KEYWORDS: RULHIÈRE, RUSSIA, ENLIGHTENMENT, CATHERINE II, PETER III

## STRESZCZENIE

Claude Carloman de Rulhière był francuskim dyplomatą i pisarzem. W 1762 wyjechał do Rosji jako sekretarz ambasadora Francji. W czasie pobytu w Petersburgu był świadkiem zamachu stanu zorganizowanego przez Katarzynę II, by zdetronizować Piotra III i przejąć władzę. Po powrocie do Paryża upublicznił swoje świadectwo tego wydarzenia, które wkrótce zyskało sławę i wzbudziło liczne kontrowersje, dzieląc francuskie elity na zwolenników i przeciwników Katarzyny II. Agenci carycy usiłowali nakłonić go, by przestał rozpowszechniać swój tekst, ale Rulhière nie uległ ich finansowym ofertom i postanowił ujawnić prawdę.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: RULHIÈRE, ROSJA, OŚWIECENIE, KATARZYNA II, PIOTR III

The newly westernized Russia, which in the course of the 18<sup>th</sup> century went through a series of large-scale reforms, first effectuated by Peter the Great and later continued by Catherine II, became the natural focus of attention of the prominent French thinkers of the Enlightenment. In fact, Russia quickly turned out to be a true infatuation of Parisian learned circles. There were many reasons for this rather startling and widespread development. Paul Hazard attributed it to a general shift in socio-economic and political dynamics in Europe of that time and ensuing reorientation of intellectual interests in France. As a result, the French enlightened elites discarded Spain and Italy as their exclusive points of cultural reference. At the

beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the ancient and venerable idea of the common Latin heritage, still of great value in France during the Renaissance and counter-reformation, had finally lost its previously unrivaled appeal (Hazard 1961: 69). Now it was England, particularly the manifest advantages of its recently established constitutional monarchy and subsequent religious tolerance that provoked many French freethinkers to openly demand analogous reforms to transform their native dictatorial absolutism into a more bearable political regime. One of the most vocal French admirers of England was assuredly Voltaire, who traveled there in 1728 and, in consequence, published in 1734 his groundbreaking *Lettres philosophiques*, where he highly applauded English political and religious liberties as well as tangible effects of British empiricism. What is more, he affirmed that England indeed epitomized the spirit of modernity, promoting progress and fostering scientific revolution. Later, towards the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, this reorientation of French cultural interests extended to Prussia ruled by Frederick the Great, deemed to be a truly enlightened king and a progressive reformer of his states. Eventually, the French intellectual curiosity shifted farther to the East, namely to Russia, which at that time was conceived of as a Northern rather than an Eastern empire (Hazard 1961: 69–70).

Russia – distant and fairly exotic, but politically quite promising – played a different role in the cultural awareness of the French than England or Prussia did. The roots of its growing acclaim arose from utopian thinking, a broad literary current popular in France in the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> century, which produced a great variety of works and genres. The French readers adored novels depicting imaginary voyages to either little known or purely fictitious states, including extraterrestrial domains. Many of them, for instance *La terre australe connue*, published by Gabriel de Foigny in 1686, or *Voyages et aventures de Jacques Massé*, written by Tyssot de Patot in 1710, became real bestsellers. Another quasi-utopian literary figure to enjoy public recognition in France and in many other European countries as well was the Marquis d'Argens, author of a trilogy entitled *Lettres juives*, *Lettres cabalistiques* and *Lettres chinoises*. His voluminous work, reminiscent of *Lettres persanes* by Montesquieu, had several editions between 1735 and 1750. In the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, however, utopian literature lost its momentum in France. Imaginary lands of socio-political perfection and fictitious travels to paradise-like destinations had been replaced by much more realistic and materially objective accounts of political fiction. Curiously enough, it was Russia that became a very tempting substitute for the utopian fantasies of the French (Lortholary 1951: 2). Hence the French philosophical imagination shifted towards the vast and still unexplored empire of the Czars, which under Peter the Great and Catherine II became a new frontier of the Enlightenment, a true workshop for unprecedented socio-political reforms (Lortholary 1951: 6). The attention paid in France to the noble savage, a privileged hero of many literary works since the publication of Lahontan's famous account of his voyages to North America in 1704 (Ellingson 2001: 65), focused now on an entirely different object – the recently

fashioned, westernized Russian citizen (von Mohrenschildt 1936: 4). Before long, the leading figures of the French Enlightenment were anxious to commit themselves to a new historical mission - to educate and civilize the ancient Muscovy (Wolff 1994: 87). Thus a formidable illusion was born – in fact, many French writers saw in westernized Russia an enticing image of the Enlightenment incarnate. The first in line was Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle, author of the *Éloge du Czar Pierre Ier*, published in 1725. In his uncritical eulogy of the late Russian Czar, Fontenelle laid solid foundations for the Petrine myth in France, which he unfailingly promoted until his death in 1757. Fontenelle deemed Peter the Great to be the ground zero of Russian history, a genius who created Russia out of pure nothingness. In fact, he depicted the Czar's ardent effort to modernize his land as reminiscent of God's *creatio ex nihilo* (Le Bovier de Fontenelle 1792: 173–174). One generation later, in the 1750s and 1760s, Voltaire and Diderot founded in turn the myth of Catherine II, often represented as the Semiramis or Minerva of the North. However, not all eighteenth-century philosophers and writers affiliated with the French Enlightenment shared this enthusiastic vision of Russia. Far from it, those who travelled to the East and experienced in flesh the allegedly progressive Muscovite socio-political paradise found it rather disgraceful, if not abominable. Not only did their testimonies prove Fontenelle's or Voltaire's abstract speculations to be completely false, they actually discredited the French philosophical russophilia altogether. One of them was an Italian adventurer, Francesco Locatelli, author of the *Lettres Moscovites*, published in 1735, which offered a rather scathing narrative denouncing Muscovy as the most despotic empire in the world. His eye-witness account based on his own fateful experience, that of an innocent victim of the Russian penal system and its sinister institutions, became so popular in Europe that in 1736 it was translated from French into English under the title of the *Muscovian Letters*.

A short pamphlet entitled *Histoire ou anecdotes sur la révolution de Russie en l'année 1762*, written by Claude Carlotman de Rulhière, was another highly critical testimony on Russia by a French eye-witness. In this article we shall closely examine Rulhière's work for three major reasons. To start with, it perfectly exemplifies intellectual tensions between French eighteenth-century socio-political theoreticians who never went to Russia and those who ventured there and experienced Russian reality in person. Secondly, though relatively popular in its time, Rulhière's text remains fairly unknown today even to the specialists in the 18th century. And, last but not least, *Histoire ou anecdotes sur la révolution de Russie en l'année 1762* represents a peculiar hybrid of literary genres, the more so that the author himself was perfectly aware of its unprecedented characteristics.

Initially circulating in several re-copied manuscripts only, *Histoire ou anecdotes sur la révolution de Russie en l'année 1762* quickly gained an unexpected notoriety. It was read to the public and widely commented in various Parisian cultural milieus, including the salon of Madame du Deffand, the Duc de Choiseul and Madame Geoffrin, whose literary assembly, in contrast to the two former, was a major non-

aristocratic forum for exchange of ideas in the 1760s, thus attracting the most socially diverse crowds (Haechler 2001: 153). But despite its evident acclaim, Rulhière's text was not published until 1797, more than ten years after the author's death (Carloman de Rulhière 1819: v). Why then was it so popular? Because *Histoire ou anecdotes sur la révolution de Russie en l'année 1762* depicted in a very singular manner a highly controversial historical event, namely the successful coup d'état orchestrated by Catherine II to eliminate her mentally incapacitated husband, Peter III, and in consequence to replace him on the imperial throne. All details of this gruesome episode were followed by European public with utmost attention and animated vivid disputes both in political and philosophical circles of the West. In France, as everywhere else, the public opinion was in fact very much perplexed on this contentious issue. The progressive, pro-Russian faction of intellectuals, such as Voltaire, Diderot and their acolytes generally identified with *Encyclopaedia*, greeted Catherine's palace revolution with enthusiasm. What is more, they attempted by any means necessary to run counter and eventually destroy Rulhière's inauspicious testimony. Conversely, a group of traditionalists associated with the royal court and its disillusioned anti-philosophical stand, regarded Catherine's act as an evident case of regicide. It was led by the Duc de Choiseul, the then minister of foreign affairs, whose general policy, based on strong anti-Russian and pro-Polish sentiments, attracted to him many prominent and highly placed detractors of the new Russian empress. One of them was Claude Carloman de Rulhière, half writer, half diplomat, whose book on Russia produced a genuine turmoil in Paris. It also sparked public mistrust and rivalry among leading French writers, not to mention an upsurge of intense political factionalism. Thus Rulhière's pamphlet grew into a very important social phenomenon. It was perhaps one of the earliest examples of a venture which in the 20<sup>th</sup> century came to be known as engaged art. In fact, the controversy underlying Rulhière's work and its unforeseen consequences proved that literature could indeed serve as a mighty weapon when used for political or social reasons (Masseau 2000: 156–162). It also showed the enormous influence of philosophical propaganda on various aspects of international relations.

Claude Carloman de Rulhière, born in 1735 in Bondy near Paris, was educated by the Jesuits. Upon his graduation from college, he resolved to enter Parisian society, where he made himself famous as a poet of considerable talent writing in the style of Horace and a zealous defender of Latin verse. His major literary accomplishment was then the *Épître sur les disputes*, discussed by Voltaire in his *Dictionnaire philosophique* (Carloman de Rulhière 1819: ii). Soon Rulhière's wit and intelligence were appreciated by the Jesuits, who asked him to join their order and to pursue an ecclesiastic career. Although Rulhière declined the offer, he was nonetheless highly recommended by Père Latour to Louis-Auguste de Breteuil, whose close friendship and important rank in the French foreign ministry changed the course of the young writer's life.

In 1760 Breteuil was nominated the French ambassador to St. Petersburg and asked Rulhière to accompany him there as his secretary (Carloman de Rulhière 1819: ii). The proposition was accepted without hesitation. For a young and ambitious man, that Rulhière assuredly was, it represented a long awaited possibility not only for a rapid political advancement, but for an intellectual adventure and excitement as well. However, the astounding series of events, which deeply shook Russia at that time and radically changed its destiny, far surpassed everything Rulhière had expected to see prior to his arrival in St. Petersburg. In fact, during his stay at the Imperial court he had a rare possibility to witness the erratic dynamics of the last months of Peter III's short and turbulent reign, marked by his eccentric behavior, and then to follow the bewildering circumstances of Catherine's coup d'état.

Rulhière's insider experience of the conspiracies and court intrigues stirring up the Russian capital, backed by his literary talent and wit, produced one of the most facetious accounts on Russia written in eighteenth-century France. *Histoire ou anecdotes sur la révolution de Russie en l'année 1762* is a very peculiar text indeed. Essentially, it represents a strange mixture of different styles and genres, defying the rigid laws of classicism, prevalent in the 1760s. Which surprises all the more that Rulhière always declared himself a passionate partisan of Latin antiquity. The elements of the macabre and grotesque, adopted by him to show the extreme instability of the Russian political scene, coincide with solemn elegiac accents used to render the gravity of the momentous historical event. All through the text the oratorical tone alternates with persiflage and virulent irony. Rulhière's generally mocking attitude and his keen sense of the absurd seem at times to blend with an ominous voice of a terrified participant. In fact, Russia was the ultimate example of aberration for him. So he wanted to invent a novel means of representation, a far cry from harmonies of classical rationality, entirely useless when it comes to capturing the ever-elusive, unfathomable essence of Russia. In a dedicatory letter to the Countess d'Egmont Rulhière recognized the need to create something new, a hybrid of earlier conventions and narrative genres, as no existing model could depict monstrous inconsistencies of Russia:

I took, and that is true indeed, all my pains to get to the bottom of the most secret intrigues of the event that I am relating here, but I did not consider writing its history. Your sheer desire determined me to do it. So when the choice of style for my account is concerned, it is your taste that I followed having no previous model to use. (...) Frequent questions you asked me about this event guided, so to speak, my account and forced me to inject indulgence and badinage into a more substantive and rather serious story. (...) Perhaps, in fact, such a strange event required a singular narrative genre. The importance of different interests involved, as we are dealing here with an empire, after all, the singularity of action, the horrors of impending doom and the sheer name of Catherine II surely attributed greatness and celebrity to this revolution, but frivolous character of the intrigues, a true driving force of this revolution, the licentiousness of Russian morals and puerilities of the miserable emperor Peter III, which caused his downfall, could not have been depicted in any other way than by

abandoning a serious and sustained style. Representing them by means of general traits, which this kind of narrative requires, would have exposed me to loss of all credibility.

(Carloman de Rulhière 1819: 277, 258–259)<sup>1</sup>

Rulhière signals again and again the necessity to develop an original conceptual approach to depict the circumstances of the Russian revolution, which essentially eluded representation. He expresses this idea in another passage of his dedicatory letter:

To correctly assess all human actions we need more than just to consult sentiments of admiration, interest or pity. Sometimes we can find a certain grandeur intermingled with vicious deeds. A touch of genius can be carried into violent crimes, weaknesses can look delightful and the most fatal acts of imprudence might be associated with heroism.

(Carloman de Rulhière 1819: 260)

Dynamic fluidity of the narrative, abrupt changes of tone, and sudden twists between the serious and the grotesque seemed for Rulhière the only viable means of representing the Russian inherent formlessness. In his testimony Russia emerges as a freakish place where nothing is impossible, where the unthinkable becomes ultimate reality, and where the most ludicrous or absurd can swiftly degenerate into the most deadly serious without an interim stage or continuity. Russia is a self-deconstructing entity, a postmodern-like semantic hallucination where the signified and the signifier are in a state of perpetual flux set in the backdrop of universal referential chaos. To further exemplify his own epistemological disorientation Rulhière evaluates the nature of Russian despotism. He observes, utterly stupefied, that in Russia the most atrocious acts of despotism can quickly turn into their own parody. The Czars, theoretically holders of the most absolute power in Europe, are in fact miserably compliant puppets, subject to capricious moods of the people or vagaries of fate. Nobody better than Peter III embodied this self-deconstructing essence of Russian despotism. Catherine's revolution ended abruptly his autocratic rule over Russia. His imperial prerogatives, formally unlimited, were reduced to nothingness in the course of just several hours. Such spectacular descent from dubious glory to precipitous political annihilation can only happen in Russia:

No other more absolute power is known on Earth than that of the Russian sovereigns. Across their whole empire their will is the only law and the only morality is obedience. Here, however, we shall see how wretched their condition is and how their power, which goes beyond every limit prescribed to human beings, came to ruin, so it is even more disastrously limited from every part, because it must abide by the very instruments it employs, by the militia forces, by superstition and public prejudices. It is indeed by virtue of true blindness

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations used in this article were translated from the original French into English by its author.

that most of the princes are so concerned with forging for themselves such chains. They forget that when they cease to respect the will of a free people, they will sooner or later have to submit themselves to the caprices of a vulgar imbecile.

(Carloman de Rulhière 1819: 262–263)

One of the major reasons for Russia's socio-political derangement was, according to Rulhière, the shocking absence of women from public life. In truth, he considered their mute docility and total subservience to men as the principal cause of permanent disarray governing Russian politics, which, in turn, leads to general incivility and lack of sophistication. Rulhière deplores women's marginal role in Russia's social fabric and their status as mere instruments in men's hands. This conspicuous deficit of feminine agency can only breed widespread depravation of morals. It sadly infects all layers of the population, brings extreme violence to interpersonal relations and ultimately contributes to an endless series of bloody revolutions. When rules of courtesy are silent and ethical codes find no application whatsoever, cruelty reigns and arbitrariness prevails. Consequently, the most spectacular ascent of the simplest subject to the highest ranks of the imperial establishment is not rare or unusual in Russia. In fact, it is a common practice:

Although the Russian women were in fact recently allowed to enter the society, at the end of the last century they still lived in confinement and played no role whatsoever in domestic authority. (...) This captivity of women living in the middle of a crowd of slaves resulted in total moral derangement. So when Peter I created the society at last, he needed nothing else to do but to severely curtail very degenerated manners. The last Empresses were not in the least deemed to have stained the glory of their reign by having chosen a crowd of lovers from all the ranks of their subjects, even from the serfs. Under the present reign the Empire was ruled by a young favorite, while a simple Cossack, whose first fortune was to play the serpent in the palatial chapel, managed to promote himself so high that he was able to secretly espouse the empress.

(Carloman de Rulhière 1819: 277–278)

Rulhière's insightful comments on the condition of Russian women correspond to equally discerning observations made concurrently by Jean Chappe d'Autroche, a renowned French academician and philosopher who was sent to Russia on a scientific mission in 1761 to examine a rare astronomical phenomenon – the passage of Venus under the Sun's disk. Seven years later, in 1768, Autroche published *Voyage en Sibérie*, a comprehensive scholarly report dedicated primarily to the astronomical phenomenon in question, but also containing extensive notes on various aspects of the Russian contemporary social and political life. His book quickly turned out to be highly destructive to the overall image of Russia, hence it provoked an instantaneous reaction of the imperial court. Catherine II, who felt personally attacked, was extremely infuriated by this work. So she decided to publish in French a lengthy refutation, entitled *Antidote, ou Examen d'un mauvais*

*livre superbement imprimé, intitulé Voyage en Sibérie* (Alexander 1989: 133). Her main objective was to disavow most of Autroche's critical assertions, notably the ones she found particularly injurious to her own image in the West. What then did Autroche write about Russia to merit such violent reaction? Following into Rulhière's footsteps, he chiefly emphasized the fundamental value of public trust, indispensable for any human society to thrive, yet strikingly absent in Russia despite reformatory enthusiasm of its recent rulers. He also posed the same relevant question his predecessor did: how can culture flourish in a land where women suffer from social oppression and where friendships, which generally prompt people of similar interests and tastes to grow and mutually develop, are hindered by a despotic and tyrannical regime? For Autroche civility, freedom, public trust and prosperity were inalienable and inseparable foundations of human happiness:

Society is, in general, very little known in Russia, especially beyond Moscow. But how can it be established under a government where nobody enjoys political liberty, which everywhere else warrants security of each citizen? In Russia people mutually fear each other, so here we only see mistrust, falseness and deceit. Friendship, a sentiment which makes human life charming, was never known in Russia. But friendship presupposes a certain sensitivity of the soul, which binds the friends, as well as opening of the heart, which enables them to share their common pleasures and pains. Beyond Moscow the Russian men have little consideration for women, who in the Muscovite society mean nothing. How then without women can any society be formed?

(Chappe d'Autroche 1768: 187)

Another aspect of the Russian socio-political reality that both Autroche and Rulhière explored in their respective accounts was Catherine's coup d'état of 1762. But while Autroche treated this consequential historical event just as a background information for his otherwise scientific treatise, Rulhière devoted to it the whole book. In fact, the mournful figure of Peter III and his miserable destiny overshadow the latter's testimony. Moreover, the image of the fallen Czar, preposterous and ludicrous, echoes the anti-classical model of representation, which Rulhière deliberately used for the purposes of his work. Thus Peter III is portrayed there as a grotesquely irresponsible individual of highly conflicting emotions. He combines both greatness and absurd pettiness, ancestral attachment to heroism and totally unjustified claims to glory, infinite ambition and political ineptitude. In a word, Rulhière depicted him as a childish clown driven by contradictory impulses of the moment, an idiot fantasizing of illusory power, which he actually never exercised. Peter III transpires in his book as a true embodiment of Russia's formlessness and as such represents its incomprehensible and unattainable essence. Additionally, his education, first carried out by the closest members of his family only to be continued by corrupt political advisors, proved to be completely useless. Actually, it only intensified his natural complexes and eccentric conduct. To the modern reader Rulhière's rendition of Peter III's political downfall brings to mind

equally absurd destiny of another royal buffoon, namely *Ubu roi*, the notorious French literary character created in 1896 by Alfred Jarry. Some recent theoreticians of literature would perhaps be more than tempted to see in this striking analogy the renowned concept of plagiarism by anticipation developed not long ago by Pierre Bayard (Bayard 2009: 5–12):

He was taken from their hands only to be placed under tutelage of vile corrupters. But as the very first principles he had been taught left a solid impression in his mind, he ended up becoming a bizarre mixture of good intentions, which degenerated into ridiculous manners, and of inept visions sadly directed towards truly great objectives. Reared to abhor slavery and to develop passion for heroism, he indeed attached himself strongly to these noble ideas. But he loved greatness alongside with smallness. So even if his true intent was to emulate the heroes he descended from, his natural genius all the more so imprisoned him in his inveterate puerilities.

(Carloman de Rulhière 1819: 281–282)

Curiously enough, Rulhière described the principal events marking the Russian revolution of 1762 and Catherine's seize of power just as grotesquely as he depicted Peter's incongruous personality. Far from structured and logical, their sequence exhibited total confusion and lack of coherence. So chaotic and haphazard was their development that Rulhière, who observed them with a rational Western eye, did not know what exactly to await as the most atrocious acts of carnage and the most inoffensive, bloodless skirmishes, reminiscent of a game of tin soldiers, were equally plausible in this absurd masquerade. Here is how Rulhière paints the apparently grandiose entrance of the victorious future empress, who, contrary to expectations, was not escorted by great noble heroes and warriors, but by a silly cortège composed of servants, peasants, her lover and a hair-stylist. The setting of this revolution, far from heroic, was utterly frivolous, if not completely foolish:

This is precisely how – to reign despotically over the most extended empire in the world – Catherine finally arrived, between seven or eight o'clock in the morning. She departed placing all her confidence in a word of a soldier, guided by some peasants, led by her lover and accompanied by her chambermaid and her coiffeur.

(Carloman de Rulhière 1819: 327–328)

The burlesque spirit of Catherine's coup d'état is best illustrated by the image of Peter III fleeing his enemies in panic. Once again, his imperial retreat had nothing epic in nature. Instead, Rulhière depicts it as a disorderly jump into the unknown of a large crowd of laughable Russian courtesans, a truly chaotic flight. A Russian noble, eye-witness to Peter's feeble military detachment chased away by Catherine's partisans, observed his master's downfall with utter indifference and pity. The evasive answer given by him to another Russian noble asking about his allegiance to the fallen Czar exemplifies complete lack of seriousness of the whole Revolution:

Upon learning this news the emperor, followed by all members of his court, rushed towards the quay. They threw themselves into two yachts and the whole crowd embarked in a great hurry. Fear and panic accompanied this rapid decampment, urged by Munich. One detail, however, should not be omitted here, which in itself would perhaps be completely insignificant if it did not demonstrate with how profound indifference a Russian can react to such terrible events. An eye-witness, who during the whole decampment was peacefully standing on the quay and described its development the next day, was asked how it was possible for him not to have followed his anguished master, who was struggling then both for his crown and for his life? And so he answered: "I was, in fact, ready to embark with everybody else, but it was too late, the northern wind was blowing and I did not have any coat on me.

(Carloman de Rulhière 1819: 350–351)

Mostly facetious, Rulhière's account changes at times to very serious, showing the intricacies of the Russian political dynamics in a less frivolous and more scholarly way. This shift of tone from the grotesque to the objective and precise appears when the author ponders on the public display of Peter's mutilated body. A scrupulous description of the late Czar's cadaver and minute details of its physical state leave no doubt as to the true nature of his violent death. No wonder Catherine II, so eager to advance the most propitious image of herself, tarnished by the growing legend of her alleged regicide disseminated all over Europe, found Rulhière's account highly detrimental to her international reputation. His rendition of an idle crowd of Peter's former partisans, contemplating his remains both with a sense of loss and relief, was perhaps all the more offensive to her susceptible conscience that her Western detractors were particularly avid for such juicy details:

The Czar's body was transferred to St. Petersburg to be publicly displayed there. His face was blackened and his neck mutilated. But despite such horrible marks, in order to stifle threat of public unrests, which already began showing, and thus to prevent potential impostors from eventually seizing power over the empire under his name, the Czar's body was left to be exposed for three days to all people, his only ornament being that of a Holstein officer. His soldiers, who had already been liberated but still remained disarmed, intermingled with the general public. When contemplating the sovereign, their faces seemed imbued with pity, contempt and a kind of remorse mixed with shame.

(Carloman de Rulhière 1819: 369)

Despite his uncompromisingly hostile attitude towards Catherine II, Rulhière had no illusions as to her murdered husband's incompetence and his total political uselessness. Though he was far from justifying her forcible seize of power, he only knew too well that Peter's further rule over Russia would eventually, if he was given a chance to fully unfold all his destructive potentials, end up in an indescribable bloodshed. Violence, treason, cruelty, moral corruption, arrogance, cowardice and sheer political stupidity characterized this wretched and pitiful

monarch. On August 12<sup>th</sup> 1762, Rulhière addressed the following letter to his friend and correspondent Jean-Jacques Rousseau. He claims to have offered him an objective description of the late Czar's proceedings, especially his disgraceful involvement in the Seven Year's War as a traitor overtly collaborating with the Prussian enemy to the detriment of his own empire. Curiously enough, Rousseau was the only major icon of the French Enlightenment not to have fallen into the traps of the pro-Russian philosophical propaganda and its inflated myths. In fact, he followed the recent developments in St. Petersburg with the same discerning eye as Rulhière did:

Few things only will I tell you about this country, for to have a better sense of what happened here all you need to know is what Peter III was really like. During the whole course of this war he constantly betrayed his empire. All military campaign projects communicated to the officials at the Russian court and coordinated with them, were revealed by him to the King of Prussia. He boasted of it openly in front of the entire court addressing his words to the accomplice to his treason. A Petronius would be needed to depict his pleasures and a Tacitus to depict his court. Although he had no chance so far to wholly manifest his cruelty, as the feebleness of the previous reign did not allow him to consider bloodshed, he would surely follow this direction in the future, for he was a cowardly and violent creature.

(J.-J. Rousseau 1970: 175)

On August 25<sup>th</sup> 1773, Rulhière addressed a letter to the Countess d'Egmont, his protector and associate in his anti-Russian crusade of the 1760s. He gladly reminded her of Catherine's hostile reaction to his *Histoire ou necdotes sur la révolution de Russie en l'année 1762*. Proud author of a truly consequential testimony, he also mentioned a great turmoil it provoked in Paris. He surely did not fail to repudiate Catherine's devoted supporters enraged by his book: Voltaire, Diderot and other figures of the French literary scene. Actually, he referred to their incessant attempts to either bribe him or to persuade him otherwise not to publish such a dismal account. The main concern of Catherine's partisans was obviously to keep her positive image intact as they considered her a great hope not only for Russia, but for the whole enlightened Europe as well. Rulhière, however, resoled not to succumb to their temptations. Instead, he took great pains to divulge Catherine's alleged crimes to the broadest circles of the French public opinion possible. All the more so that he held the general outcry of the enlightened philosophers to be the ultimate evidence of their truth. So, as he argued, the *Histoire ou anecdotes sur la révolution de Russie en l'année 1762* represented a faithful and trustworthy historical document:

May I remind you, Madam, of some rudimentary facts. As soon as the first rumors of the existence of my account began circulating, several people in correspondence with the empress of Russia got alarmed fearing for her glory. You were perfectly aware of the measures they took. As I found it impossible to force myself to accept their advances, which were only

becoming more and more considerable day by day, one of them imagined that they should resort to your authority to make me change my mind. (...) And what resulted from all their attempts? The absolute certainty of yours that there you have in your hands the testimony of an incorruptible witness.

(Carloman de Rulhière 1819: 374–375)

The editor of the first printed version of Rulhière's account, which came out in 1797, offers in his introductory note some interesting details about the appearance of the manuscript and its dissemination in the 1760s. Not only does he refer to its great impact on the French public opinion, but also points out to animated controversies it stirred. He reports that the royal court itself manifested an extraordinary interest, desirous of getting first-hand information on the recent events in Russia. As a result, Rulhière's manuscript was publically read not only in Paris, but also in Versailles. To add more flavor to this highly contentious case, the editor of the first printed version of the *Histoire ou anecdotes sur la révolution de Russie en 1762* did not fail to mention Catherine's desperate attempts to discredit Rulhière's narrative and to prevent its negative effects:

The empress quickly learned about its existence. She gave the order to her agents in Paris to use all possible means to make this work disappear. They made several considerable pecuniary offers to the author, which were all rejected. Unable to succeed, they decided to resort to authorities. They addressed themselves to the Duc d'Aguillon, who at that time was a minister. M. de Sartine, lieutenant of the police, summoned M. de Rulhière to his office ordering him to render the manuscript. He tried to threaten him with the Bastille. But the latter, who previously resisted to all means of corruption, was not in the least intimidated by such threats. So he replied to the lieutenant of the police that they could put him in the Bastille, snatch the manuscript from him, but it would be completely useless, as he carried it in his memory. So all these threats were of no consequence. (...) The King's brother, having heard about this story, took the author under his protection. (...) But the agents of the empress repeated their attempts. They even offered him thirty thousand francs to suppress some traits, the publication of which could prove detrimental to their sovereign's reputation. He refused, giving them, however, his word of honor that as long as the empress lived, his work would never be printed.

(Carloman de Rulhière 1797: 4–5)

There are plenty of other similar sources which show that the Russian palace revolution of July 1762 was indeed followed in France with enormous interest. Though no solid evidence for Catherine's direct involvement in this political murder existed, widespread rumors quickly attributed it to her. Divided as the French public opinion may have been, most philosophers, however, regarded Catherine's ascent to power in a very favorable light. Actually, they were prompt to justify the tragic fate of Peter III and to excuse the "progressive" Russian empress. One of the most prominent advocates of such philosophical clemency was of course Voltaire, who in a letter addressed to Bernard Louis Chauvelin treated the issue with a characteristic

sense of humor and irony. The Patriarch of Ferney argues that even the most appalling atrocities yield sometimes truly tasty fruits, so an evil action may eventually produce great good. Needless to say, he did not seem a bit scandalized by the recent developments in Russia:

I deem you to be a person who entertains a strong persuasion that kings and representatives of kings have nothing better to do but to conduct themselves properly. People talk about a violent colic diarrhea which delivered Peter Ulric from a small annoyance of losing an empire of two thousand miles. So now your Semiramis will only need a Ninias to make the resemblance perfect. I'm afraid I must admit that my heart is corrupted enough not to be as scandalized by this scene as a good Christian should perhaps be. But a truly great good can result from this small evil. For providence is just what in the old days the Jesuits used to be: it resorts to every means it can. And besides, when a drunkard dies of a colic diarrhea, it teaches us to be sober.

(Voltaire 1973: 163)

Far from falling for Voltaire's irony and its irresistible charms, the anti-Russian camp stood firm, however, at least in the 1760s. One of the most influential figures to promote the rumors of Catherine's regicide, thus boosting the popularity of Rulhière's account even further, was the then French foreign minister, the Duc de Choiseul. But his career ended abruptly in December of 1770, when he fell out of grace, was dismissed by the order of Louis XV, and sent to exile (de Viguierie 1995: 837). The Duc d'Aguillon, his immediate successor in charge of the French foreign relations, turned out to be less hostile towards Russia than his predecessor and more open to political reconciliation between the two countries. Typical of this new trend was one of Aguillon's protégés, the Chevalier Marie-Daniel Bourrée de Corberon, sent to St. Petersburg in 1775 as a secretary to the French ambassador, the Marquis de Juigné. Although his account on Russia, entitled *Un diplomate français à la cour de Catherine II*, reproduces many traditional anti-Russian stereotypes and clichés, he acknowledged the evident fact that Russia of 1775 was a major European power not to be neglected any longer and surely not to be conceived of solely in terms of its Muscovite barbaric past (Bourré de Corberon 1901: 273–274).

This strong pro-Russian leaning of the French foreign politics only accelerated in the 1780s. The French diplomat and aristocrat Louis Philippe de Ségur in his work entitled *Mémoires, souvenirs et anecdotes*, published in 1789, presented a very elaborate picture of the Russian court, Russian diplomatic, literary and artistic circles. He discussed the new trends in philosophy arriving in St. Petersburg from the West, the changing intellectual tastes of the Russians, and their gradual, but successful assimilation of European values. But what is perhaps the single most important aspect of his account is that he left us an exquisite analysis of Catherine the Great's personality. No other French writer captured with the same understanding of historical significance the mature years of her reign and her greatest political and military successes, including the recent conquest of Crimea. In a truly

pre-romantic spirit, Ségur gave a captivating description of Catherine's triumphant voyage to this exotic peninsula, resplendent with lush vegetation, fascinating local traditions and artifacts of oriental art. The West met the East in Crimea – but this time it was Russia who, according to Ségur, represented the epitome of European civilization. A far cry from Rulhière's disparaging testimony.

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