Department of History Publications

1-1-2003

A Distant World: Russian Relations with Europe Before Peter the Great

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"A Distant World: Russian Relations with Europe Before Peter the Grea,t" in Whittaker, Cynthia H, E Kasinec, and Robert H. Davis. Russia Engages the World, 1453-1825. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2003.

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"A Distant World: Russia and Europe before Peter the Great." Cynthia Whittaker et al., ed., *The World Engages Russia* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2003), 2-23.

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Draft: Not for Citation

Shortly after the fall of the western Roman Empire in the fifth century, a number of previously unknown groups—the Veneti, the Sclaveni and the Antes—rather suddenly appeared in the writings of European annalists. Though their exact identity is the subject of some dispute, most historians agree that they were probably Slavs. The early history of this group is shrouded in mystery. We do not know where they came from, who they were, or even what they called themselves. One thing, however, is certain: they were on the move. Under pressure from the Avars, a group of nomadic pastoralists from the western Eurasian Steppe, the Slavs migrated out of their homeland above the Danube to the north and east and settled regions so inhospitable that no agriculturalist had ever attempted to scratch out a living there. Indeed, the only inhabitants of this corner of northeastern Europe at the time were Uralic-speaking hunter-gatherers, the ancestors of today's Finns. Over the course of five centuries, the Slavic plowmen progressed into the seemingly endless forested zone, pushing the proto-Finns before them into a smaller and smaller corner of the continent. As they did so, their Common Slavic language evolved into East Slavic, and the resulting linguistic divisions laid the earliest foundations for what would become Belorussian, Ukrainian, and Russian culture, though hardly in recognizable form.[1]

The peopling of the distant and barren northeastern expanse was a remarkable achievement, but one with two serious consequences. First, the geographic position of the East Slavs meant that they, and particularly that cohort which came to reside north of the Oka River, would be relatively isolated from the great civilizations of medieval western Eurasia: the Carolingian Empire, the Byzantine Empire, the Abbasid Caliphate, and Transoxiana. The East Slavs were pioneers rather than successors. They opened to the axe, plow, and scythe a territory that had hosted no ancient civilization, was not on any major trade route, and was, all things considered, a long way from anywhere. This is not to say that the East Slavs were completely isolated from the ancient centers of Eurasian culture, for they were not. The point is that they did not have very frequent or sustained contact with these cultural loci for a period of approximately half a millennium.

The second consequence resulting from the settlement of the Slavs in the northeast, an area that later became the Russian heartland, was poverty. The territory was ill-suited to agriculture: it was largely covered with pine trees that, while they made excellent building material and provided ready fuel, shed acid-rich needles. This arboreal detritus impoverished the already sandy soil. Being in a northern clime, growing seasons in the East Slavic lands were short. A peasant could only hope to harvest one crop before the fall brought darkness and cold for the next seven or eight months. Finally, it must be said that for all their dogged determination, the East Slavic agriculturalists practiced a rather primitive kind of agriculture. They cleared the forest, scratched the

[1] P. M. Barford, *The Early Slavs: Culture and Society in Early Medieval Eastern Europe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001).

earth with wooden plows until soil was exhausted, and then they moved on. Yields were low, hunger probably common.

Despite their isolation and poverty, the Slavic plowmen succeeded in settling this unforgiving region, expanding their numbers, and, most importantly, creating the beginnings of a trading network along the many rivers of the region—the western Dvina, the Volkhov, the northern Dvina, and the Dniepr and its tributaries. The dimensions and geography of East Slavic commerce are largely unknown to us, but we can infer that the routes must have been sizable and extensive from the fact that it soon attracted predators. These were the Volga Bulgars, the Khazars of the lower Volga, the Pechenegs and Polovtsy of the Great Steppe, and, most famously, the Vikings or Norsemen of the Baltic. All of these groups proved aggressive and acquisitive, but only the Vikings succeeded in conquering the Slavs. **Illus. 1.1**

By the standards of pre-modern warriors, the Vikings were rather sophisticated. Unlike their competitors in northern Eurasia, they did not employ horses as a mode of travel and conquest. Rather, they relied on a very specific and highly advanced form of nautical technology. Their longships were remarkable because they were highly durable, relatively light, and, most significant, capable of traveling with great efficiency both in open seas and tiny rivers. By a peculiar geographic accident, the longship proved to be perfectly suited for travel around the European peninsula of Eurasia, which was surrounded by reasonably mild seas and crisscrossed with large, slow-flowing rivers. Whereas foot-born or horse-born warriors had to trudge across the rough and inhospitable terrain of western Eurasia in search of booty, the Vikings could use the sail to travel around it and oars to move within it.

Sometime near the end of the first millennium c.e., a group of Vikings—the Rus'—took control of the riparian trade route from the Baltic to the Black Sea.[2] Just how they accomplished this, we do not know. As a creation of the Vikings, Kievan Rus' (as historians sometimes call this medieval jurisdiction whose capital was located in Kiev) shared a common heritage with other early western Eurasian states created or conquered by Norsemen, including regions in England, Ireland, northern and western France, and southern Italy. Indeed, the histories of the western and eastern Viking enterprises are quite similar, as the parallel histories of Normandy and Rus' demonstrate. Once the Vikings became sufficiently established in these areas, they gave up their wandering ways and settled down to rule and tax the natives. In essence, they traded the hard life of nomadic banditry for the easier life of sedentary banditry. Yet neither the Norman nor Rus' enterprises existed in a vacuum. Rather the opposite: both had to deal with the great powers of the day, Rome and Constantinople. After some violent negotiation, a compromise was reached: the new Viking kingdoms would be recognized as legitimate if their subjects would accept Christianity. And so it was, though in truth only a tiny portion of the native populations had any understanding of the Gospel or, for that matter, of the existence of Rome and Constantinople. There were also local politics with which to contend. Being outnumbered by the natives, the Normans and Rus' had to be careful not to push their Frankish and Slavic underlings into rebellion. In any case, they needed native allies and proceeded to marry the native daughters, a process that ended in the

[2]Thomas S. Noonan, "Why the Vikings First Came to Russia," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 34 (1986): 321-48; Omeljan Pritsak, "The Origin of Rus'," *Russian Review* 36 (1977), 249-73.

Vikings' complete cultural assimilation by the locals. Within a few generations, neither the Normans nor Rus' spoke Scandinavian tongues.[3]

Though they were similar in origin and early development, careful examination reveals a number of crucial differences between Kievan Rus' and the other Viking states. Culturally, the western Vikings were, like the East Slavs they conquered, pioneers. The Norman kingdom inherited the cultural legacy of the older Roman and Carolingian empires. In stark contrast, the eastern Vikings were founders. When the Rus' arrived in the northeast, the Finno-Slavic cultural world they found was functional but comparatively unsophisticated. It contained no hint of the accumulated techniques of classical Greco-Roman culture. The Rus' did receive classical culture via contact with Byzantium, but quite little of it. Christianity was the most important export, yet it took some time to penetrate East Slavic life. Economically, the western Vikings built their operations on the decayed remnants of older imperial infrastructures, while the eastern Vikings had to start almost from scratch. In Gaul, the Romans had constructed a vast system of fortified towns linked together by well-traveled trade routes. In the land of the Rus', the Finns and Slavs had not lived in large settlements, nor was their international trade comparatively lively. Militarily, the eastern Vikings were at war much more often than their western counterparts. Certainly the Normans and their western brothers were involved in their share of violent scrapes. But in one important respect, western Eurasia across the Elbe was pacified after the turn of the millennium: the flow of Eurasian nomads—Huns, Avars, and the others—that had flooded central Europe over the preceding centuries ceased. The Magyars were the last to come and settle. The story was rather different in Rus'. Here, the nomads continued to arrive and remained very powerful. The early Rus' chronicles overflow with stories of Orthodox princes fighting a host of usually nomadic, usually Turkic-speaking enemies.

Despite these comparative disadvantages, the Rus' were more than reasonably successful. From the tenth century, at the time of the Viking takeover, to the beginning of the thirteenth century, Rus' progressed from a distant, marginally profitable Norse enterprise to an established western Eurasian empire. The writ of the grand prince, as the Kievan ruler was called, ran from the Baltic to the edge of the steppe and from the Vistula to the Upper Volga. Kiev was a considerable metropolis, and smaller towns dotted the landscape. International trade flowed along the regions many rivers. The beginnings of high culture were flowering. True, there were problems: the Kievan realm demonstrated a tendency for periodic breakdown, causing in turn a tendency toward political fragmentation. By the mid-twelfth century, Rus' was already divided into semi-autonomous principalities.[4] Yet it was not some internal mechanism that finally laid the Kievan empire low. Rather, the mortal blow was struck by yet another group of Eurasian pastoral nomads—the Mongols.

The Mongols, like the Vikings before them, have been treated with scorn. In the Rus' chronicles they are godless Hagarites, the orphans of God; in more modern times, they become "Asiatic" barbarians, the orphans of civilization. The truth is that the Mongols were the largest, most advanced, and best-led nomadic force ever to cross the Great Steppe. They defeated the most sophisticated empires of Eurasia—Northern China, Southern China, Inner Asia, Iran. They also subordinated a host of minor, more primitive enterprises, among them the Rus' empire. The Mongols' initial thrust in the early thirteenth century was devastating. They razed

[3]Simon Franklin and Jonathan Shepard, *The Emergence of Rus', 750-1200* (London and New York: Longman, 1996).

[4]John L. I. Fennell, *The Crisis of Medieval Russia, 1200-1304* (London: Longman, 1983).

entire cities, murdered and pillaged extensively, and desecrated sacred monuments. The nomads sent a message: submit or die. That message was duly received, and Rus' entered the Pax Mongolica. Shortly thereafter the princes of Rus' were summoned to Sarai (the capital of the Mongol kingdom of the Golden Horde); tax collectors were sent to Rus'; and the Mongol army left Rus' hardly ever to return. For the next two or more centuries, the Mongols would be absentee landlords. As long as the rent arrived promptly, there was very little reason to meddle.[5]

Usually, the tribute did arrive promptly, largely thanks to the good offices of the princes of a tiny town called Moscow. Like all good imperialists, the Mongols worked through local proxies. They would summon a Rus' leader to Sarai, proclaim him grand prince, and dispatch him back to the wilderness to make sure the money kept flowing east. Among the princes so instructed, those in the Muscovite line proved the most able, and their realm of Muscovy grew rich and powerful. Over the course of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, they brought the other Rus' principalities (Vladimir, Suzdal, Tver, et al.) to heel. During this slow campaign, as they became stronger and stronger, they even managed to adjust the terms of trade with their Mongol masters. In 1380 at the Battle of Kulikovo Field, the Muscovites and their allies faced down the Tatars. The Muscovites still paid, but clearly Mongol power in the northern region was waning. After the Stand on the Ugra River in 1480, the Mongol yoke finally ended. **Illus. 1.2**

Into the imperial void stepped a series of remarkable Muscovite leaders who ruled from 1462 to 1584: Ivan III, Vasilii III, and Ivan IV, often called "the Terrible". They expanded the kingdom's borders east beyond the Volga, south to the Caspian Sea, west to the Dniepr, and north to the White Sea. In so doing they came to rule peoples who had never been part of Kievan Rus'—Mordvinians, Chuvash, Mari, Samoyeds, Bashkirs, Tatars, Balts, Finns, Germans, Lithuanians, Poles, Cossacks, and Turks, among others. The once homogeneous Muscovite principality, located in the uniformly East Slavic Oka-Moskva mesopotamia, became a multiethnic empire. This imperial reach brought the warrior elite unprecedented wealth in the form of trading cities—Smolensk, Polotsk, Novgorod, Kazan, Astrakhan. It also brought the Muscovites into contact with other major states in Eurasia. Prior to this period of expansion, the Muscovites lived in a world dominated by the Tatar Khanates, the Byzantine sphere of influence, and the powers of east central Europe that included Poland, Lithuania, and the Baltic German jurisdictions. After building their empire, the Muscovites found themselves in a much larger world. To the east was Ming China, to the south were the Safavids and the Ottomans, to the west were the kingdoms of Europe. Commercial, diplomatic, and military relations began with all these states in the later fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.[6]

Of all these regions, Europe presented the Muscovites with the greatest opportunities. It was closest geographically. To get to China or Persia, the Russians had to cross vast distances and formidable terrain. To get to Turkey, the Muscovites had to fight their way across the Great Steppe. But to get to Europe, they merely

[5]Charles Halperin, *Russia and the Golden Horde: the Mongol Impact on Russian History* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985). A revisionist approach, stressing the importance of the Mongols on early Rus' and Muscovite history, is found in Donald G. Ostrowski, *Muscovy and the Mongols: Cross-Cultural Influences on the Steppe Frontier, 1304-1589* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[6]The rise and early history of Muscovy is ably treated in Robert Crummey, *The Formation of the Muscovy, 1304-1613* (London and New York: Longman, 1987).

had to cross the border with the Baltic German states or Poland-Lithuania. Europe was also closest culturally. The eastern regions were Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, Confucian or animist. Europeans were Christians, even if a heretical kind from the Russian perspective. Finally, Europe was the richest region, or at least its riches were the closest at hand, while Isfahan, Bukhara, and Bejing were largely inaccessible. As early as the fifteenth century, Nogorodians were trading in the great Baltic ports, and the commercial centers of northern Europe were almost in reach. It is little wonder, then, that by the early sixteenth century, the once isolated Muscovite regime had become drawn into the orbit of Europe. European diplomats began to travel to Moscow to negotiate Russian involvement in various central European affairs; the interaction between the western and eastern churches intensified, though it remained hostile; and European merchants began to deal directly with the Muscovite government for trading rights in Russian cities.

Western Europeans knew practically nothing about Russia, and most hardly knew that Muscovy existed. It is little wonder, then, that the first visitors recorded their impressions for the curious back home.[7] The first European account was written by an Italian, Ambrogio Contarini, a Venetian diplomat and merchant who was dispatched in 1474 to Persia with instructions to form an alliance for the purpose of attacking the Ottomans. On his return trip in 1475, he was forced north and found himself, quite unexpectedly, in Moscow. Upon returning to Venice, he wrote an account of his travels, focusing on the Persian mission. Muscovy, a place about which he knew little and cared less, was at best a sidelight. Contarini wrote that the grand prince controlled a large territory and could field a sizable army, although he believed the Russians to be worthless soldiers. The people, he reported, were handsome but "brutal" and inclined to wile away the day in drink and feasting. The Russians were Christians, but not very good ones.[8] **Illus. 1.3**

Contarini's disdain for the Orthodox faith was typical, but this contempt did not stand in the way of European efforts to convince the Muscovites to help them remove the Turks from the continent. In the early sixteenth century, the papacy and the Hapsburgs made repeated overtures to Muscovy regarding a possible alliance against the Ottomans. These proposals led nowhere, but they did produce three little tracts on the realm, one each by Alberto Campensé, Paulo Giovio, and Johann Fabri.[9] None of these men had ever been to Muscovy, thus their accounts are full of fantasy, notably the odd idea that every Russian Orthodox believer was a nascent Roman Catholic. Other Europeans possessed less kindly opinions, primarily because they were at war with the Muscovites. Jacob Piso, an Italian in Polish service, wrote Latin verse condemning Russian aggression, and Christian Bomhover, a Livonian official, penned an inflammatory history of Russian atrocities in the

[7]Marshall Poe, *'A People Born to Slavery': Russia in Early Modern European Ethnography, 1476-1748* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2000). For a complete bibliography of foreign accounts of Muscovy, see Marshall Poe, *Foreign Descriptions of Muscovy: An Analytic Bibliography of Primary and Secondary Sources* (Columbus, OH: 1995).

[8]Ambrogio Contarini, *Questo e el Viazo de misier Ambrosio Contarini* (Venice: H. Foxius, 1487). See *Travels to Tana and Persia by Josefa Barbaro and Ambrogio Contarini*, trans. William Thomas and S. A. Roy, esq. (London: Hakluyt Society, 1873), 161-63.

[9]Alberto Campensé, *Lettera d'Alberto Campense che scrivo al beatissimo Padre Clemente VII intorno alle cose di Moscovia* (Venice, 1543); Paolo Giovio, *Pauli Iovii Novocomensis libellus de legatione Basilij magni principis Moscoviae ad Clementem VII* (Rome: Ex Aedibus Francisci Minitii Calui, 1525); Johann Fabri, *Ad serenissimum principem Ferdinandum archiducem Austriae, Moscovitarum iuxta mare glaciale religio, a D. Iaonne Fabri aedita* (Basel: Ioannem Bebelium, 1526).

Baltics.[10] Some took a more balanced view, as can be seen in the largely neutral Muscovite vignettes found in contemporary cosmographies of Maciej z Miechowa and Sabastian Münster.[11]

Overall, the early European descriptions of Muscovy were short on detail, long on wishful thinking, and often wildly inaccurate. In stark contrast, Sigismund von Herberstein's seminal *Notes on the Muscovites*, published first in 1549, was exact, sober, and astoundingly true to life. **Illus. 1.4** Herberstein was an experienced Habsburg statesman and had traveled on diplomatic missions to Muscovy both in 1517 and 1527. Though the Muscovites did their best to limit what foreigners learned (diplomats commonly complained that they were being held prisoner), Herberstein succeeded in observing a remarkable amount of Russian life. He recorded it all in thick notebooks like an ethnographer.

Some twenty years after his final journey, Herberstein apparently became exasperated with the misinformation being bandied about by supposed experts on Muscovy and decided to set the record straight. Herberstein described a vast range of topics: the existing literature on the state; its languages, name, geography, borders, economy, and religion; its ancient history; domestic life; the grand prince's army, mode of rule, titles, and coronation ceremonies; the administration of justice; the history of Muscovite, Polish-Lithuanian, and imperial relations; the condition of the Tatars on Russia's southern and eastern frontiers; the vast and little known northern territories; the Russian court's treatment of ambassadors; and, finally, the course of Herberstein's own missions to Russia. *Notes on the Muscovites* proved to be the single most influential book on Russia published in the early modern period. Over the next fifty years it was pressed roughly two dozen times and translated into six languages. So impressive was Herberstein's portrait, that many authors—including those who had been to Russia themselves—simply gave up and stole his vivid descriptions. More generally, Herberstein's image of Muscovy and its inhabitants was passed down to later generations.

And how did Herberstein depict Russia? In broad terms, he believed it was a tyranny, a polity in which a rogue prince illegally appropriates the commonwealth. In essence, a tyrant makes the *res publica* the *res privata*—he steals the state. The princes in question were Ivan III and Herberstein's own host, Ivan's son, Vasilii II. These men, according to Herberstein, had reduced Rus' to a state of servitude. Vasilii, Herbertstein wrote, "uses his authority as much over ecclesiastics as laymen and holds unlimited control over the lives and property of all his subjects: not one of his counselors has sufficient authority to dare to oppose him, or even differ from him, on any subject."[12] Herberstein explained that the Russians' servility before their prince arose out of religious conviction: "They openly confess that the will of the prince is the will of God; on this account they call him God's key-bearer and chamberlain, and in short they believe that he is the executor of the divine

[10]Jacob Piso, "Epistola Pisonis ad Ioannem Coritium, de conflictu Polonorum et Lituanorum cum Moscovitis," in Ianus Damianus, *Iani Damiani Senensis ad Leonem X. Pont. Max. de expeditione in Turcas Elegia* (Basel: Ioannes Frobenius, 1515. n.p.); Christian Bomhover, *Eynne schonne hystorie van vnderlyken geschefften der heren tho lyfflanth myth den Rüssen unde tataren* (Cologne?, 1508).

[11]Maciej z Miechowa, *Tractatus de duabus Sarmatiis asiatiana et europiana et de contentis in eis* (Cracow: Opera & impensis prouidi viri d[omi]ni Ioannis Haller, 1517); Sebastian Münster, *Cosmographia. Beschreibung aller Lender durch Sebastianum Munsterum in welcher begriffen Aller völker Herrrschafften, Stetten, und namhafftiger flecken herkommen* (Basel: Henrichum Petri, 1544).

[12]Sigismund von Herberstein, *Rerum moscoviticarum commentarii.* Vienna: Egydius Aquila, 1549. Cited text: *Notes upon Russia*, trans. R. H. Major, 2 vols. (London: Hakluyt Society, 1851-52; reprint, New York: B. Franklin, 1963?), 1: 32.

will."[13] If the grand prince acted with divine authority in all things, and if he owned the "lives and property" of all his subjects, could these subjects be anything but slaves? No, as was demonstrated by the fact that "all confess themselves to be the *chlopos*, that is, slaves of the prince."[14]

Shortly after the publication of *Notes on the Muscovites*, its author's interpretation of the Muscovite monarchy seemed to be confirmed by events. In the mid 1560s, after what had been by all accounts a very successful reign, Ivan IV earned his epithet "the Terrible" and began a merciless assault on his court and kingdom.[15] Just *why* this happened, we do not know, but we do have a good understanding of *what* happened, thanks largely to the observations of several Europeans then in Moscow. **Illus. 1.5** Foreigners such as Albert Schlichting, Raffaelle Barberino, Heinrich von Staden, Jacob Ulfeldt, Daniel Printz, Johann Taube, and Elbert Kruse witnessed acts of cruelty that nearly defied description.[16] Schlichting provided a nightmarish account of one such episode:

> Making a sign with his hand the tyrant [Ivan] cried: 'Seize him.' They stripped him [Ivan Viskovatyi] naked, passed a rope under his arms, tied him to a traverse beam, and let him hang there. Maliuta went to the tyrant and asked who was to punish him. The tyrant replied: 'Let the most loyal punish the traitor.' Maliuta ran up to the man as he hung from the beam, cut off his nose, and rode away on his horse; another darted up and cut off one of Ivan's ears, and then everyone in turn approached and cut off various parts of his body. Finally Ivan Reutov, one of the tyrant's clerks, cut off the man's genitals and the poor wretch expired on the spot. . .. The body of Ivan Mikhailovich was cut down and laid on the ground; the retainers cut off the head, which had neither nose nor ears, and hacked the rest of it to pieces.[17]

Yet, the Muscovite tsar hardly had a monopoly on terror. Such displays of violence and cruelty were not unusual in sixteenth-century Europe: think, for example, of the horrors of the Inquisition or the Wars of Religion.

Nonetheless, Ivan's bloody campaign remained somewhat unique. According to the dominant Aristotelian political theory of the day, tyranny was a temporary affair because abused subjects normally would not permit a rogue prince to oppress them forever and would, eventually, overthrow the tyrant. Yet, Muscovites remained passive, and they did not rise up against their tormentor or his successor, Fedor (1584-1589). Giles Fletcher, a

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[13]Herberstein, *Notes*, 1: 32.

[14]Herberstein, *Notes*, 1: 95. Also see Marshall Poe, "What Did Russians Mean When They Called Themselves 'Slaves of the Tsar'?" *Slavic Review* 57 (1998), 585-608.

[15]On Ivan's reign, see R. G. Skrynnikov, *Ivan the Terrible*, trans. Hugh F. Graham (Gulf Breeze, FL: Academic International Press, 1981).

[16]Raffaelle Barberino, "Relazione di Moscovia." In *Viaggi di Moscovia de gli anni 1633, 1634, 1635 e 1636* (Viterbo: s.n., 1658); Heinrich von Staden, "Aufzeichnungen über den Moskauer Staat." See *Aufzeichnungen über den Moskauer Staat*, ed. Fritz T. Epstein (Hamburg: de Gruyter, 1964); Jacob Ulfeldt, *Hodoeporicon Ruthenicum in quo de moscovitarum regione, moribus, religione, gubernatione, & Aula Imperatoria quo potuit compendio & eleganter exequitur* (Frankfurt: Typis M. Beckeri, impensis I. T. & I. I. de Bry, 1608); Daniel Printz von Buchau, *Moscoviae ortus progressus* (Neisse in Schlesian: Typis Ignatij Constant. Schubart, 1668); Johann Taube and Elbert Kruse, *Erschreckliche / greuliche und unerhorte Tyranney Iwan Wasilowictz / jtzo regierenden Grossfürsten in der Muscow* (n.p., 1582);

[17]Albert Schlichting, "De Moribus et Imperandi Crudelitate Basilij Moschoviae Tyranni Brevis Enarratio." Written 1571. Cited text: "'A Brief Account of the Character and Brutal Rule of Vasil'evich. Tyrant of Muscovy' (Albert Schlichting on Ivan Groznyi)," trans. Hugh Graham *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* 9 (1975), 259-60.

scholar and English ambassador to Muscovy, however, said that it was only a matter of time before the entire enterprise imploded. In his famous *Of the Russe Commonwealth*, Fletcher predicted that Ivan's legacy would be civil war: "[His] wicked pollicy and tyrannous practise (though now it be ceassed) hath so troubled that countrey, and filled it so full of grudge and mortall hatred ever since, that it wil not be quenched (as it seemeth now) till it burne againe into a civill flame."[18] According to Fletcher, Russia's condition was so dire after Ivan's passing that "the people of the most part . . . wishe for some forreine invasion, which they suppose to bee the onely meanes, to rid them of the heavy yoke of this tyrannous government."[19] **Illus. 1.6**

Fletcher was right on both counts, for the succeeding era of Russian history—the "Time of Troubles"—was marked by both civil war and foreign invasion.[20] The former was brought about by a series of unfortunate accidents. The first of these occurred in 1591, when Tsarevich Dmitrii, the son of Ivan IV and possible heir to the throne, died under mysterious circumstances. Though the evidence suggests that the boy stabbed himself in an epileptic fit, rumor spread that Tsar Fedor's mentor, Boris Godunov, was behind the deed. The second fateful happenstance occurred in 1598, when Tsar Fedor died without an heir. Thus the dynasty that had ruled Rus' for over 700 years—the Riurikid—ended. Boris Godunov was "elected" tsar, but his legitimacy was challenged by a charismatic man claiming to be Dmitrii, who led a sizable army of Russians and Cossacks from the Polish frontier. In the midst of Godunov's battle with the impostor, the third unhappy accident occurred: the tsar himself died. In 1605, Russia had no dynasty, no tsar, and a man claiming to be Tsarevich Dmitrii at the gates of the capital. "Dmitrii" promptly took the city, but was overthrown a year later by Vasilii Shuiskii.

Fletcher's second prophecy was then fulfilled. Shuiskii invited the Swedes to assist him in maintaining the throne; his enemies (led by yet another False Dmitrii) turned to Poland; and both armies proceeded to invade Muscovy. In the subsequent rush of events, Shuiskii himself was ousted in a coup; the Second False Dmitrii was killed by one of his men; the Muscovite elite swore allegiance to the son of the Polish king; and the Poles occupied Moscow. In 1610, Muscovy was an occupied country awaiting the arrival of a new foreign ruler, and the Swedes still threatened. But then a remarkable thing occurred: provincial Russians of every class banded together to repel the foreign invaders and began a movement of national liberation, which, against all odds, succeeded. By 1613, the native forces had pushed back the Swedes and the Poles, and an elected assembly elected a new tsar, Mikhail Romanov (1613-1645), the founder of the second Russian dynasty, which lasted until 1917. All of these events were witnessed and recorded by Europeans who served on various sides in the civil conflict.[21] **Illus. 1.7**

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[18]Giles Fletcher, *Of the Russe Commonwealth* (London: Printed by T. D. for Thomas Charde, 1591). See "Of the Russe Commonwealth" in *The English Works of Giles Fletcher, the Elder*, ed. Lloyd E. Berry. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1964), 201.

[19]Fletcher, *Of the Russe Commonwealth*, 210.

[20]On the Time of Troubles, see Sergei F. Platonov, *The Time of Troubles*, trans. John T. Alexander. (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1970) and Chester Dunning, *Russia's First Civil War: the Time of Troubles and the Founding of the Romanov Dynasty* (University Park, Penn: Pennsylvania State UP).

[21]Konrad Bussow, *Verwirrter Zustand des Russischen Reichs*. See *The Disturbed State of the Russian Realm,* trans. G. Edward Orchard (Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 1994); Jacques Margeret, *Estat de l'Empire de Russie et Grand Duché de Muscovie* (Paris: Chez Mathieu Guil1emot, 1607). See *The Russian Empire and the Grand Duchy of Muscovy*, trans. and ed. Chester S. L. Dunning (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1983); Issac Massa, "Een coort verhael van beginn oospronck deser tegenwoordige troeblen in Moscovia, totten jare 1610 int cort overlopen ondert gouvernenment van diverse vorsten

After the Time of Troubles, in contrast to Fletcher's expectations, Muscovy remained a tyrannical state. Adam Olearius, a scholar and diplomat from Holstein, who visited Russia in the 1630s, however, noted that Tsar Mikhail was not a tyrant, but rather a mild ruler and greatly loved by his subjects. Nonetheless, his power was that of a tyrant, for his subjects themselves acknowledged that they were the tsar's slaves.

> All subjects, whether of high or low condition, call themselves and must count themselves the tsar's *kholopi*, that is slaves and serfs. Just as the magnates and nobles have their own slaves, serfs and peasants, the princes and the magnate are obliged to acknowledge their slavery and their insignificance in relation to the tsar. [22]

Just as Herberstein had said over one hundred years before, the tsar was the owner of the "lives and property" of all his subjects. But how could Muscovy be a tyranny without a tyrant? Olearius proposed a novel explanation for this century-old paradox. The Aristotelian theory of monarchy assumed that the character of a regime was determined by the behavior of the prince: if he were good, he would be loved and his government stable; if he were a tyrant, then he would be loathed and his reign would be short-lived. **Illus. 1.8**

Yet Olearius, an astute reader of Aristotle, discovered in the *Politics* a type of polity that reversed this causality—despotism. In despotic monarchies, the character of the people determined that of the prince. Natural slaves required and rightfully received a despot as ruler. Since natural slavery was a permanent condition, despotisms were immobile. If it were assumed that the Russians were natural slaves, then the question of love or fear became moot; whether they respected the tsar or feared him was of no consequence because their very state of being necessitated complete submission. Or so it seemed to Olearius.

> Their nature is such that, as the wise Aristotle said of the barbarians, 'they cannot and shall not live other than in slavery.' To them applies also what Aristotle said of the peoples or Asia Minor, who are called Ionians because they derived from the Greeks: 'They are miserable in freedom and comfortable in Slavery.'[23]

Later European commentators agreed with this judgment; the Russian tsar was a despot, and in despotism, seemingly absolute power is routinely afforded the ruler and passively accepted by his subjects.[24] **Illus. 1.9**

There can be little doubt that Olearius and other observers exaggerated the extent of the tsars' power and the submissiveness those in their realm. The historical record clearly contradicts the notion of state omnipotence and subject servility. On several occasions—the urban riots of 1648, the Copper Revolt of 1662,

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aldaer." See *A Short History of the Beginnings and Present Origins of these Present Wars in Moscow under the Reign of Various Sovereigns down to the Year 1610*, trans. G. Edward Orchard (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982).

[22]Adam Olearius, *Ausführliche Beschreibung der kundbaren Reyss nach Muscow und Persien* (Schleswig: Gedruckt in der Furstl. Druckerey, durch Johan Holwein, 1647). See *The Travels of Olearius in Seventeenth Century Russia*, trans. and ed. Samual H. Baron (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1967), 147.

[23]Olearius, *Travels*, 151.

[24]Samuel Collins, *The present State of Russia* (London: John Winter, 1667); Johann Georg Korb, *Diarium itineris in Moscoviam* (Vienna: Typis Leopoldi Voigt, 1700 or 1701). See *Diary of an Austrian Secretary of Legation at the Court of Czar Peter the Great*, trans. and ed. Count MacDonnell (London: Bradbury & Evans, 1863; reprint, London: Cass, 1968); Paul of Aleppo, *The Travels of Macarius Patriarch of Antioch. Written by his Attendant Archdeacon, Paul of Aleppo, in Arabic*, trans. Francis C. Belfour, 2 vols. (London: Printed for the Oriental translation committee, 1829-36); Augustin Freiherr von Meyerberg, *Iter in Moschoviam . . . ad Tsarem et Magnum Ducem Alexium Mihalowicz, Anno M.DC.LXI.* Cologne?: s.n., 1679?); Jacob Reutenfels, *De rebus Muschoviticis ad serenissimum Magnum Hetruriae Ducem Cosmum tertium* (Padua: Typis P. M. Frambotti, 1680); Carl Valerius Wickhart, *Moscowittische Reiß-Beschreibung* (Vienna: Bey J. J. Kürner, 1677).

Stenka Razin's rebellion in 1669-1671, the Solovetskii Monastery Uprising of 1668-76, and the revolt of the *strel'tsy*, or elite guards, in 1682—disgruntled Russians rose up against what they perceived as tyrannical authority. A more accurate assessment is to say that seventeenth-century Muscovy was usually ruled by a coalition of forces, including the royal family, boyars, church hierarchs, and military servitors, who exercised direct control over the serfs.

Clearly, however accurate their accounts, west and central European observers saw Muscovite Russia as a world apart, a "rude and barbarous kingdom" distant from the mores of their own civilization. Russians, in turn, prided themselves on being the sole protectors of Orthodoxy—in their eyes, the only true religion—and maintained an aloofness toward peoples of other faiths with whom they came into contact. This sense of satisfied isolation and heavy religiosity began to weaken during the reign of the second Romanov, Tsar Aleksei (1645-1676); he himself was very pious but developed and communicated a taste for west European ballet, theatre, literature, snuff, asparagus, and roses—secular pleasures inimical to traditional practitioners of the Muscovite way of life. But it was Aleksei's son, Peter, who would cast aside tradition, forcibly pull Russians out of their isolation, and turn the Orthodox Muscovite state into a secular westernized empire that no longer stood apart from the rest of Europe as a distant world.