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## «M'accuserez-vous encore d'aimer la petite politique et les demi-partis». An unpublished letter from Louis-Philippe de Ségur to Prince Potemkin

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**Abstract.** This article focuses on a previously overlooked letter penned by the Comte de Ségur (1753-1830), shedding new light on his diplomatic maneuvers during his tenure as plenipotentiary minister at the court of Catherine II (1785-1789). Dated October 20, 1787, the letter, addressed to Prince G.A. Potemkin, provides a candid glimpse into Ségur's role in the delicate dance of Franco-Russian relations amidst the backdrop of the Russo-Turkish War. Contrary to the instructions from the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ségur ventured beyond the prescribed boundaries, suggesting the groundwork for a potential Franco-Russian alliance. His plea for secrecy underscores his awareness of transgressing official directives and hints at a guilty conscience. Through a comparative analysis of his *Correspondance politique* and memoirs, this article unveils Ségur's clandestine efforts for the alliance, positioning him in the precarious position of deceiving both his own government and subsequent historical narratives. By revisiting this overlooked episode, the article aims to offer fresh insights into the complexities of late Eighteenth Century diplomacy and the role of personal convictions in shaping international relations.

**Keywords:** French-Russian diplomacy, Eighteenth Century, Catherine the Great, Prince Potemkin, Comte de Ségur.

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### INTRODUCTION

The present article examines a letter written by Louis-Philippe, comte de Ségur (1753-1830) – plenipotentiary minister at the court of Catherine II from 1785 to 1789 – which does not appear to have been considered in any of the previous publications concerning him and which, likewise, is not part of his *Correspondance politique*, preserved at the *Archives diplomatiques* (La Courneuve)<sup>1</sup>. The essay also aims to provide contextualization of the afore-

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<sup>1</sup> Archives du Ministère des Affaires étrangères (MAE), *Correspondance politique, Russie*, vols. 113-130, le comte de Ségur, (1785-1789). All French quotations, including the transcription of Ségur's letter to Potemkin, have been normalised for ease of reading, without any modification of their content or meaning.

mentioned unpublished letter. Dated October 20, 1787, the letter was dispatched by Ségur to Prince G. A. Potemkin (1739-1791), Catherine's favourite, at that time engaged in conflict against the Ottoman Porte in the southern provinces of the Russian Empire<sup>2</sup>.

The document merits particular scrutiny as it elucidates Ségur's stance regarding the prospect of a Franco-Russian political alliance, which emerged in the aftermath of the Russo-Turkish War of 1787<sup>3</sup>. According to multiple indirect testimonies – previously examined by various scholars<sup>4</sup> – on this occasion, the comte exceed-

ed the bounds of the instructions dispatched to him by Montmorin, the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, giving cause for the Russian government to believe that Louis was prepared to forsake the Ottoman Porte in favour of an agreement with Catherine II and their mutual ally, Joseph II of Austria<sup>5</sup>. The unpublished document in question stands as the most direct and irrefutable evidence of Ségur's disobedience to orders. Acting upon his personal convictions, he contravened Montmorin's directives by first proposing to Potemkin – with unprecedented candor – the basis for a potential Franco-Russian treaty. Furthermore, the plea to the Prince to maintain utmost secrecy on the matter serves as a clear demonstration of Ségur's awareness of having exceeded the bounds of his instructions, as well as of his guilty conscience.

Moreover, as evidenced by the unpublished letter, Ségur was certain that only Potemkin would peruse the document, of which he never made mention either in the *Correspondance politique* or in his memoirs, the *Mémoires ou souvenirs et anecdotes*<sup>6</sup>. Considering the unpublished document within the broader context of the *Correspondance politique*, it becomes evident that Ségur's forward step with the czarina's ministers placed him in the predicament of openly deceiving his own government – and the readers of his memoirs – when it became aware of his audacious maneuvers. Further evidence of the comte's secrecy in these maneuvers can be found in his meeting with Prince von Nassau-Siegen, discreetly entrusted by Loménie de Brienne to consistently present Versailles' ideas for an agreement with the czarina to Prince Potemkin.

To date, historians have not sufficiently explored Ségur's efforts for the Franco-Russian alliance. In light of the unpublished letter and its comparison with the *Correspondance politique* and the *Mémoires*, this arti-

<sup>2</sup> On the Russo-Turkish relations and wars during the era of Catherine II, by way of example see A.W. Fisher, *The Russian annexation of Crimea: 1772-1783*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1970; Id., *A precarious balance: Conflict, Trade and Diplomacy on the Russian-Ottoman Frontier*, The Isis Press, Istanbul 1999; R.H. Davison, "Russian Skill and Turkish Imbecility": *The Treaty of Kuchuk Kainardji Reconsidered*, «Slavic Review», 35, 1976, pp. 463-483; R.E. Jones, *Opposition to war and Expansion in Late Eighteenth Century Russia*, «Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas», 32, 1984, 1, pp. 34-51; I. De Madariaga, *Russia in the Age of Catherine the Great*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1981; V.H. Askani, *The One-Eyed Fighting the Blind: Mobilization, Supply, and Command in the Russo-Turkish War of 1768-1774*, «International History Review», 15, 1993, pp. 221-238; Ead., *The Ottoman Wars 1700-1870: an empire besieged*, Pearson-Longman, Harlow 2007; A. Schönle, *Garden of the Empire: Catherine's Appropriation of the Crimea*, «Slavic Review», 60, 2001, 1, pp. 1-23; T.C. Prousis, *Disputes in the Dardanelles: a report on Russo-Ottoman Relations*, «East European Quarterly», 36, 2002, 2, pp. 155-170; B.L. Davies, *Empire and military revolution in Eastern Europe: Russia's Turkish wars in the Eighteenth century*, Bloomsbury, London 2013; Id. *The Russo-Turkish War, 1768-1774: Catherine II and the Ottoman Empire*, Bloomsbury Academic, London 2016; K. O'Neill, *Claiming Crimea: a history of Catherine the Great's southern empire*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2017; M.M. Yakushev, *Diplomatic Relations between Russia and Ottoman Empire in the Second Half of the Eighteenth Century*, «Russian Studies in History», 57, 2018, 2, pp. 146-161; T. Stoilova, *Russia, the Porte and the Sultan's Orthodox subjects after the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca (1774-1787)*, «Slavs and Russia: Problems of Statehood in the Balkans (late XVIII-XXI centuries)», 2020, pp. 9-24; A.E. Al-Roud and A.I.Z. Al-Kelane, *The most important treaty in the Ottoman Empire history: "Ketchuk Kainardji" treaty. A critical Fiqhi study*, «Dirasat: Human and Social Sciences», 2022, pp. 467-487.

<sup>3</sup> The bibliography on the French position in the so-called Eastern Question is quite extensive. By way of example, we recall: A. Sorel, *La question d'Orient au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle; le partage de la Pologne et le traité de Kainardji*, Plon, Paris 1878; L. Pingaud, *Choiseul-Gouffier. La France en Orient sous Louis XVI*, Alphonse Picard, Paris 1887; J.A.R. Marriott, *The Eastern Question. An Historical Study in European Diplomacy*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1917; R. Salomon, *La politique orientale de Vergennes, 1780-1784*, Les Presses modernes, Paris 1935; M.S. Anderson, *The Eastern question, 1774-1923: a study in international relations*, Macmillan, London 1966; A.L. Macfie, *The Eastern question, 1774-1923*, Longman, London 1996; G. Leanca, *The Ottoman Empire and Europe from the late Westphalian Order to the Crimean System: the 'Eastern Question' Revisited*, «Estudios Internacionales», 8, 2020, 4, pp. 110-131.

<sup>4</sup> See especially, H. Ragsdale, *Montmorin and Catherine's Greek Project: Revolution in French Foreign Policy*, «Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique», 27, 1986, 1, pp. 27-44; Id., *Evaluating the Traditions of Russian Aggression: Catherine II and the Greek Project*, «The Slavonic and East European Review», 66, 1988, 1, pp. 91-117.

<sup>5</sup> Regarding the relationship between Joseph II and Catherine II, see O. Christie, *Kriege unter Kaiser Josef II*, L.W. Seide, Wien 1904; I. De Madariaga, *The Secret of Austro-Russian Treaty of 1781*, «The Slavonic and East European Review», 38, 1959, 90, pp. 114-145; P.P. Bernard, *Joseph II and Bavaria: two Eighteenth century attempts at German unification*, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague 1965; K.A. Roider, *Joseph II and the Turkish War*, «The Slavonic and European Review», 54, 1976, 4, pp. 538-556; Id., *Austria's Last Turkish War: Some Further Thoughts*, «Austrian History Yearbook», 19, 1983, pp. 15-32; Id., *Austria's Eastern question, 1700-1790*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1982; P.W. Schroeder, *The transformation of European politics, 1783-1848*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1994; F. Fejtö, *Joseph II: un Habsbourg révolutionnaire*, Perrin, Paris 2004; M.Z. Mayer, *The price for Austria's Security. Part I: Joseph II, the Russian Alliance, and the Ottoman War, 1787-1789*, «The International History Review», 26, 2004, 2, pp. 257-299; D. Beales, *Joseph II*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2008-2013, 2 vols.; H.L. Dyck, *Pondering the Russian Fact: Kaunitz and the Catherinian Empire in the 1770s*, «Canadian Slavonic Papers», 22, 1980 (online 2015), 4, pp. 451-469.

<sup>6</sup> L.P. de Ségur, *Mémoires ou souvenirs et anecdotes*, Alexis Eymery, Paris 1824-1826, 3 vols.

cle thus intends to examine this particular aspect of the comte's mission. The discussed document is preserved in the collection «Pièces isolées, collections et papiers d'érudits, tome 5, dossier 2» at the *Archives nationales de France* (Pierrefitte-sur-Seine)<sup>7</sup>. The letter was acquired in 1960, but the details of its previous history remain unknown<sup>8</sup>.

THE CONTENT OF THE LETTER: THE  
POSSIBLE BASIS OF THE FRANCO-RUSSIAN  
TREATY, ACCORDING TO SÉGUR

On October 20, 1787, Ségur wrote to Prince Potemkin – then engaged in the military campaign against the Ottoman Empire – to update him on his *démarches* with the Russian court, in view of an alliance with Versailles. The opening of the letter already foreshadows Ségur's imprudence: he began with a calm complaint about the slowness of the czarina's ministers in responding to his friendly overtures. The comte, well aware of Potemkin's impulsiveness, hoped to rely on him for swift progress in negotiations, encouraging him with flattery: «Mon Prince, votre Cour ne se soucie pas de répondre à l'amitié, peut-être votre génie voudra-t-il répondre à la politique».

After briefly outlining his manoeuvres to negotiate a Franco-Russian alliance – well-received by Catherine – Ségur admitted to not yet having received authorization to speak «ministériellement», intending nevertheless to convey his «idées particulières» to the czarina's favourite. The comte believed Versailles and St. Petersburg could build upon the 1756 treaty as a basis for the new alliance<sup>9</sup>. Specifically, they could establish a mutu-

al aid agreement in case of war «en Allemagne», while maintaining Russian neutrality in a new Anglo-French conflict, and French neutrality in a Russo-Turkish war. Despite this, the 1756 formula might prove inadequate for the Prince's «grands projets». Therefore, Ségur shamelessly sought to leverage Potemkin's ambition, suggesting he communicate the likely Russian negotiating guidelines so Ségur could facilitate their implementation. Particularly, Ségur sought Catherine's stance on the thorny issue: the possibility of Russian aid to Versailles «contre les Anglais» or at least the closing of ports to British ships<sup>10</sup>, as compensation if «nous agirions avec vous contre les Turcs». Perhaps aware of the risks, Ségur quickly retracted, stating he wasn't tasked with making such propositions without secure bases and knowledge of both courts' dispositions.

Nevertheless, the issue was too important and close to the comte's heart for him to remain cautious, though caution was necessary. Ségur recalled Potemkin's hints at a French policy shift, which he had reluctantly declined due to the state of affairs. Potemkin needed to seize the moment, as France seemed awakened to its true interests, and Ségur felt he could now «agir comme vous le

<sup>7</sup> Archives nationales de France (AN), Pièces isolées, collections et papiers d'érudits, Tome 5, Dossier 2, *Lettre a. s. du comte Louis-Philippe de Ségur, ambassadeur en Russie, au prince Potemkine, lui exposant ses idées sur le projet de traité d'alliance*, 20/10/1787.

<sup>8</sup> The only available record concerning the acquisition of this document is a brief entry in the archives' inventory: *Entrée n° 1587: achat à Privat* (23 février 1960). Despite further investigation, no additional information regarding its prior history or provenance could be retrieved. The subseries AB/XIX, to which this document belongs, was established in 1856 following the reorganization of the *Archives nationales* – then *Archives de l'Empire* – to include documents acquired by extraordinary means, i.e., outside standard administrative transfers. Since 1949, AB/XIX has been reserved specifically for isolated documents, collections, and scholars' papers that do not justify inclusion in larger thematic series. Given the heterogeneous nature of this subseries – encompassing anything from significant historical items to minor documents – and considering that detailed acquisition histories were often not recorded comprehensively during this period, it is not unusual for provenance details of certain pieces to remain incomplete or vague, as is the case with the present letter.

<sup>9</sup> The bibliography on the Franco-Russian alliance of 1756 and the «reversal of alliances» is extremely vast. By way of example, we recall P. Rain, *La diplomatie française d'Henri IV à Vergennes*, Plon, Paris

1945; *Correspondance secrète du comte de Broglie avec Louis XV (1756-1774)*, éd. par M. Antoine et D. Ozanam, C. Klincksieck, Paris 1956; L.J. Oliva, *Misalliance: a Study of French Policy in Russia during the Seven Years' War*, New York University Press, New York 1964; H.H. Kaplan, *Russia and the Outbreak of the Seven Years' War*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1968; M. Antoine, *Louis XV*, Fayard, Paris 1989; L. Bély, *Les relations internationales en Europe, XVII<sup>e</sup>-XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Presses universitaires de France, Paris 1992; Id., *La révolution diplomatique de 1756: une négociation au sein de l'État royal*, in *Expériences de la guerre, pratiques de la paix: Hommages à Jean-Pierre Bois*, éd. par G. Saupin et É. Schnakenbourg, Presses universitaires de Rennes, Rennes 2013, pp. 149-167; E. Dziembowski, *Un Nouveau Patriotisme français, 1750-1770. La France face à la puissance anglaise à l'époque de la guerre de Sept Ans*, Voltaire Foundation, Oxford 1998; Id., *La guerre de Sept Ans (1756-1763)*, Perrin, Paris 2015; F.D. Liechtenhan, *Élisabeth Ière de Russie*, Fayard, Paris 2007; H. Carrère d'Encausse, *La Russie et la France: de Pierre le Grand à Lénine*, Fayard, Paris 2019; *Une diplomatie des lointains. La France face à la mondialisation des rivalités internationales, XVII<sup>e</sup>-XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles*, éd. par E. Schnakenbourg et F. Ternat, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, Rennes 2020.

<sup>10</sup> On the profitable trade maintained by Russia and Great Britain, see J. Ehrman, *The British government and commercial negotiations with Europe, 1783-1793*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1962; *Commercial relations between Russia and Europe. Collected essays*, ed. by W. Kirchner, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1966; A. Kahan, *The plow, the hammer and the knout. An economic history of Eighteenth-Century Russia*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1985; H.H. Kaplan, *Russian Overseas Commerce with Great Britain During the Reign of Catherine II*, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia 1995; A.G. Cross, «By the banks of the Neva»: chapters from the lives and careers of the British in Eighteenth-Century Russia, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1997; M.P. Romaniello, *Enterprising Empires. Russia and Britain in Eighteenth-Century Eurasia*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2019.

souhaitiez»<sup>11</sup>. Thus, he urged the prince to prompt Russian ministers for frank and detailed proposals upon which the alliance treaty would be based. In conclusion, mixing politics with flattery, Ségur recommended utmost discretion to Potemkin regarding their discussion, hoping no one else would see the letter, penned with trust inspired by their friendship and kindness. He hinted at his alignment with Potemkin's system, hoping for support.

Séгур's recklessness is all the more bewildering because he informed Potemkin of his ideas before even informing Montmorin himself. While the letter to the prince is dated October 20, the one addressed to the French minister – in which the comte laid out his reflections – dates back to October 31. Indeed, his complete lack of caution is explainable, though not justifiable, only by referring to the enthusiasm stirred in him by the idea of overturning the traditional French political line that he did not agree with. Such change was warmly welcomed by Ségur, eager to distance France from the Ottoman Empire toward an opulent court ruled by a sovereign who personally appreciated him<sup>12</sup>. Despite the complexities of the French position and European circumstances, Ségur saw no reason to delay implementing Versailles' new political line. For him, what better success than sealing a new Franco-Russian agreement, following the satisfaction of signing the 1787 commercial treaty?<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> It is known, in fact, that Potemkin nicknamed Ségur «Séгур-Efendi», as the comte – to obey the orders of Versailles – had to take the side of the Ottoman Porte. In reality, Ségur did not share at all the political line of his government, as he confessed in his memoirs: «Est-il croyable que tous les princes de la Chrétienté prodiguent leurs secours, leurs présents et pour ainsi dire, leurs hommages à un gouvernement barbare, stupide, orgueilleux, qui méprise nous, notre religion, nos lois, nos mœurs, nos rois, et qui journellement nous appelant chiens de chrétiens, nous accable d'humiliations et d'outrages? [...] j'étais ministre: je devais obéir à mes instructions et je m'y conformai ponctuellement» (L.P. de Ségur, *Mémoires*, cit., vol. II, p. 350).

<sup>12</sup> On the image of the Ottoman Empire in 18th-century France, see R. Derathé, *Les philosophes et le despotisme, in Utopies et institutions au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, éd. par P. Francastel, Mouton, Paris-La Haye 1963, pp. 57-75; A. Grosrichard, *Structure du sérail. La fiction du despotisme asiatique dans l'Occident classique*, Seuil, Paris 1979; I. Apostolou, *L'apparence extérieure de l'Oriental et son rôle dans la formation de l'image de l'autre par les voyageurs français au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, «Cahiers de la Méditerranée», 66, 2003, pp. 181-200; A. Thomson, *L'Empire ottoman, symbole du despotisme oriental?*, in *Rêver d'Orient, connaître l'Orient: Visions de l'Orient dans l'art et la littérature britanniques*, éd. par I. Gadoin et M.É. Palmier-Chatelain, ENS Éditions, Lyon 2008, pp. 177-196; *L'orientalisme, les orientalistes et l'Empire ottoman de la fin du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle à la fin du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Actes du colloque international (Paris, 12-13 février 2010), éd. par S. Bash et al., Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres, Paris 2011.

<sup>13</sup> On the French-Russian trade, see A.M. Arnould, *De la balance du commerce et des relations commerciales extérieures de la France: dans toutes les parties du globe, particulièrement à la fin du règne de Louis XIV et au moment de la Révolution*, Buisson, Paris l'an III de la Répub-

#### PLACING THE UNPUBLISHED LETTER IN THE CONTEXT OF SÉGUR'S CORRESPONDANCE POLITIQUE AND DIPLOMATIC MISSION.

The advancement made by Ségur with Potemkin must be understood within the broader context of Franco-Russian diplomatic relations in late 1787. Following the Ottoman aggression against Catherine, Louis XVI faced a dilemma: support the Ottoman Empire – a valuable economic partner, but the undeniable provocateur of the conflict – or abandon it in favour of the czarina, with whom he had signed only a few months earlier the first direct Franco-Russian trade and navigation treaty<sup>14</sup>. Simultaneously, France suffered humiliation from Prussia's invasion of the Dutch Republic in September. Louis XVI's indecision and economic constraints prevented direct intervention<sup>15</sup>, leading to the abandonment of their Dutch allies, an indelible stain on French honour<sup>16</sup>.

This situation prompted a shift in Versailles' diplomatic stance, discernible as early as September 1787, as

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lique [1795], 2 vols.; P. Boissonade et P. Charliat, *Colbert et la Compagnie de commerce du Nord*, «Revue d'histoire économique et sociale», 17, 1929, 2, pp. 156-204; J.L. Van Regemorter, *Commerce et politique: préparation et négociation du traité-franco russe du 1787*, «Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique», 4, 1963, 3, pp. 230-257; Id. et M. Cadot, *Le commerce extérieur de la Russie en 1784, d'après le journal de voyage de Baert du Hollant*, *idem*, 10, 1969, 3-4, pp. 371-391; F. Fox, *French-Russian Commercial Relations in the Eighteenth Century and the French-Russian Commercial Treaty of 1787*, unpublished Ph.D. diss., University of Delaware 1966; Id., *A View of French-Russian Trade Relations in the Eighteenth Century: the Ms. Le Gendre*, «Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas», 16, 1968, 4, pp. 481-498; J. Horn, *The Path Not Taken: French Industrialization in the Age of Revolution 1750-1830*, The MIT Press, Cambridge and London 2006; A. Kraatz, *Le commerce franco-russe. Concurrence et contrefaçons. De Colbert à 1900*, Les Belles Lettres, Paris 2006; P. Pourchasse, *Le commerce du Nord. Les échanges commerciaux entre la France et l'Europe septentrionale au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Presses universitaires de Rennes, Rennes 2006; E. Schnakenbourg, *Genèse d'un nouveau commerce: la France et l'ouverture du marché russe par la Mer Noire dans la seconde moitié du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, «Cahiers de la Méditerranée», 83, 2011, pp. 309-325; T. Claeys et B. Vinogradov, *Les origines du traité franco-russe du 11 janvier 1787, in L'Empire de Catherine la Grande, nouvelles approches*, éd. par K. S. Jobst et al., SPM, Paris 2023, pp. 140-152.

<sup>14</sup> O.T. Murphy, *The Diplomatic Retreat of France and Public Opinion on the Eve of the French Revolution, 1783-1789*, Catholic University of America Press, Washington D.C. 1998, pp. 58-59.

<sup>15</sup> M. Price, *The Dutch Affair and the Fall of the Ancient Regime, 1784-1787*, «The Historical Journal», 38, 1995, 4, pp. 875-905: 903-904.

<sup>16</sup> On the Dutch crisis, see A. Cobban, *Ambassadors and Secret Agents. The Diplomacy of the First Earl of Malmesbury at the Hague*, Jonathan Cape, London 1954; S. Schama, *Patriots and Liberators, Revolution in the Netherlands, 1788-1813*, Knopf, New York 1977; T.C. Blanning, *The origins of the French revolutionary wars*, Longman, London 1986; J. Black, *British Foreign Policy in an Age of Revolution*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1994; J. Hardman, *French politics, 1774-1789: from the accession of Louis XVI to the fall of the Bastille*, Longman, London 1995; J. Israel, *The Dutch Republic: Its Rise, Greatness and Fall, 1477-1806*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1995.

noted by Comte Mercy-Argenteau, the Austrian ambassador<sup>17</sup>. As emphasized by Hugh Ragsdale<sup>18</sup>, Mercy was not mistaken: in an October conference, Montmorin cautiously admitted the desire to cooperate with Austria for the rescue of the Ottoman Porte, and that in case of its impracticability, Versailles would have wanted to preserve its Levantine trade, perhaps acquiring Egypt as compensation for the Austro-Russian expansion in Ottoman territories<sup>19</sup>. At the same time – in a letter dated October 2, 1787 – Montmorin discussed with Ségur recent European events, emphasizing that Prussian involvement in Dutch affairs was orchestrated by Great Britain<sup>20</sup>. The British seemed determined to undermine French influence both in the West and East, evident in Ainslie's – the British ambassador to the Sultan – actions in Constantinople. As the situation in Holland and Constantinople became increasingly untenable for France, Montmorin instructed Ségur to explore with caution<sup>21</sup> the possibility of aligning with Russia, potentially at the expense of the Ottomans, if necessary<sup>22</sup>. This manoeuvre

would represent a significant departure from traditional French policy and required delicate handling.

Unaware of these developments, Ségur faced mounting challenges in St. Petersburg. He grappled with Prussia's invasion of the Dutch Republic, initial clashes between Russia and the Ottomans, and Britain's denial of Ainslie's manoeuvres, which strained Franco-Russian relations<sup>23</sup>. In light of these complexities, Ségur urged Montmorin for clarity on Louis XVI's stance regarding Ottoman affairs. Catherine, sympathetic to France but exasperated by Louis XVI's indecision, sought definitive answers to solidify their relationship amidst growing Anglo-Prussian threats: «Elle ne peut plus supporter l'incertitude de savoir si nous serons amis ou ennemis, il me sera difficile de m'y soutenir longtemps dans la position indécise où je me trouve»<sup>24</sup>.

Shortly after, in mid-October, Ségur received Montmorin's letters regarding the Ottoman issue. On the 18th of the same month, the comte communicated to the minister that he had informed the Russian government of the ostensible letter he had just received. This missive – written by Montmorin himself – contained the directive to Choiseul-Gouffier – the French ambassador at Constantinople – to inform the Ottomans that if they persisted in hostilities, Louis XVI, viewing them as aggressors, could not aid them<sup>25</sup>. Ségur's words made a profound impression on the Russian government, reinforced by a further conference on October 31. On this occasion, too eager to abandon the Porte for Russia, Ségur proposed to Bezborodko – *de facto* the Russian Minister of Foreign affairs<sup>26</sup> – the idea of «rapprochement» between France and the two imperial courts,

<sup>17</sup> About comte Mercy, see H. Hasquin, *Diplomate et espion autrichien dans la France de Marie-Antoinette: le Comte de Mercy-Argenteau, 1727-1794*, Avant-Propos, Waterloo 2014.

<sup>18</sup> H. Ragsdale, *Montmorin and Catherine's Greek Project*, cit., pp. 32-33.

<sup>19</sup> The idea of a French acquisition of Egypt was not Montmorin's, but dated back to the reign of Louis XV and the ministry of Choiseul. On this matter, see F. Charles-Roux, *Les Origines de l'expédition de l'Égypte*, Plon, Paris 1910; Id., *Le projet français de conquête de l'Égypte sous le règne de Louis XVI*, Institut français d'archéologie orientale du Caire, Caire 1929; Id., *France, Égypte et Mer Rouge de 1715 à 1798*, «Cahiers d'histoire égyptienne», 3, 1951, pp. 117-95; H. Laurens, *Les Origines intellectuelles de l'expédition d'Égypte*, ISIS Yayınclık, Istanbul 1987; M. Battesti, *Expédition d'Égypte, un plan de conquête français remontant au milieu du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, «Cahiers de la Méditerranée», 57, 1998, 1 (Bonaparte, les îles méditerranéennes et l'appel de l'Orient), pp. 33-38.

<sup>20</sup> «La part que les Anglais ont eu à cet événement, leurs armements pour appuyer une démarche dont ils ont espéré de recueillir le fruit, la notification qu'ils nous ont faite qu'ils armeraient par mer et par terre, tant nous annonce que cette nation veut engager la Hollande et qu'elle dispose du Roi de Prusse» (MAE, Correspondance Politique, Russie, vol. 122, pièce 28, *Lettre de Montmorin à Ségur*, 2/10/1787, ff. 127v-128r).

<sup>21</sup> In the same period, Joseph II of Austria was beginning to grow irritated by France's ambiguity on the Ottoman issue: «Mais il faut que la France finisse une fois à faire des vœux; il ne suffit pas qu'elle reste indifférente en ne s'opposant point à nos desseins: il est bien plus de son intérêt d'y coopérer de son côté, si elle en veut partager les avantages. Je n'ai encore rien appris de positif de la Russie et j'ignore toujours quel parti prendra l'Impératrice et de quel côté elle fera agir ses plus grandes forces. Pour moi, je continue à faire mes dispositions avec vigueur pour assurer du moins mes frontières qui sont d'une terrible étendue depuis la mer Adriatique jusqu'au Dniester en Galicie» (*Lettre de Joseph à Mercy*, 6/10/1787, in *Correspondance secrète du Comte Mercy-Argenteau avec l'Empereur Joseph II et le Prince de Kaunitz*, éd. par A. D'Arneht et J. Flammermont, Imprimerie nationale, Paris 1891, vol. II, pp. 125-126).

<sup>22</sup> «Les circonstances dans lesquelles nous nous trouvons en Europe et l'impossibilité où les Turcs nous ont mis de les soutenir par la manière dont ils ont entamé la guerre, nous conseillent, M., de ne pas rejeter

l'idée d'un rapprochement avec les deux Cours Impériales, même aux dépens des Turcs, si cela devenait nécessaire. La conduite de ces derniers et la nécessité justifieraient notre abandon et il serait possible que nous obtiendrions des équivalents qui nous consoleraient de l'augmentation de puissance qui en résulterait pour les deux Cours Impériales. Vous sentez, M., qu'il importe que vous évitiez de vous expliquer sur ce point, mais vous pouvez écouter les propositions qui vous seront faites et en montrant le désir que le Roi a de s'unir intimement avec la Russie, laisser voir que vous êtes disposé à en rendre compte» (MAE, Correspondance Politique, Russie, vol. 122, pièce 28, *Lettre de Montmorin à Ségur*, 2/10/1787, ff. 128v-129r).

<sup>23</sup> O.T. Murphy, *The Diplomatic Retreat*, cit., p. 57.

<sup>24</sup> MAE, Correspondance politique, Russie, vol. 122, pièce 34, *Lettre de Ségur à Montmorin*, 18/10/1787, f. 165r.

<sup>25</sup> This letter is preserved in the *Archives diplomatiques* (La Courneuve). See MAE, Correspondance politique, Turquie, vol. 176, pièce 103, *Lettre de Montmorin à Choiseul-Gouffier*, 1/10/1787, ff. 228r-228v.

<sup>26</sup> On Bezborodko, see especially N.I. Grigorovich, *Chancellor Prince Alexander Andreyevich Bezborodko in connection with the events of his time (the years from 1747 to 1787)*, in SIRIO (Collection of the Imperial Russian Historical Society), vol. XXVI, St. Petersburg 1879; Id., *Chancellor Prince Alexander Andreyevich Bezborodko in connection with the events of his time (the years from 1788 to 1799)*, in *idem*, vol. XXIX, St. Petersburg 1881.

«même aux dépenses des Turcs»<sup>27</sup>, as indicated by Montmorin in the October 2 letter.

Bezborodko couldn't have been more pleased with these insinuations. Without delay, he inquired whether Joseph II was already informed – as an ally of Versailles – of the French shift in policy towards the Porte, and if Montmorin had granted Ségur *pleins pouvoirs* to negotiate the alliance. With Ségur's negative response, Bezborodko reassured him of his personal efforts to provide a detailed response and make openings to gain Louis XVI's trust. A few days later, Ségur repeated his statements to Bezborodko to Osterman – Vice-Chancellor of Russia – who made a remark contrary to Montmorin's wishes: Catherine, deeply resentful towards the Ottoman Porte, had yet to formulate a precise plan for extending her conquests, as they depended too much on future successes to be predetermined. Consequently, it fell to France to take the first step towards Russia by presenting its ideas for the alliance treaty, contrary to Versailles' desires. In fact, Ségur was ordered to «écouter les propositions» of the Russian ministers, carefully avoiding making any himself.

Needless to say, by openly discussing the matter with Bezborodko and Osterman, Ségur had already exceeded the limits set by Montmorin's instructions. Ironically, in his letter of October 23, the comte reassured the minister of the caution he would exercise in discussing the issue with the Russian ministers<sup>28</sup>. Moreover, as further evidence of Ségur's recklessness, Hugh Ragsdale refers in his article<sup>29</sup> to a letter Cobentzl sent to Vienna during the same period. The Austrian ambassador – likely informed by Ségur himself – reported the topics discussed by the French diplomat during the aforementioned meeting with Bezborodko: the comte

<sup>27</sup> «Premièrement, [je me suis occupé] de montrer à cette Cour le désir qu'à le Roi de se lier intimement avec elle, en sondant avant ses dispositions. Secondement, la défense d'aller au devant des Ministres russes relativement aux avantages et aux stipulations du traité que nous pouvons désirer ou accorder. Troisièmement, l'ordre de chercher adroitement, et comme de moi-même, à savoir si l'Impératrice, en faveur de cette alliance, paraîtrait disposée à fermer ses ports à l'Angleterre, dans le cas où nous serions en guerre avec cette puissance et par quel avantage elle pourrait payer ou notre immunité [...] ou même notre concours dans la guerre des Turcs» (MAE, Correspondance politique, Russie, vol. 122, pièce 41, *Lettre de Ségur à Montmorin*, 31/10/1787, f. 189v).

<sup>28</sup> «Quoique je croie instant, dans la circonstance critique des affaires de l'Europe, de jeter en fonte un système solide qui en impose aux orgueilleux ennemis de l'influence française, ne craignez pas cependant que je m'engage trop, si je me trompais et si vous n'êtes pas de mon avis sur la nécessité de la très prompte exécution du projet en question; je laisserai toujours assez de champ aux difficultés qu'offre la confection d'un pareil arrangement pour que vous puissiez prendre le parti que vous conviendra» (MAE, Correspondance politique, Russie, vol. 122, pièce 38, *Lettre de Ségur à Montmorin*, 23/10/1787, ff.180r-180v).

<sup>29</sup> H. Ragsdale, *Montmorin and Catherine's Greek Project*, cit., p. 35.

admitted that if Catherine and Joseph went as far as the destruction of the Porte, then France would actively participate in its dismemberment; however, if the two imperial courts limited themselves to annexing a few provinces, then Versailles would maintain neutrality. What the late American historian seems to overlook is the existence of even more glaring evidence of the lack of judgment demonstrated by Ségur on this occasion. We are, of course, referring to the letter written by the Comte to Potemkin on October 20, 1787, whose contents the paper studied in the preceding section.

#### SÉGUR'S MEETING WITH PRINCE VON NASSAU-SIEGEN AND MONTMORIN'S REACTION

In its concluding section, the article will examine one final anecdote – found both in the *Correspondance politique* and in the *Mémoires ou souvenirs et anecdotes* – that attests to the secrecy of Ségur's manoeuvres with Prince Potemkin. In November 1787, Ségur received Prince von Nassau-Siegen in St. Petersburg, returning from Potemkin's army where he was serving<sup>30</sup>. As recounted in his *Mémoires*, the comte had contacted him, bitterly complaining about his alleged secret negotiations with Catherine's favourite<sup>31</sup>. The prince felt the need to personally explain himself to Ségur: he was sent by Loménie de Brienne to Potemkin's camp to support «les tentatives que vous êtes chargé de faire pour conclure une alliance avec la Russie»<sup>32</sup>. However, realizing that Ségur was unaware of his mission, the prince understood that he had fallen victim to an intrigue by the Archbishop of Toulouse who – at odds with Marshal Ségur, the comte's father – «espérait se servir de moi pour partager ou pour vous enlever les honneurs de cette négociation»<sup>33</sup>.

The explanation provided by the comte in his *Mémoires* deserves further examination as it is nothing but Ségur's skilful attempt to conceal from the reader –

<sup>30</sup> On foreigners employed in the Russian Army, see M.S. Anderson, *British Officers in the Russian Army in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries*, «Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research», 38, 1960, 156, pp. 168-173; *The Military and Society in Russia, 1450–1917*, ed. by E. Lohr and M. Poe, Brill, Leiden 2002; S. Chernikov, *Evolution of Russia's Military Command in the Early 18th Century. The Role of European Influence in the Implementation of Peter's Reforms*, «Cahiers d'histoire russe, est-européenne, caucasienne et centrasiatique», 50, 2009, 4, pp. 699-735; O. Rusakovskiy, «Foreigners are said to be wise and honest but they teach us false things»: «On Military Tactics» (1700/1701) by Ivan Pososhkov and Western military tradition, «War in History», 29, 2022, 2, pp. 283-301.

<sup>31</sup> L.P. de Ségur, *Mémoires*, cit., vol. III, pp. 302-303.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*.

whom he certainly imagined to be unaware of his *Correspondance politique* and private letter to Potemkin – the more secret but also more compromising aspects of the issue. On November 20, the comte informed Montmorin of Nassau's arrival and the contents of his conversation with Potemkin. The prince informed the diplomat of what he had conveyed to Catherine's favourite:

Il lui a fait entendre avec beaucoup de mesure et d'adresse qu'il était autorisé à lui dire que le système de notre Cour pouvait changer en faveur de celle de Russie comme il l'avait toujours souhaité. [...] Il a cherché à exciter, comme de lui-même et adroitement, le Prince à engager sa souveraine à fermer ses ports aux Anglais, s'ils nous faisaient la guerre [...] <sup>34</sup>.

One may wonder if Ségur, upon hearing the prince's words, managed to control the expression on his face. Nassau's words exactly echoed the contents of the letter that he had sent to Potemkin on October 20, refraining – of course – from mentioning it to Montmorin. Indeed, the secrecy of the comte's *démarche* is demonstrated by the falsely indignant tone he assumed with the minister, also in the letter of November 20:

Si j'avais été instruit, M. le Comte, de cette tentative près du Prince Potemkine pour échauffer le Ministère russe, j'en aurais attendu l'effet avant de faire la démarche [près de Bezborodko et Osterman] dont je vous ai rendu compte; au reste, le Prince de Nassau m'a parfaitement secondé et comme son amitié le porte à éviter ici tout entretien d'affaires avec le Ministère, il fera bientôt, par sa conduite, tomber le bruit qui s'était répandu qu'il avait des instructions secrètes, bruit qui m'était désagréable et nuisible. M. le Prince Potemkine qui en le faisant parler ignorait encore les démarches qui j'avais faites ici et qui paraît désirer de presser cette union, croyait qu'après avoir vu l'Impératrice, il pourrait aller à Paris pour vous rendre compte de la sincérité des dispositions qu'il avait reconnues <sup>35</sup>.

As if Potemkin truly did not know about Ségur's manoeuvres in St. Petersburg and had not been tasked by the comte himself to do exactly what Nassau was now asking him to do! Clearly, Ségur did not appreciate competition in his diplomatic schemes and having failed to inform Versailles of what he had secretly written to Potemkin, he was forced to play the role of the offended party. In the conclusion of the letter, the comte continued his charade: he assured Montmorin that the czari-

na's favourite would soon receive his letters – containing the report «de mes conférences avec M. de Bezborodko» – which would reassure him about France's disposition for a desirable alliance, but which Potemkin judged hard to achieve <sup>36</sup>.

Nevertheless, Nassau's visit to St. Petersburg allowed Ségur to press Montmorin again on the decision regarding the Ottoman Porte. In a conversation with Catherine, Nassau had suggested the idea – agreed upon with Ségur – that in exchange for «notre abandon des Turcs, notre concours contre eux» <sup>37</sup>, Louis would likely want the guarantee of the closure of Russian ports to Britain in the event of a new conflict between London and Versailles. Furthermore, Nassau seemed adept enough to reassure the czarina about fears of damage to national trade that such a clause would entail: «ce commerce ne pouvait jamais se perdre, que les productions russes étaient nécessaire à la Marine anglaise et que seulement elles seraient exportées dans ce cas par des neutres» <sup>38</sup>. After a brief pause for thought, Catherine gave Nassau a response – «Je ne dis non sur rien, cela dépendra de ce que la France fera pour moi» <sup>39</sup> – which fueled Ségur's hopes for a prompt conclusion of the alliance. Given the czarina's disposition, hitherto firmly resolved not to compromise her commercial relations with the English, Versailles had no time to lose. The moment to officially declare the abandonment of the Ottoman Porte had – in his opinion – arrived, all the more so as the avoidance of a new conflict with the United Kingdom made the Russian government fear a new volte-face by France:

D'après tout ce dont j'ai eu l'honneur de vous rendre compte, Monsieur le Comte, vous verrez que nous ne pouvons plus rester dans l'incertitude, autrefois nous devons être pour les Turcs que nous dirigions; leur incartade dictée par les Anglais, nous permettions encore dans le premier moment d'être neutres pour pacifier, mais d'après nos ouvertures, l'empressement de l'Impératrice qui a accepté notre alliance et décliné les offres des Anglais, nous ne pouvons plus être que amis intimes ou ennemis déclarés, et l'Impératrice s'étant franchement livrée à nous, et nous ayant marqué un si vif empressement de conclure toujours une alliance, se rejettera, si son espérance est trompée, dans les bras de l'Angleterre dont

<sup>34</sup> MAE, Correspondance politique, Russie, vol. 122, pièce 55, *Lettre de Ségur à Montmorin*, 20/11/1787, ff. 252v-254r. Folio 253 is absent from the binding of the volume.

<sup>35</sup> *Idem*, ff. 254v-255r.

<sup>36</sup> «Mais il [Potemkine] la [l'alliance] désirait si vivement et était encore si loin de la croire possible qu'il n'a pas pu cacher au Prince de Nassau la crainte qu'il avait qu'il ne se fût déçu ou qu'il eut été même trompé dans ce qu'il lui insinua des dispositions de notre Cour, mais peu de jours après il aura reçu des lettres de l'Impératrice qui, en l'informant de mes conférences avec M. de Bezborodko, ne lui auront plus laissé de doute» (*Idem*, ff. 256r-256v).

<sup>37</sup> MAE, Correspondance politique, Russie, vol. 122, pièce 56, *Lettre de Ségur à Montmorin*, 23/11/1787, f. 262r.

<sup>38</sup> *Idem*, f. 262v.

<sup>39</sup> *Idem*, ff. 262v-263r.

elle a besoin pour ses flottes; et nous jurera une haine que rien ne pourra guérir et qui nous fera perdre toute concurrence dans le commerce du Nord<sup>40</sup>.

At the beginning of December, Ségur received the letter Montmorin wrote on November 7, 1787. At that time, the French minister had received the letters sent to him by Ségur in September, containing the request for a clear proposition on Ottoman affairs, the only useful measure to counter the efforts of England to undermine French influence everywhere. From this point on, the divergence between the comte and his court would become increasingly apparent. As demonstrated so far, while Ségur wished for France to demonstrate a firm and resolute attitude, on the contrary, Versailles – plagued by increasingly dramatic internal and external problems – sought to gain time by maintaining indecision. In fact, in the letter drafted on November 7, Montmorin did not respond to the comte's requests, citing the fact that before making any decision, Louis would want to know what Joseph II's plans were for the Ottoman Porte – annihilation or limited territorial acquisitions? – and therefore, until the Austrian ally had clearly explained himself, France reserved the right not to take a position.

Moreover, according to the minister, more reasons seemed to indicate that such an attitude was most convenient for Louis XVI. Firstly, it was not in Versailles' interest to take the initiative, as its proposals would have to be initially sent to Vienna and only after Joseph's approval would they be forwarded to Catherine, resulting in excessive time consumption. A direct approach from the Empress would be quicker and more convenient<sup>41</sup>. Secondly, Austria – despite its preparations – had not yet declared war on the Ottoman Porte, and it would certainly take some time before Joseph was ready for hostilities, not to mention the possibility of some incident that could hinder his plans, «C'est encore un motif pour nous de ne rien précipiter»<sup>42</sup>. Indeed, Montmorin was not mistaken in believing that a preliminary agreement between Catherine and Joseph would be the basis on which the alliance with France would be negotiated. During the same period, Osterman communicated to Ségur that although Catherine was eager to

quickly conclude an agreement with Louis, she could not put forward any detailed proposal before consulting with the Austrian emperor. Therefore, the czarina hoped that Versailles would understand «la nécessité où elle se trouvait [...] de délibérer elle-même [...] sur l'étendue du nouveau plan [...] dans un moment où tant d'évènements imprévus devaient amener des combinaisons nouvelles»<sup>43</sup>.

Finally, with the letter of November 7, Montmorin cooled the comte's ardour, reminding him – with a not too veiled reprimand – that he only had the order to listen to the propositions or insinuations that Russia would make regarding the alliance, but not to make them himself. In his reply, drafted on December 4, Ségur expressed surprise and concern at Montmorin's reaction to his *démarches*. Not only that, he felt obliged to reassure the minister of his literal compliance with his instructions, in a self-justification that, in light of what has been presented so far, proves to be a clumsy attempt by Ségur – furthermore, made in bad faith – to save his position in the face of Versailles' rightful reproach:

J'ai reçu la lettre que vous m'avez fait l'honneur de m'écrire. Elle augmente ma surprise et mon inquiétude, et cependant plus je réfléchis, moins je crois m'être écarté des instructions que j'ai reçues. J'ai montré le désir d'une union intime comme j'en avais l'ordre littéral. [...] Quant aux ouvertures, je les ai attendues et ne les ai point faites et tous ce que j'ai dit relativement à l'Angleterre et à la possibilité de notre concours contre les Turcs n'a été dû que comme de moi-même et pour sonder, comme vous me l'aviez ordonné, les intentions du Ministère russe<sup>44</sup>.

Not only had Ségur been the first to advance the proposal for the basis of the treaty with Osterman, Bezborodko, and Catherine, but even before presenting his reflections on the matter to Montmorin, he had carefully considered sending them to Potemkin in the aforementioned letter of October 20. The height of audacity, the Comte seemed to attempt to shield himself from the accusations brought by Montmorin by citing the mission of Nassau, of which he had been kept in the dark: «La conformité du langage du Prince de Nassau et du mien à 600 lieues l'un de l'autre, me confirme dans l'opinion que j'ai bien interprété les intentions du Roi et [...] que je ne me suis pas trompé»<sup>45</sup>. While Ségur's justifications in the *Correspondance politique* may appear at least faltering, the *Mémoires* – particularly insistent in pleading his case – are glaring evidence of the comte's guilty conscience:

<sup>40</sup> *Idem*, ff. 264v-265r.

<sup>41</sup> «C'est en Russie qu'il nous faut chercher à découvrir les vrais desseins des deux Cours, nous ne pouvons qu'attendre ce qu'on voudra nous dire. Toute proposition de notre part aurait besoin d'être approuvée à Vienne, avant que l'Impératrice nous réponde. Le temps s'écoulerait dans une vaine attente. Il paraît plus simple d'obtenir directement de la Russie quelque chose sur quoi nous puissions tabler, ne dut-elle servir qu'à nous indiquer ce qu'elle projette de faire si les circonstances sont favorable» (MAE, Correspondance politique, Russie, vol. 122, pièce 47, *Lettre de Montmorin à Ségur*, 7/11/1787, f. 221r).

<sup>42</sup> *Idem*, f. 221v.

<sup>43</sup> MAE, Correspondance politique, Russie, vol. 122, pièce 49, *Lettre de Ségur à Montmorin*, 12/11/1787, ff. 226r-226v.

<sup>44</sup> *Idem*, pièce 69, *Lettre de Ségur à Montmorin*, 4/12/1787, ff. 293r-293v.

<sup>45</sup> *Idem*, ff. 293v-294r.

Cependant, loin de m'écarter de mes instructions, je m'étais borné à montrer le désir d'une union intime, comme j'en avais ordre littéral. [...] Loin de me permettre aucunes ouvertures, je les avais attendues et non faites. De plus, à six cents lieues de moi, le Prince de Nassau, confidentiellement autorisé, avait tenu au prince Potemkine un langage conforme au mien. Fallait-il d'autres preuves pour démontrer que je n'avais pas dépassé mes instructions!<sup>46</sup>

Certainly, Nassau had reported to Potemkin the same ideas expressed by Ségur earlier, but this does not change the fact that Montmorin's instructions did not envisage such a daring step – which, moreover, he refrained from informing Versailles about – nor was the comte authorized to suggest to Catherine – as reported by Cobentzl – the idea of active French participation in the dismemberment of the Porte, in case the two imperial courts wished to go that far. And it matters little if in the *Mémoires* the comte persisted in seeking the reason for the minister's reprimand in the political indecision caused by the crisis of 1787, he had clearly disregarded orders and deserved Montmorin's reproaches.

#### CONCLUSIONS

The final stretch of 1787 passed without further developments in the negotiation. While Montmorin wished to ascertain the intentions of the two imperial courts regarding the Ottoman Porte, Ségur seemed convinced that neither Catherine nor Joseph – caught off guard by the Sublime Porte – had a well-defined plan on the matter, which would likely only be decided by the course of the conflict. The negotiation thus appeared to be at an impasse. The comte communicated only one positive news to Montmorin, in a letter dated December 31. Cobentzl had received formal orders from Vienna to cooperate in concluding the Franco-Russian alliance, which seemed to be viewed with particular favour by the Austrian court.

However, the negotiation of the Franco-Russian alliance was effectively initiated by Ségur in the final eighteen months of his mission in Saint Petersburg but ended in a stalemate. On one hand, pre-revolutionary France – now engulfed in irreparable internal convulsions – attempted one last time to influence European events, departing from its centuries-old diplomatic tradition, and limiting the ambitions of Catherine and Joseph concerning the Ottoman Porte, through an agreement that would bind the three sovereigns. On the other hand, the czarina, already at war with the Ottoman Porte, also had

to face Gustav III's Sweden, while simultaneously fearing the Anglo-Prussian axis – along with the United Provinces – which openly threatened the stability of her alliances with Joseph II of Austria<sup>47</sup>.

On March 19, 1789, Montmorin sent Ségur the final instructions on the matter<sup>48</sup>. Louis XVI finally decided to reject the Austro-Russian request for French intervention in the event of Prussia invading Poland, thus jeopardizing the *status quo* following the partition of 1772. Indeed, the dire finances of the French state prevented such a step. As Montmorin observed, Europe was well aware of France's difficult economic situation and the fact that the *États généraux* – soon to convene – had been summoned primarily to «faire disparaître la différence qui se trouve entre les revenus et les dépenses nécessaires de l'Etat»<sup>49</sup>. Louis had therefore chosen not to make promises he probably wouldn't be able to keep or to incite panic over the potential war that would result from signing the alliance. Nonetheless, the sovereign was confident that the situation would soon improve: «S.M. n'a aucun doute, M., que le résultat de l'assemblée nationale qu'elle a convoquée ne soit telle qu'elle doit s'attendre de l'amour de ses sujets et des ressources immenses de la nation»<sup>50</sup>. Needless to say, Louis's hopes would fade within a few months.

On April 14, a dismayed Ségur undertook the thankless task of conveying what Montmorin had written in the aforementioned letter: reassurances of Louis XVI's unchanged friendship for Catherine served little purpose. From that moment on, the comte found himself in a «délicate et pénible» position, now unable to support the credit of a country that had acknowledged its «impuissance actuelle». Furthermore, Ségur was pessimistic about the possibility of resuming negotiations, as Russia would certainly no longer grant France the only advantage that seemed to interest the *Conseil*:

<sup>47</sup> O.T. Murphy, *The Diplomatic Retreat*, cit., pp. 126-129; C. Nordmann, *Gustave III, un démocrate couronné*, Presses Universitaires de Lille, Lille 1986, pp. 156-159; A. Geffroy, *Gustave III et la Cour de France*, Didier, Paris 1867, vol. II, pp. 67-70.

<sup>48</sup> Ironically enough, Montmorin was personally in favour of the alliance with Catherine, as can easily be deduced from a study of one of his reports, read during the *Conseil* meeting of 18 November 1788. The real opponents of the alliance with Russia were Necker and La Luzerne, to whose objections – preserved in the same archive fund – Montmorin replied in the above-mentioned report. Writing to Ségur, the minister evidently had to comply with the orders he received from Louis. See MAE, *Mémoires et documents, Russie*, vol. 16, pièce 22, *Mémoire par le Comte de Montmorin*, 1788; *Idem*, pièce 23, *Mémoire par M. de La Luzerne*, 18/11/1788; *Idem*, pièce 24, *Mémoire, par Necker*, 18/11/1788.

<sup>49</sup> *Idem*, *Correspondance politique, Russie*, vol. 128, pièce 50, *Lettre de Montmorin à Ségur*, 19/03/1789, f. 238r.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>46</sup> L.P. de Ségur, *Mémoires*, cit., vol. III, pp. 305-306.

Dans le cas où je parviendrais, contre la probabilité, à maintenir dans le désir de notre alliance, je ne vois pas la possibilité de faire le traité aux mêmes conditions. Le grand avantage de ce traité pour nous était d'obtenir des secours de Russie contre les Anglais [...] mais cet avantage étant aussi contraire aux intérêts du commerce russe nous ne pouvions le devoir qu'à la circonstance critique qui portait l'impératrice à tout sacrifier au désir de notre alliance<sup>51</sup>.

Ségur remained convinced that signing the alliance – with the inclusion of a guarantee for Polish territories – would free Catherine from the only fear that seemed to plague her. Prussia and Great Britain, fearful of the union of Russia, France, and Austria, would not dare to start a general war. Furthermore, Versailles could, without shedding a drop of blood, avenge the events in Holland, enjoying the advantage that Catherine had promised at the expense of the British. However, now that the alliance had faded, what «motif pourra la déterminer à nous promettre contre les Anglais des secours désavantageux pour son commerce?»<sup>52</sup>. According to Ségur, the time for action had passed, and even if negotiations were to reopen, the treaty would be entirely useless. Indeed, Catherine, in an evident position of strength, would impose: «dans l'alliance la neutralité entre nous et l'Angleterre sera stipulé comme la nôtre entre la Russie et la Porte, et alors le traité sera comme nul, puisqu'il sera sans objet»<sup>53</sup>. From that moment until his return to a now revolutionary France, the comte was relegated to be a passive observer, always welcome by Catherine but painfully aware of his political insignificance.

In conclusion, although Ségur's letter to Potemkin was unquestionably a misjudgment and open disobedience to the orders received, the sincerity of the comte's ideas cannot be doubted. From his point of view, France – increasingly compromised internally and now regarded as a «second-class» country by other European powers – could hope to restore its diplomatic prestige only with the help of the czarina. Ségur's hope of seeing his king return to being the «mediator of Europe» – Vergennes *docet*<sup>54</sup> –

persisted until the fateful events of the summer of 1789. In October, he returned to Paris, deeply discouraged about the prospects of the French monarchy.

#### TRANSCRIPTION OF THE TEXT OF SÉGUR'S LETTER TO POTESKIN

À Saint-Petersbourg, ce 20 octobre 1787

Mon Prince,

Votre Cour ne se soucie pas de répondre à l'amitié, peut-être votre génie voudra-t-il répondre à la politique. J'ai montré aux Ministres de l'Impératrice le désir du Roi de faire un traité d'alliance avec Elle, et j'ai eu la réponse la plus favorable et l'acceptation la plus obligeante. Je ne suis encore autorisé qu'à cette seule proposition. Mais je puis vous dire mes idées particulières. Nous pouvons par ce traité convenir, comme en 1756, que nous nous secourrons mutuellement en Allemagne et que vous serez neutres entre nous et les Anglais, comme nous entre vous et les Turcs. Mais il est peut-être une autre manière de faire le traité qui conviendrait mieux à vos grands projets. Il faudrait pour en rendre la possibilité plus probable que vous me fassiez savoir, par les ouvertures qu'on peut me faire ici, si vous nous donniez des secours contre les Anglais, ou si vous leur fermeriez vos ports dans le cas où nous agirions avec vous contre les Turcs. On ne m'a point chargé de faire cette proposition, c'est une question que je vous fais d'amitié et de confiance. Vous sentez sûrement très bien que pour achever un aussi grand changement de système, il faut que j'aie des bases sûres et que je connaisse aussi bien les dispositions de votre cour que celles de la mienne.

Vous m'avez bien souvent entretenu de ces grandes idées dans le temps où la position des affaires, et la disposition des esprits, m'obligeait à suivre un système opposé au vôtre. Voici le moment où je puis, en suivant mon devoir, agir comme vous le souhaitez. Je suis, on ne saurait plus, satisfait de la confiance que me témoignent les Ministres de S.M.I., mais engagez-les surtout à me faire sur vos vues les ouvertures les plus franches et les plus détaillées, c'est, selon mon idée, de ce plus ou moins d'ouverture que peut dépendre le plus ou le moins d'étendue qu'on donnera à notre traité.

N'ayez pas une humeur injuste contre les Français qui sont chez les Turcs, je ne doute pas que dans ce moment le Roi n'évite tout ce qui sera désagréable à l'Impératrice, mais calculez les dates. Ils ont été envoyés là dans

<sup>51</sup> *Idem*, pièce 65, *Lettre de Ségur à Montmorin*, 14/04/1789, ff. 299-300r.

<sup>52</sup> *Idem*, f. 302r.

<sup>53</sup> *Idem*, ff. 302r-302v.

<sup>54</sup> On Vergennes' political strategy of European balance, see G. Faigiez, *La politique de Vergennes et la diplomatie de Breteuil 1774-1787*, «Revue Historique», 140, 1922, 1, pp. 1-25; *Id.*, *La politique de Vergennes et la diplomatie de Breteuil 1774-1787 (suite et fin)*, *idem*, 140, 1922, 2, pp. 161-207; O.T. Murphy, *Charles Gravier de Vergennes: Profile of an Old Regime Diplomat*, «Political Science Quarterly», 83, 1969, 3, pp. 400-418; *Id.*, *Charles Gravier, Comte De Vergennes: French Diplomacy in the Age of Revolution, 1719-1787*, State University of New York Press, New York 1983; J.F. Labourdette, *Vergennes. Principal Ministre de Louis XVI*, Desjonqueres, Paris 1990; B. De Montferrand, *Vergennes. La gloire de*

*Louis XVI*, Tallandier, Paris 2017; *Id. Vergennes et "l'équilibre des forces à la française"*, «Commentaire», 163, 2018, 3, pp. 657-664. On this matter, particular mention should be made of the excellent introduction to the correspondence of Vergennes and Louis XVI, published by John Hardman and Munro Price: *Louis XVI and the comte de Vergennes. Correspondence 1774-1787*, ed. by J. Hardman and M. Price, Voltaire Foundation, Oxford 1998.

le temps où nous étions opposés de système et l'on craignait votre agression. Aujourd'hui tout est changé, mais il faut de temps pour faire parvenir des ordres, il est difficile de faire arriver promptement ces ordres à Oczakov [sic]. Et la sûreté de ces officiers exigera aussi quelques précautions pour les tirer, sans danger pour eux, des mains des Turcs. Tout ce que je puis vous dire c'est que j'écris encore aujourd'hui par courrier à Versailles pour cet objet. Attendez un peu patiemment six semaines et ma réponse. J'espère que personne que vous ne verra cette lettre que je vous écris avec toute la confiance que votre amitié et vos bontés m'ont inspiré. Puisque je travaille à présent selon votre système, j'espère que vous me seconderez de votre mieux. M'accuserez-vous encore d'aimer la petite politique et les demi-partis?

Je ne vous ferais plus de compliments, si votre silence ne me faisait pas craindre votre oubli et ne ressemblait pas tant à l'indifférence; il exige que je ne vous parle aujourd'hui que de la considération distinguée avec laquelle j'ai l'honneur d'être

Mon Prince,  
Votre très humble et très obéissant serviteur.  
Le Comte de Ségur