

**The Chevalier d'Éon and His Contemporaries'**  
**Contribution to French Rossica:**  
**From Diplomatic Dispatches and Notes to *Anecdotes Secrètes*\***

Rev. of: Mezin, S. A. (2019). *Neizvestnoe proizvedenie frantsuzskoi rossiki serediny XVIII veka "Sekretnye anekdoty o dvore imperatritsy Vserossiiskoi"*  
[An Unknown Work of French Rossica of the Mid-18<sup>th</sup> Century:  
*Anecdotes Secrètes about the Court of the Empress of All Russia*]. –  
St Petersburg, Europeiskii Dom. – 156 p.

**Yuri Smirnov**

Samara National Research University,  
Samara, Russia

The review is devoted to a book by S. Mezin and the publication of an interesting historical source. Mezin is a well-known specialist in the history of modern Russo-French relations in various spheres. He consistently focuses on eighteenth-century French Rossica in his works. Now he has presented an unknown essay about the court of Empress Elizabeth to the scholarly community. It was written in 1757 by Chevalier d'Éon in the genre of historical anecdote, very popular at the time. The essay has been published both in French and in Russian, with Mezin doing the translation himself. The reviewed book includes the text *Secret Anecdotes about the Court of the All-Russian Empress* by the French diplomat and spy, along with comments, study, and substantive analysis. The publication and accompanying materials are preceded by a detailed essay by Mezin entitled "French Russia in the Mid-18<sup>th</sup> Century (1725–1762)". This is not only used to provide a historical background for the source, but also to study an important but insufficiently examined topic. The reviewer considers Mezin's book a valuable contribution to the historiography of the less explored period in the eighteenth century between the reigns of Peter I and Catherine II and to the source studies of this period in Russian history. At the same time, the reviewer clarifies some chronological and thematic characteristics of the historical anecdote as a specific genre, linking its emergence and formation with French historiography and literature in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

*Keywords:* Russian Empire in the eighteenth century, historiography, source studies, Chevalier d'Éon, anecdote as a literary genre

---

\* *Citation:* Smirnov, Yu. (2022). The Chevalier d'Éon and His Contemporaries' Contribution to French Rossica: From Diplomatic Dispatches and Notes to *Anecdotes Secrètes*. In *Quaestio Rossica*. Vol. 10, № 5. P. 1917–1923. DOI 10.15826/qr.2022.5.769.

*Цитирование:* Smirnov Yu. The Chevalier d'Éon and His Contemporaries' Contribution to French Rossica: From Diplomatic Dispatches and Notes to *Anecdotes Secrètes* // *Quaestio Rossica*. 2022. Vol. 10, № 5. P. 1917–1923. DOI 10.15826/qr.2022.5.769.

Представлена рецензия на книгу С. А. Мезина, известного специалиста по истории русско-французских отношений Нового времени в самых разных сферах жизни, и на публикацию в ней интересного исторического источника. Ученый постоянно обращается к французской россике XVIII в. В своей новой работе он представил научной общественности неизвестное сочинение шевалье д'Эона о дворе императрицы Елизаветы Петровны, написанное в 1757 г. в популярном тогда жанре исторического анекдота. Это сочинение впервые публикуется как на французском языке, так и в русском переводе, который сделал сам С. А. Мезин. В рецензируемое издание, кроме составленного упомянутым выше французским дипломатом и шпионом текста «Секретных анекдотов о дворе императрицы Всероссийской», вошли комментарии к нему, источниковедческий и содержательный обзоры этого сочинения. Предваряет публикацию источника и сопутствующие ей материалы обстоятельный очерк С. А. Мезина «Французская россика середины XVIII века (1725–1762)», который также вошел в данное издание. Он не только предназначен для создания исторического фона, на котором представлен данный источник, но и является оригинальным законченным исследованием на важную, но еще недостаточно изученную тему. Книга С. А. Мезина безусловно признается рецензентом ценным вкладом в историографию менее других изученного отрезка XVIII столетия между правлениями Петра I и Екатерины II и в источниковедение данного периода российской истории. Вместе с тем рецензент счел нужным уточнить некоторые хронологические и тематические характеристики исторического анекдота как определенного жанра, связав его возникновение и становление с французской историографией и литературой XVII–XVIII вв.

*Ключевые слова:* Российская империя в XVIII в., историография, источниковедение, шевалье д'Эон, анекдот как литературный жанр

S. A. Mezin's works have drawn the attention of the academic community, primarily due to his role as an authoritative researcher of past Russo-French relations [Redin, Soboleva, p. 309]. His works on French sources and French writings about Russia in the eighteenth century are highly significant. He has shared his thoughts on the "Russian" pages of Voltaire's work in a number of recent articles, including in *Quaestio Rossica* [Мезин, 2020]. This journal, in whose publications the "eighteenth" century occupies an important place, is characterized by an effort to overcome "a sharply defined line, familiar to Russian academic discourse, between the 'epoch of the Enlightenment' and previous decades" [Артамонова, 2019а, с. 373]. In this regard, it is worth drawing the attention of its readers to Mezin's detailed study of the writings of French authors about Russia in the "era of palace coups", anticipating the transition to "enlightened absolutism". One of these works is of particular interest, a separate edition of a French original with a Russian translation [Мезин, 2019]<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Hereinafter references to the peer-reviewed publication will be given in parentheses with the indication of pages.

*Secret Anecdotes about the Court of the Empress of All Russia* has remained practically unknown until now: it has not even been published in the original language, although it came from the pen of a historical person who has attracted the attention of not only scholars, but also fiction writers and filmmakers. According to the reviewed historian and a number of his French colleagues, the notorious Chevalier d'Éon (also known as Mademoiselle de Beaumont) was the creator of this work. According to Mezin, the transgender-duelling side of his life did not manifest itself during his stay in Russia (April 1756 – spring 1757, September 1757 – August 1760), contrary to the 'action-packed' conjectures of historical novels (for example, in V. Pikul's *Feather and Sword*). This allows us to refrain from detailed excursions into the most eccentric part of the biography of Charles d'Éon de Beaumont (5 October 1728–21 May 1810).

His writings fit well into the framework of the notes by diplomats, spies, and travellers typical of mid-eighteenth-century French Rossica: the Marquis de La Chetardi, Count Dalon, the Marquis de Lopital, de La Messelier, etc. All of these individuals did not lack an adventurous streak or a certain amount of self-admiration, but their behaviour did not manifest anything out of the ordinary.

This can be seen thanks to some interesting and useful features of Mezin's publication. It includes the French text and Russian translation of *Secret Anecdotes*, along with necessary comments, an index of names, and two source-study articles ("When and by whom were *Secret Anecdotes about the Court of the Empress of All Russia* written?" and "Empress Elizaveta Petrovna and Russia in the middle of the eighteenth century through the eyes of a French diplomat"). This publication also contains the extensive essay "French Rossica in the middle of the eighteenth century (1725–1762)", which, in terms of its volume and depth of research, can be considered a small monograph.

As a result, specialists and lovers of Russian history have received a wonderful gift in the form of a valuable contribution to the historiography of the less studied period of the eighteenth century between the reigns of Peter I and Catherine II, to source analysis of this period, and to publishing activity. However, the archaeological characterization of *Secret Anecdotes* is not entirely complete, since Mezin only had access to a transcription of the handwritten text and a description made by his French colleagues. The original was discovered in 2013 and now is in a private collection. It remains inaccessible to Russian researchers (c. 7).

The publication of *Secret Anecdotes* in Russia and the attention paid to it here are quite understandable. The anecdotes were written in Paris between two trips to Russia, probably in June 1757 (c. 52). There is little in them that could be added to the history of Franco-Russian relations or to the scandalous biography of the Chevalier d'Éon himself, both of which have attracted the attention of the European academic community and the general public for two and a half centuries. For Russian historians, the discovery of a new work by a foreigner well-informed about the people and customs of post-Petrine Russia is of undoubted value.

It is interesting to compare the attitude to *Secret Anecdotes* with the attention given to other writings of the aforementioned young diplomat, who in October 1757 took up the duties of the first secretary of the French embassy (c. 53). Having gained some experience, he completed some new works a little later: *Note on Russia in 1759 by the Chevalier d'Éon*, *Persons of the First Rank of This Court* (1759), and *Reflection on the Ease of a Coup in Russia after the Death of the Empress with a Plan That Should Follow to Achieve Success and about the Possibility of its Further Fulfilment* (March 1762). They included collected observations and analytical information useful to the French king and the foreign affairs department (c. 41–42). It has also aroused interest of modern French researchers, which led to the publication of *Notes on Russia* and related works in d'Éon's homeland [Liechtenhan].

Mezin has also identified falsified texts groundlessly attributed to the chevalier. Here, we are referring to his fictional "memoirs", from which appeared the never-before-seen *Adventures of a Young Cavalier in a Female Disguise at the Court of the Russian Empress Elizabeth Petrovna* and the notorious *Testament of Peter the Great* ("one of the most famous historical hoaxes") (c. 52–53).

Despite the fact that d'Éon created more detailed and elaborate notes after some time in Russia, *Secret Anecdotes* does not lose its value as a precious historical source, as explained by Mezin. Firstly, the chevalier took a different perspective when considering Russian realities in the *Note on Russia*, such as a "bird's eye view" and through jokes ("peeping through the keyhole"). Secondly, the text and information of the anecdotes are not directly repeated in d'Éon's other writings (c. 50).

The chevalier approached his mission in Russia very thoroughly. He became acquainted with original and translated literature about the country and the reports of French ambassadors: he even began to study the Russian language, replenishing his library with several Russian books. However, having put aside the originally conceived serious study of the history, sciences, and arts of Russia, d'Éon began to write about what really fascinated him, "about the court, about the inclinations of the courtiers, about their connections, intrigues, and interests... the genre of anecdotes corresponded completely to his aspirations" (c. 55–56).

Mezin gives definitions of the literary genre of historical anecdote, common in France in those days. The main items belonging to that genre were: 1) stories that "talk too freely, too frankly about the morals and behaviour of persons of the highest rank" and 2) "stories dedicated to the secret and covert affairs of monarchs." The researcher traces the appearance and name of this genre to the work of the Byzantine historian of the sixth century Procopius of Caesarea and its revival to the end of the seventeenth century in Europe (c. 56).

Let us make a clarification, since the opinion, according to which the beginning of the discussed genre occurred in seventeenth-century France, seems to be the most reasonable. At the time, a political pamphlet, forgotten for more than a thousand years, was rediscovered, translated from Greek

into Latin, and published in Lyon in 1623 for the French public: this work exposed the sinful customs and shameful deeds of Emperor Justinian, his wife Theodora, and those close to him. Procopius' work did not have a title, but in a Byzantine lexicon of the tenth century it was mentioned as an "anecdote", that is "unpublished"/"unreleased". This word gave the name to this work and its imitators: finally, it became the designation of a whole genre. To explain the unfamiliar Greek word, the title included the Latin expression *Historia Arcana*, a "secret/covert history" (*Procopii Caesariensis Anecdota seu Arcana Historia*). Published in 1685, A. de Variyas' book contributed to the popularization of this new genre in French literature and historiography: it was entitled *Les Anecdotes de Florence ou l'Histoire secrète de la maison de Médicis* (*Florentine Anecdotes, or the Secret History of the Medici House*). In addition, Variyas expanded the scope of the historical anecdote, describing not only the hidden sources of well-known deeds and actions, as Procopius did, but also bringing to the public certain "hidden events" [Голубков, с. 229, 231–232, 237].

Returning from this excursion into the history of the anecdote genre to d'Éon's work, stylistic flaws are noticeable even in its title. *Secret Anecdotes* is, firstly, a tautology ("salt is salty"), and, secondly, is characterized by excessive pathos. It is no coincidence that Mezin considers "adventurism and bragging" to be the main "personal features" of the author in comparison with the other representatives of eighteenth-century French Rossica (с. 46). The chevalier does not reveal any deep secrets to the reader simply because he does not know them, not being admitted to the empress. He uses rumours and gossip, second-hand facts. However, gossipers and rumourmongers are sometimes quite well informed. Among his informants are nobles, court musicians, an artist, a doctor, and a jester (с. 57–58).

Further expansion of this genre from the event to the everyday sphere happened in the eighteenth century, allowing d'Éon's work to claim its place in the genre. Mezin mentions the contemporaneous French writer M. de Gomez, who, in her book *Anecdotes, or the Secret History of the Ottoman House* (1722), included in the definition of an anecdote a connotation with "the domestic history of sovereigns" (с. 57). Supporting such an interpretation, French authors even before d'Éon (Villebois, Voltaire) began to write stories about the rulers of Russia, primarily Peter the Great, in the genre of a historical anecdote, without pretending to present special innermost secrets (с. 58).

One can agree with Mezin that anecdotes are mostly oral sources; they can be considered to some extent as part of the "oral history" of their time (с. 57). As rulers and their subjects understood the significance of the word, they tried to preserve important statements in the form of records [Артамонова, 2019b, с. 531]. The transition to a modern society is generally characterized by a gradual replacement of traditional verbal expressions of collective ideas and historical memory with written, literary forms, such as noble family stories [Смирнов, с. 509, 511].

The text of *Secret Anecdotes* is divided into four parts. They are not titled and are not very coherent. Mezin reveals the inclusion of the following themes

in the work: 1) the daily routine, table, and favourites of the empress; 2) her circle of friends, clothes, and receptions in the palace; 3) the communication of the empress with diplomats, the punishments she practices, her personal qualities; and 4) theatre, court weddings, guardsmen (c. 59).

Mezin, following d'Éon, pays special attention to:

- the description of Empress Elizabeth's appearance and outfits;
- examples of her kindness and piety;
- emphasizing the empress' sympathies for France and its king, which, however, remain unfulfilled due to the weakness of her character and the malignity of some people from her inner circle;
- the empress' habits and daily routine, paying attention to going to bed late and frequent night walks around the palace and the guards, which are explained by the fear of possible conspiracies;
- the role of influential courtiers and Elizabeth's social circle;
- the palace receptions, clothes, and jewellery of courtiers, which, being purchased in Paris and Lyon, bring considerable benefits to French industrialists and merchants;
- final conclusions, stereotypes repeated by the diplomat: "Russian barbarism", "wild", "slave" and bestially "evil" people, whose ruler, even a "kind" one, can only be a despot (c. 60–65).

Even considering the everyday life of a distant northern country, the chevalier draws a conclusion, not original for a number of his compatriots, that in the interests of France one should not educate the Russians, but weaken them further, cultivate existing vices, and plant new ones. He is pleased that many visiting Frenchmen, pretending to be actors and teachers but in fact even being branded criminals, have contributed to the achievement of this goal (c. 66, 68).

To the annoyance of the author of *Secret Anecdotes*, a number of his contemporaries who wrote French Rossica, and their high-ranking addressees, such hopes for an unkind future for Russia did not materialize. The Russian Empire was on the verge of a new rise in power and its next steps along the path of modernization. Career ambitions and personal vanity, with the expectation of which such works were written, also did not come true. The only "beneficiaries" from their publication a quarter of a millennium later are specialists and history buffs, who have expanded the source base of their research. For this, one can thank even biased and not entirely benevolent observers. However, first of all, we must pay tribute to another highly professional academic work by Mezin and those colleagues in France and Russia who helped him.

### Список литературы

Артамонова Л. М. Век Просвещения в «Quaestio Rossica» // Диалог со временем. 2019а. № 68. С. 372–379. DOI 10.21267/AQUILO.2019.68.34740.

Артамонова Л. М. Просвещение и социальная эмансипация в представлениях элиты эпохи Екатерины II: от «культурного шока» – к модернизационным практикам // Quaestio Rossica. 2019b. Т. 7, № 2. С. 525–538. DOI 10.15826/qr.2019.2.391.

Голубков А. В. Анекдот как альтернативная биография во французской культуре XVII века // *W kręgu problemów antropologii literatury. W stronę antropologii niezwykłości, studia* / pod red. W. Supy. Białystok : Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu w Białymstoku, 2013. S. 229–242.

Мезин С. А. Неизвестное произведение французской россики середины XVIII века «Секретные анекдоты о дворе императрицы Всероссийской». СПб. : Европ. Дом, 2019. 156 с.

Мезин С. А. История допетровской Руси в изложении Вольтера: взгляд просвещенного европейца // *Quaestio Rossica*. 2020. Т. 8, № 3. С. 807–822. DOI 10.15826/qr.2020.3.496.

Смирнов Ю. Н. Литературные обработки фамильных преданий Аксаковых и Рычковых как источники по истории юго-восточных окраин России в конце XVIII в. // *Русь, Россия, Средневековье и Новое время*. 2019. № 6. С. 508–512.

Liechtenhan F.-D. *En Russie au temps d'Élisabeth. Mémoire sur la Russie en 1759 par le chevalier d'Éon*. Paris : L'inventaire ed., 2006. 196 p.

Redin D., Soboleva L. The Epoch of the Enlightenment: From the Voyages of Peter I to the Ideas of the Catherinian Period // *Quaestio Rossica*. 2017. Т. 5, № 2. P. 303–312. DOI 10.15826/qr.2017.2.224.

## References

Artamonova, L. M. (2019). Vek Prosveshcheniya v “Quaestio Rossica” [The Age of Enlightenment in *Quaestio Rossica*]. In *Dialog so vremenem*. No. 68, pp. 372–379. DOI 10.21267/AQUILO.2019.68.34740.

Artamonova, L. M. (2019). Prosveshcheniye i sotsialnaya emansipatsiya v predstavleniyakh elity epokhi Yekateriny II: ot “kul’turnogo shoka” k modernizatsionnym praktikam [The Enlightenment and Social Emancipation under Catherine II: From “Cultural Shock” to Modernisation Practices]. In *Quaestio Rossica*. Vol. 7. No. 2, pp. 525–538. DOI 10.15826/qr.2019.2.391.

Golubkov, A. V. (2013). Anekdot kak al'ternativnaya biografiya vo frantsuzskoi kul'ture XVII veka [Anecdote as an Alternative Biography in 17<sup>th</sup>-Century French Culture]. In Supy, W. (Ed.). *W kręgu problemów antropologii literatury. W stronę antropologii niezwykłości, studia*. Białystok, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu w Białymstoku, pp. 229–242.

Liechtenhan, F.-D. (2006). *En Russie au temps d'Élisabeth. Mémoire sur la Russie en 1759 par le chevalier d'Éon*. Paris, L'inventaire ed., 196 p.

Mezin, S. A. (2019). *Neizvestnoe proizvedenie frantsuzskoi rossiki serediny XVIII veka “Sekretnye anekdoty o dvore imperatritsy Vserossiiskoi”* [An Unknown Work of French Rossica of the Mid-18<sup>th</sup> Century: Anecdotes Secrètes about the Court of the Empress of All Russia]. St Petersburg, Europeiskii Dom. 156 p.

Mezin, S. A. (2020). Istoriya dopetrovskoi Rusi v izlozhenii Vol'tera: vzglyad prosveshchennogo evropeitsa [The History of Pre-Petrine Russia as Recounted by Voltaire: The View of an Enlightened European]. In *Quaestio Rossica*. Vol. 8, No. 3, pp. 807–822. DOI 10.15826/qr.2020.3.496.

Redin, D., Soboleva, L. (2017). The Epoch of the Enlightenment: From the Voyages of Peter I to the Ideas of the Catherinian Period. In *Quaestio Rossica*. Vol. 5. No. 2, pp. 303–312. DOI 10.15826/qr.2017.2.224.

Smirnov, Yu. N. (2019). Literaturnye obrabotki famil'nykh predanii Aksakovykh i Rychkovykh kak istochniki po istorii yugo-vostochnykh okrain Rossii v kontse XVIII v. [Literary Treatments of the Aksakov and Rychkov Family Tales as Sources on the History of the South-Eastern Outskirts of Russia in the Late 18<sup>th</sup> Century]. In *Rus', Rossiya. Srednevekov'ye i Novoe vremya*. No. 6, pp. 508–512.

*The article was submitted on 24.01.2022*

*Translated by I. S. Savelyeva*