



Karamzin, or Russia's European Path

Vladimir K. Kantor

To cite this article: Vladimir K. Kantor (2017) Karamzin, or Russia's European Path, Russian Studies in Philosophy, 55:6, 431-444, DOI: [10.1080/10611967.2017.1409536](https://doi.org/10.1080/10611967.2017.1409536)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10611967.2017.1409536>



Published online: 13 Feb 2018.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



VLADIMIR K. KANTOR

Karamzin, or Russia's European Path

In this article, the author examines one of the most important issues in the spiritual maturation of Russian culture. Peter the Great brought Russia back to Europe as a military and political power. Yet, the great country needed to assimilate European culture. In this context, we could rightly call Karamzin a Russian European who laid the groundwork for the development of genuinely Russian culture.

Keywords: *Karamzin, Pushkin, Peter I, literature, history, philosophy, Christianity, conservatism, golden mean*

Before Peter the Great, Western travelers considered Muscovite Rus' as wild as Africa, where its citizens may have had rulers, but life itself flowed beyond all norms, as in a country seized by an enemy, since neither life nor property was guaranteed. The British envoy Giles Fletcher wrote that Russia's industrious peasants were trying to work less while hoarding their earnings as if planning for an enemy invasion. Western travelers believed it had always been thus. However, as Pushkin wrote, much is solved by chance, the instant and powerful tool of Providence. A cultural hero was necessary, one among those familiar to all peoples, beginning with Gilgamesh, Theseus, Heracles, and ending with

English translation © 2016 Taylor & Francis Group, LLC, from the Russian text, "Karamzin, ili evropeiskii put' Rossii." Published with the author's permission.

The study has been funded by the Russian Academic Excellence Project '5-100' Vladimir Karlovich Kantor, a doctor of philosophical sciences and professor, is head of the International Laboratory for the Study of Russian and European Intellectual Dialogue at the National Research University Higher School of Economics, Russian Federation. Email: vkantor@mail.ru.

Translated by Brad Damaré.

Charlemagne. It is interesting that three Russian thinkers (Karamzin, Pushkin, and Khomiakov) who pondered the fate of Russia used the very same formulation, "Peter appeared," though they did not know each other's words and kept this observation to their papers rather than making it publicly during their lifetimes. Peter the Great as an apparition! Russia entered Europe as a political and military power under Peter, but it was necessary to conform intellectually to European values, which would create a Prospero out of a Caliban.

And that is what happened: a type of Russian European emerged, a young and strong European who, despite cataclysms both internal and external over the course of two centuries, arrived and survived, standing against Bolshevism in Russia and fighting against Nazism in Europe (two-thirds of the fallen heroes of the French Resistance were Russians). Who stood at the beginning of this spiritual arrival? Who was the first to make an intellectual effort to spiritual sublimity to turn Russians into Europeans, but *Russian Europeans*, people who would not just become Europeans but also retain their specifically Russian characteristics and sense of spirituality. Many attempted, but the decisive actor was Karamzin, who created, without exaggeration, almost the entire territory of Russian spirituality: prose writer, poet, translator, fluent in several European languages, traveler who opened Europe to Russia, great historian, and extraordinary thinker who laid down Russia's norms for a civilized reading of the world. Echoing Pushkin, we refer to him as the last Russian chronicler and the first Russian historian, remembering that Pushkin dedicated his *Boris* to Karamzin, but not always realizing that he needed a particular reference point in his descriptions of Russian wildness for it to become a reference point for writing the first Russian historical tragedy (modeled after the Shakespearean canon, but he needed the material to fill it). Not for nothing did Pushkin hesitate over the title of his play, calling it *The Comedy of Genuine Misfortune to the Muscovite State, of Tsar Boris and Grishka Otrep'ev*. The play, of course, also has a holy fool, as well as a scene in a tavern at the Lithuanian border where Pushkin allows himself some open mischief when Otrep'ev, realizing that there is only one route to Lithuania, asks the young innkeeper: "Is it far to the Luevy mountains?" Pushkin leaves "Luevy mountains" in the final version, but he begins to realize that he had written something more than a vulgar pun. In the end, he dedicated the play to Karamzin, without whom this magnitude of understanding of the Russian destiny would never have existed. "To Nikolai Mikhailovich Karamzin, whose memory is dear to Russians, Alexander Pushkin dedicates this work, inspired by his genius." If he initially read Karamzin's history "like a fresh newspaper" or even an "immediately topical" one, to use his expression, he later realized that Karamzin had laid the foundations for a Russian worldview, one where Russia was seen as a part of Europe, and a major part.

Even before Tyutchev, who said that Charlemagne's Europe found itself face-to-face with the Europe of Peter the Great, Karamzin used a less grandiose formulation to show Russia as part of the European continent, a part capable of self-knowledge and, consequently, of conveying a European mentality. After all, the foundation of ancient Greek thought, strictly speaking, was laid by the historian Herodotus. In general, Karamzin not only provided Pushkin with the material for contemplating Russia, but also gave him a great thinker as a friend. We know Pushkin found it easy to get along with people, but among all of them Chaadaev was perhaps the most valuable. Pushkin met Chaadaev at Karamzin's house in Tsarskoe Selo. "When they first met at Karamzin's in Tsarskoe Selo, Chaadaevy was twenty-two, and Pushkin, still a student at the Lycée, was seventeen."¹

Karamzin managed to revive the empty expanses and wild Scythia and propel them into the world, not by inventing unthinkable plots, but by illustrating and comprehending what actually *was*. When it was good, he wrote about the good. When it was the horrors of Ivan the Terrible, no one wrote about his atrocities with more horror than Karamzin. Not for nothing did Pushkin call his *History* not just the creation of a great writer, but also the feat of an honest man. Furthermore, Pushkin alighted on an unexpected comparison when he wrote that "Ancient Russia seemed to have been discovered by Karamzin, just as Columbus discovered America." Russia is like an entire continent, but unlike America in its historical life. Why, though, did none of the Europeans notice it, as if some iron curtain had concealed Rus' from the West? There really was a curtain: the Tatar-Mongol invasion. When assessing the destruction of Rus' by the Mongol hordes, Russian historians analogized it to the fall of the Roman Empire during the age of migration. "Russia," wrote Karamzin, "experienced all the disasters suffered by the Roman Empire from the time of Theodosius the Great until the seventh century, when the savage northern peoples pillaged their prosperous regions. The barbarians operated under one and the same code and differed only in strength."² With respect to the memory of Karamzin and the effectiveness and external credibility of his comparison, we must object. First, the barbarians who barged into the Roman Empire lived for ages on the outskirts of the Roman ecumene and partly absorbed its spirit. They arrived in Rome as Christians, while Christianity later had a decisive influence on their culture. Christianity was and remained alien to the Tatar-Mongols, who treated the church as an instrument necessary for their needs. It was not the church that subdued the conquerors, but the conquering barbarians who subdued the church. Second, the Germanic tribes landed on the soil of a highly developed ancient civilization that had taken shape and strengthened for centuries. Rus' had just barely set

foot on the path of civilization. While the Germans ultimately fell under the influence of the Rome that they conquered, the opposite happened to Rus': Rus' was under the powerful influence of the Golden Horde. In other words, this fragile, nascent civilization was *re-barbarized*.

The tragedy of Rus', of its historical service to Europe, was significant. This was a path several centuries long, from the first princes of Novgorod and Kiev, who launched campaigns on Byzantium until the salvation of Western Europe by the dying Rus' of the Tatar-Mongol invasion; in other words, the salvation of the Christian world. Pushkin captured Karamzin's thought:

There is no doubt that the Schism separated us from the rest of Europe [Pushkin therefore believes Russia was already part of it] and that we did not take part in any of the great events that shook it, but we had our own special destiny. Russia, its boundless expanses, absorbed the Mongol invasion. The Tatars did not dare cross our Western borders and leave us behind them. They retreated to their deserts, and Christian civilization was saved. To achieve this goal, we had to live a very particular existence that, though we remained Christians [that is, for Karamzin and Pushkin, Europeans], made the Christian world alien to us, so that, through our martyrdom, the vigorous development of Catholic Europe was spared any hindrance. (additions in brackets mine)³

The salvation of Western Europe had now become a kind of paradigm of Russian being—the same Russia that the West did not want to acknowledge.

Karamzin's development began with *Letters of a Russian Traveler*. For nearly the first time, it was not a Western traveler visiting the "African" Russia, but a Russian, and a highly educated nobleman at that, who was visiting Europe: not to study there, as others had under Peter or Catherine, but to watch, observe, and draw conclusions. That is, he traveled as an equal to see everything for himself rather than operate by rumor, hearsay, or legend. What kind of establishment is Europe, and does Russia really exist outside of that space? After all, Karamzin is reading European texts, understanding them, experiencing them, and he even begins his travels by placing himself in the context of European travelers. Furthermore, he says that he wanted to write a novel based on European life, but he burned it, since he had to see what he had written about for himself:

The evening is pleasant. A few steps from the tavern, a clear river is flowing. The riverbank is covered with a soft green grass and in other places embowered with thick trees. I refused dinner, went out to the riverbank, and remember one Moscow evening when, strolling with

Pt. near the Androniev Monastery, we gazed with perfect pleasure at the setting sun. To think then that exactly a year later I would be enjoying the pleasures of an evening at a tavern in Courland. Another thought occurred to me. At one point, I had begun to write a novel and wanted to use my imagination to travel to the same lands that I am now to visit in person. When I left Russia in my mental journey, I stopped to sleep at a tavern, and the same thing has happened in reality. In my novel, however, I wrote that it rained that evening, and that the rain did not leave a single thread on me dry, so that it was necessary for me to dry myself before the tavern's fireplace. In fact, the evening was exceptionally calm and clear. This first night was an unhappy one for my novel: fearing the rainy season would continue and bother me on my travels, I had burned it in the stove at my blessed home in Chistye Prudy. Now I lay down on the grass under a tree, took a notebook, ink, and pen from my pocket, and wrote what you are now reading.⁴

As we see, he informs the reader from the very beginning that he, as the author, exists in a European context that he knows better than Europeans know Russia. This quickly becomes clear to him:

Meanwhile, two Germans who were traveling with us to Königsburg in a special carriage came to the riverbank, lay down beside me on the grass, lit their pipes, and out of boredom began to berate the Russian people. I stopped writing and coolly asked them whether they had been anywhere in Russia further than Riga. "No," they answered. "Well then, my lords," I said, "Then you cannot judge Russians, as you have only been to a border town." They saw no reason to argue, but for a long time would not acknowledge me as a Russian, believe it impossible we could speak foreign languages. . . . "Fine gentlemen indeed" I thought, and wished them a good evening.⁵

This is his first encounter with the European way of perceiving the world, an overture to his *Letters* that shows that Europe sees only itself. Karamzin wants to see Europe as it is, without putting himself above or below his interlocutors. His clear position is one of respect and of a desire to learn about what you do not already know. In fact, within this approach we can already discern a European approach, the one that once made Europe Europe. Karamzin shaped his itinerary around his desire to visit and interact with Europe's greatest minds (presuming the foreign languages were fully accessible to him). The French Revolution unexpectedly wedged itself into his travels and in many ways changed the vector of his

worldview. As the great Russian philologist Buslaev wrote: “If the goal of the recently transformed Russian literature since the time of Peter the Great was one of bringing us the fruits of Western Enlightenment, then Karamzin brilliantly fulfilled his purpose. He fostered within himself the kind of person who later, with full consciousness, could reveal the Russian patriot within. His love for mankind was the basis of a rational love for his homeland, and Western Enlightenment was dear to him because he sensed within himself the power to establish it in his own homeland.”⁶

In the meantime, let us look at his visit to the greatest of eighteenth-century thinkers, a thinker to whose ideas the early twentieth-century neo-Kantians returned, one of the most complex and European thinkers, who provided a code for European culture. Let us begin with the visit:

Yesterday (June 19, 1789) after dinner I visited the famous Kant, the profound and subtle Metaphysician who refutes both Malebranche and Leibniz, both Hume and Bonnet. The Kant whom the Jewish Socrates, the late Mendelssohn, called nothing other than *der alles zermalmende Kant*, that is, the all-destroying Kant. I had no visitor’s card, but courage conquers cities—and the doors of his study were opened to me. Who I met was a small and slender old man, admirably white and delicate. My first words were, ‘I am a Russian nobleman, I love great men and wish to express my respect to Kant.’ He immediately asked me to sit, saying, ‘I wrote something not everyone could like; not many people love metaphysical subtleties.’ For half an hour we discussed various things. . . . Kant speaks quickly, extremely softly, and not intelligibly, and so I had to strain all my nerves to hear him.⁷

Note that we see here a conversation between equals, not one of servility before a Western genius. The issue is not the quantity of knowledge but of self-esteem, not to mention that a great historian was speaking with a great philosopher. He knew his contemporaneous intellectual West as few others did, and all these geniuses were still alive. He interacted with Herder and Wieland, watched great English and French painters at work, and experienced the Jacobin revolution.

In his work “What is Enlightenment?” Kant associated the maturation of man and his ability to use his own mind with the development of freedom. Karamzin was able to use, and dared to use, his own mind, so when trying to assimilate Western European ideas, he was never a slave to any great names. After adopting the principles of Sentimentalism from Rousseau and introducing it into Russian literature, Karamzin wrote his famous “Poor Liza,” which created the so-called Liza text in Russian literature. The Jacobins, however, saw their predecessor in the

Rousseau who rejected science and culture, just as the Rousseauist Leo Tolstoy and his great renunciation of what he considered the needless gains of civilization became the predecessor of the Bolsheviks. Karamzin managed to separate Rousseau the artist from Rousseau the thinker:

My good Rousseau! You who always praise the wisdom of nature, you call yourself her friend and son and strive to direct people to her simple, life-saving laws! Tell me, has nature herself invested this propensity for life in us? Does she not set it in motion with her magnificent miracles, so abundantly scattered around us? Does she not call us to learning?⁸

The still-Republican Karamzin creates the tale of “Marfa the Mayoress,” the defender of Novgorod’s liberties, and though he adds that Marfa was honorable, the historical laws of history led to monarchy. The tragedy in France persuaded him that coups are most often a catastrophe for the whole country.

He created verse that was imitated by his contemporaries, and he published journals, including *Vestnik Evropy*, which survived in various guises and which was supposed to provide educated Russian society with a guidepost of spiritual life. He modernized the Russian vocabulary by introducing European words, from *industry* to *galoshes*. Karamzin enriched the language with calques like “impression” and “influence,” “infatuation,” “moving,” and “entertaining.” It was he who brought the words “industry,” “concentrate,” “moral,” “aesthetic,” “epoch,” “scene,” “harmony,” “catastrophe,” and “futuraity” into use. As contemporary German Slavist Dirk Uffelman has written: “Karamzin discovered how subjective freedom corresponds to independence, while Shishkov subordinated the individual consciousness to collective rules.”⁹ This independence allowed Karamzin to remain faithful to himself in all things.

The enlightened, European-educated young man, an admirer of European culture who interacted with Kant, Herder, and Wieland, who loved but did not adopt Rousseau, reflected on the principles of his worldview in his own way. He witnessed the reign of Catherine II give way to the despotic regime of Paul I, then Alexander I, and finally the decline of the historian’s life under Nicholas I. Four emperors ... The rise and fall of the Great French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. The Patriotic War against the French invasion. Tyutchev’s lines come to mind: “The omnibenevolent summoned him/As a companion to their feast.”

Of those who find themselves in this world during fateful times, not everyone becomes a worthy companion to the gods. Karamzin did. A dreamer with a beautiful soul, a sentimental zealot of Enlightenment, he

managed to witness the harsh course of historical development. As Karamzin himself wrote in 1794:

I clearly see that using Plato
To build Republics we cannot,
Nor Thales, Pittacus, or Xenon
To soften cruelty in the heart.
For evil stretches boundlessly,
And man, forever man will be.

The longing and sadness in his words require no elaboration, but it was his thirst for the ideal that turned him toward the history of his homeland: to understand how to live, how to influence life, one has to understand the principles of how one's country is organized historically as a state. This was his personal need, but it coincided with a public one.

On October 31, 1803, Karamzin was appointed historiographer with an annual salary of 2,000 rubles. The official mouthpiece of state consciousness, Emperor Alexander I, wanted to know the history of the state he was ruling. By the early nineteenth century, Russia was already in close, unprecedented contact with Europe as a powerful and viable state, no longer as a violent Asian horde. In the eyes of the Europeans, however, the Russian state seemed to have arisen out of nowhere. One had to look at Russia not in isolation, but in a new historical context, *in the context of European history*, even if that context would initially be literary and intellectual rather than scientific (comparison with Rome and Greece, with recollections of Tacitus and Livy as predecessors guiding the Russian historian's path). One had to show Russia as a country with a history, not as an accidental stranger; a country worthy of its European neighbors. At the same time, one had to consider the fact that communication with Europe was no longer the sole province of the state, but also occurred at the public level. According to Belinsky, the public had emerged in Russia during the late eighteenth century, and that public wanted to understand what it was, because it was not certain that it had a worthy historical past, especially when comparing slavish life in Russia with the freedoms in Europe. "As the famous Fyodor Tolstoy exclaimed after reading Karamzin," notes Eidel'man, "expressing the feelings of hundreds, if not thousands of educated people, 'It turns out I have a Fatherland!'" This was the second trend that determined the need for historical research. Sergey M. Solovyov wrote of Karamzin:

The nineteenth-century historian already senses *the science of national self-consciousness* in history; he says that it is a supplement or explanation of the present and an illustration of the

future ... The historian who witnessed great political storms and the restored order that followed, the historian who wrote under the sovereign who perpetrated that order, had to direct his attention mainly to the ways these rebellious passions from time immemorial agitated civil society and the means by which their violent ambitions were bridled and order established.¹⁰

This was a man able to unite these two interests into one and to spiritualize it with his own personal interest, the interest of a free and independent individual attempting to comprehend history's laws rather than prescribe his own.

A true Christian who survived France's rejection of Christianity and considered this the path to a bloody abyss, Karamzin hoped instead to find an antidote in history. He writes: "What the Bible is for Christians, History is for the people."¹¹ It was precisely this overcoming of the people's rebellious passions that he expected from his historical work. He wanted to put Russian history in the context of European history: this was the first item in his goal.

As a great writer, Karamzin was entirely a Russian man, a man of his soil, of his country. At first he approached life, his surroundings, with the demands of a higher ideal, an ideal developed through the life of the rest of humanity. This ideal, of course, proved untenable before the reality that surrounded the great writer ... And Karamzin ... became a historian of the "Russian state"; he perhaps consciously, perhaps unconsciously ... planted the demands of the Western human ideal beneath the facts of our history; he was the *first* to view this strange history from the European point of view.¹²

He also wanted, however, that in approaching this historical context, Russia not forget its sins and the horrors of governance and remember more than just its achievements.

This is the "golden ratio" imposed on history; the human measure applied to historical events and historical figures was also a measure of Karamzin's own life, a measure of his attitude toward friends, enemies, and "the powerful of this world." Karamzin's paradox is that, though preserving Republican ideals in his soul, he became a monarchist, believing that autocracy was not a random event for Russia, but that it arose historically and provided a certain guarantee against historical upheavals, against Russia falling outside the borders of Christian development.

In the very first lines of his *History* he formulates the principles of his approach to the world order, and he does not waver from them:

In some sense, history is a sacred book of peoples: the main book, the necessary book; a mirror of their being and activity; a record of revelations and rules; a covenant of ancestors with posterity; an explication of the present and an example for the future.

Rulers and Lawmakers act on the instructions of History and look through its pages as navigators do their sea charts. Human wisdom requires examples, but life is short. One must know the ways these rebellious passions from time immemorial agitated civil society and the means by which the beneficial powers of the mind bridled their violent ambitions and established order in order to bring together human advantages and grant them the possibility of happiness on earth. . . . If, as Pliny says, any History, even one amateurishly written, is worth reading, how much more so our own.¹³

Note that Karamzin does not consider Europe an exception here, but just one among others. The Jacobins and their bloody terror delivered the first blow against Karamzin's Europeanism, turning the noble ideas of the Enlightenment into their antithesis. The age of Napoleon followed, a figure the historian says stained Europe with blood and crushed a multitude of European powers into dust, and whose name caused the heart to shudder. To define his evolution, his change of views, succinctly: it was not just his love for his Homeland, but his certainty that Russia, being European, had its own code of development. Recall that both the Slavophiles and the Westernizers began their entry into intellectual space by assimilating Western European theories, if not by *idealizing the West*. This sense was best expressed in Alexei S. Khomyakov's famous words about "the distant West, a land of holy miracles." Everything created in the West, Karamzin writes, has a universal character: this is the initial premise of both movements. The faith in Western Europe is nearly blind, thus the disappointment even stronger. Horrified by the inhumanity of the French Revolution, which had abandoned many of its basic values, like the defense of individual human life (the execution of the great Lavoisier was almost Pugachevian in its severity), Karamzin began to seek the possibility of humanism *in an enlightened Russian autocracy*.

Here, Karamzin had reached the greatest intellectual and humanistic position possible for the historian. The "Young Jacobins" who polemicized against Karamzin and dreamed of the immediate creation of a republic modeled on Novgorod did not want to consider the historic specificity of Russia's establishment and development, hoping to use decisive measures to turn it into something like Europe. Considering institutional serfdom, the military settlements, and conscription, their impatience was natural and

understandable. In a certain sense, however, the path to an inimitable, true Europeanism, the sort that Karamzin wanted, as well, was possible only through self-knowledge and self-awareness, through real knowledge of oneself and a rejection of ideological illusions both conservative and liberal; or, if not rejection outright, then deeper reflection on them. “Karamzin,” one scholar writes, “never tires of repeating himself: society and the state are formed naturally, according to natural laws, and always correspond to the spirit of the people, which would-be reformers must reckon with, for better or worse. He has no doubt, by the way, that Algerian, Turkish, and Russian despotism are all, alas, organic; this form does not suit the Frenchman or Swede, just as Swedish arrangements have no Russian or Algerian grounds.”¹⁴ What is to be done, then? Accept autocracy as the last word of Russian history? Future Decembrists accused Karamzin of this, but the historian had a different goal in mind: the introduction of a historical parameter transformed the chaos of the past into a naturally developing cosmos.

“Autocracy is Russia’s Palladium: its integrity is necessary for the country’s happiness,” writes Karamzin.¹⁵ Pushkin had a difficult relationship with autocrats: Nicholas destroyed him, but he also became a great emperor’s singer, writing “Poltava,” “The Bronze Horseman,” and “The Moor of Peter the Great.” Autocrats vary greatly, but this does not debunk the idea. The mature Pushkin realized that Peter was indeed the creator of Russia, the great workman. I would like to quote Berdyaev, who once remarked that “many naïve and inconsistent people think that you can reject Peter and save Pushkin, that you can create a rift in the unified and integral fate of a people and their culture. But Pushkin is inextricably linked with Peter, and he was aware of this organic relationship. He was the poet of an imperial Russia, a great power.”¹⁶ The relationship between the two builders, as Fedotov wrote, is the empire created by Peter and Pushkin. What Peter did with his actions, Pushkin enchanted with his words.

It was an empire creating a civilized space encompassing a wide variety of social strata and diverse peoples. The words of Fedotov, that Pushkin was “the singer of Empire and of freedom,” are no accident.¹⁷ The civilizing space of the empire made freedom possible. As Fedotov wrote:

Peter’s reforms really did bring Russia into the global expanse, placing it at the crossroads of all the great cultures of the West, and creating a breed of *Russian Europeans*. These are distinguished first of all by their freedom and breadth of spirit; they differ not only from Muscovites, but also from actual Western Europeans. For a long period of time, Europe as a whole has lived a more

genuine life on the banks of the Neva or the Moscow River than on the banks of the Seine, the Thames, or the Spree ... The Russian European is everywhere at home. (*italics mine*)¹⁸

It was the Russian Europeans who found themselves defenders of European freedom during the era of totalitarianism, and the source of their ideas, of Russian thinkers overall, was Karamzin.

Each country has its own Palladium for taking its place as a free, European power. This does not mean that Karamzin defeated Pushkin intellectually, but he did give him direction. I should say that Karamzin was far deeper than a mere support of one form of government or another. Pushkin understood and accepted this, as well. At the foundation of human life, the historian wrote, lies a divine undertaking, and humanity must sense this.

In 1826 he wrote "Thoughts on True Freedom." These thoughts are worth reading carefully:

Aristocrats, Democrats, Liberals, Sycophants! Who among you can boast of sincerity? You are all Augurs, and you are afraid to look one another in the eyes without dying of laughter. Aristocrats and Sycophants want the old order: it is profitable for them. Democrats and Liberals want a new disorder: they hope to use it for their personal benefit ...

The structure of civil society remains unchanged: you can put the bottom on top, but there will always be a bottom and a top, a willing and an unwilling, wealth and poverty, pleasure and suffering.

There is no good for the moral being without freedom, but this freedom comes not from the Sovereign, nor from Parliament, but from each of us with the assistance of God. We must win freedom in our own hearts through a peaceful conscience and faith in Providence.¹⁹

Amazingly, Chaadaev, scorned as a hater of Russia and a merciless Westernizer, appreciated Karamzin as the intellectual and spiritual creator of a great country, Russia:

As far as Karamzin is concerned, I tell you I am learning to honor his memory more and more with each day. What elevation in his soul, and what warmth in his heart! How sensibly and reasonably he loved his fatherland! How ingenuously he admired its immensity, and how well he understood that the whole point of Russia lies in this immensity! And he meanwhile knew the value of foreign

peoples and gave them due justice! Where can you find that nowadays? And as a writer, what a harmonious and sonorous period, and what true aesthetic sensibility! The picturesqueness of his pen is extraordinary: this is the main thing for the history of Russia: thought would destroy our history, so it can only be created with a paintbrush.²⁰

Freedom of state is born only through spiritual freedom and individual independence. Very few have considered this, but Pushkin's last philosophical verses are permeated by Karamzin's concept of Christian freedom. The path to freedom passes through self-knowledge: "but let me see, O God, my sins."

In his requiem, he gave this philosophical formulation a brilliant and laconic expression:

The people will recall me fondly
 For drawing kindness from my lyre
 To call for Freedom 'midst this cruelty
 And mercy for the damned inspire.

Was Karamzin a *conservative*, as many today attest? A conservative is the guardian of intransigence, while Karamzin introduced new meanings and rebuilt the Russian consciousness. He was a man of measure in the Aristotelian sense. Like Aristotle, he advocated a "golden mean," a concept contrary to mediocrity: it is a sort of perfection or a peak that resembles a ridgeline between two abysses, or between a chasm and a swamp, or more precisely, between Scylla and Charybdis. In Russia, neither the authorities nor the opposition fully digested this notion of measure. This is why Karamzin is so important today.

Notes

1. Mikhail Gershenzon, *Izbrannoe. Tom 1. Mudrost' Pushkina* (Moscow, Jerusalem: Universitetskaia kniga, Gesharim, 2000), p. 131.

2. N.M. Karamzin, *Istoriia gosudarstva Rossiiskogo*, t. I-IV (Kaluga: Zolotaia alleia, 1993), p. 419.

3. *Perepiska A.S. Pushkina. V 2-kh t. T. 2* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1982), p. 289.

4. N.M. Karamzin, *Pis'ma russkogo puteshestvennika* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1984), pp. 11–12.

5. Karamzin, *Pis'ma*, p. 12.

6. F.I. Buslaev, "Pis'ma russkogo puteshestvennika," *O literature. Issledovaniia, stat'i* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1990), p. 450.

7. Karamzin, *Pis'ma*, pp. 20–21.

8. N.M. Karamzin, "Nechto o naukakh, iskusstvakh i prosveshchenii," *Izbrannye stat'i i pis'ma* (Moscow: Sovremennik, 1982), p. 41.

9. Dirk Uffelmann, *Die russische Kulturosophie. Logik und Axiologie der Argumentation* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Verlag, 1999), p. 139.

10. S.M. Solovyov, "N.M. Karamzin i ego literaturnaia deiatel'nost': 'Istoriia gosudarstva Rossiiskogo,'" *Sochineniia v vosemnadsati knigakh*. Book XVI: *Raboty raznykh let* (Moscow: Mysl', 1995), p. 49.

11. N.M. Karamzin, "Mysli ob istorii," *Izbrannye stat'i i pis'ma* (Moscow: Sovremennik, 1982), p. 159.

12. A.A. Grigor'ev, "Zapadnichestvo v russkoi literature, prichiny proiskhozhdeniia ego i sily," *Estetika i kritika* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1980), p. 186.

13. Karamzin, *Istoriia*, p. 607.

14. N.Ya. Eidel'man, *Poslednii letopisets* (Moscow: Kniga, 1983), p. 139.

15. N.M. Karamzin, *Zapiska o drevnei i novoi Rossii* (Moscow: Nauka, 1991), p. 105.

16. N.A. Berdyaev, "Rossiia i Velikorossiia," *Dukhovnye osnovy russkoi revoliutsii. Opyty 1917–1918 gg.* (St. Petersburg: RKhGI, 1999), p. 237.

17. G.P. Fedotov, *Sud'ba i grekhi Rossii. V 2-kh t.* Vol. 2 (St. Petersburg: Sofiia, 1991), p. 141.

18. G.P. Fedotov, "Pis'ma o russkoi kul'ture," *Sud'ba i grekhi Rossii. V 2-kh t.* Vol. 2 (St. Petersburg: Sofiia, 1991), p. 178.

19. N.M. Karamzin, "Mysli ob istinnoi svobode," *Izbrannye stat'i i pis'ma*, p. 161.

20. P.Ia. Chaadaev, "Pis'mo A.I. Turgenevu. 1838," *Sochineniia* (Moscow: Pravda, 1989), pp. 411–12.