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Moscow and its merchants, 1580–1650

The Russian merchant

The Russian merchant of the seventeenth century seemed a strange figure by the side of his contemporary in Western Europe. Unlike the English or Dutch merchant, he was not part of a vast network of overseas trade nor was he the beneficiary of great empires in America and Asia. He rarely left his own country, used no sophisticated bookkeeping or financial techniques, and by the standards of Amsterdam or London was not a man of tremendous wealth. Compared to the merchants in the centers of European commerce he appeared backward indeed. Against the background of Eastern Europe, however, the Russian merchant was not so unique because most of the distinctive features of his economic activity were shared by the merchants of Prussia, Poland, and the Habsburg lands. They too did not participate in the great currents of European overseas trade, and although probably aware of the more sophisticated techniques of the English and the Dutch they, like the Russians, lacked the capital to form great trading companies and financial institutions like those of the West.

The political and legal status of the Russian merchant also set him apart from his counterparts near and far. The English merchant was not only a subject of the King, but was usually one of the propertied minority of townsmen who elected a member of Parliament from their borough. The Dutch merchant, as a citizen of Amsterdam or some other town, had an important voice in the affairs of state at every level. Even in Eastern Europe, the merchant had some political importance legally established, if not always honored. The town in Eastern Europe emerged from the end of the Middle Ages with some autonomous rights: mainly those of self-
government and representation in the local diet. In the absolutist states these rights were severely curtailed – in the Habsburg lands in the sixteenth century and in Prussia in the seventeenth. In Poland, the peculiar constitution of the Commonwealth allowed the towns to retain their legal position, but the decline of the towns' economic base after 1650 undermined their actual position in the state: Only Danzig continued to play a role in Polish politics. The legal and political position of the East European merchant was very weak by the end of the seventeenth century. The Russian town, in contrast, had never been a legal corporation and possessed no rights as such; it was not even theoretically a legal entity. Nevertheless, some forms of self-government existed: The townspeople were required to elect from among themselves a number of judicial-administrative officers. This legal structure was an essential element in the life of the Russian merchants, an element without which much of their purely economic history must remain incomprehensible. Unfortunately, most historians of the administration of the towns in this period write from a strongly legalistic viewpoint that makes it difficult to give an account of the real political and administrative life of the towns and to avoid the error of describing what the law intended instead of what actually happened.

This state of affairs has less to do with the Russian towns of the seventeenth century than with the world of the Russian historians of the nineteenth: From the writings of the liberal legal historian B. N. Chichevin (1856) onward, a dominant theme was the absence in Russia of the traditions of local autonomy supposedly present in the Germanic world since the Middle Ages. An extremely abstract view of the legal history of Northwestern Europe was used as the basis for understanding the institutions of pre-Petrine Russia. The historians of the nineteenth century found no legally enshrined safeguard of the autonomy of Russian towns and concluded that these towns must have been powerless. At no point did they consider the actual workings of the town administration in connection with its social and economic reality; at every point they substituted law for life. This outlook has had a tremendous impact on the Russians' view of their own past and continues to be influential among Western historians of Russia. Furthermore, one cannot escape the impression that Soviet historians have implicitly accepted the doctrine of the powerlessness of the town: The Marxist critique of the legalistic view led them, understandably, to concentrate on the economic side of urban history, but this led also to the neglect of the history of urban administration. Thus the nineteenth-century understanding of the political-administrative
role of the city in Russia remains substantially unchallenged, in spite of the fact that it is based on evidence and a type of argument that would not be accepted by most historians in the West or in the USSR. The result of this situation is that even a determined attempt to uncover the reality of urban administration in pre-Petrine Russia will tend to fall back on the description of a legal theory.¹

The fundamental legal distinction applied to the population of seventeenth-century Russia was the distinction between those who were “burdened” (tiaglye, that is, those who paid the direct taxes) and those who were not. Almost all peasants and townsman were burdened; the church (in most cases) and the nobility were not. Thus, in law the townsman seemed to merge into the peasant mass. However, economic and social reality divided the townsman from the peasant. Since the end of the sixteenth century, almost all Russian peasants outside the North were serfs: under the power of a noble or ecclesiastical lord and forbidden to move without his permission. Only the crown peasants (11 percent of all serfs) were somewhat better off, being closer in status to the virtually free peasants of the North and Siberia. This basic difference in Russian society was barely reflected in the law, but it was none the less fundamental. In contrast to the peasant serf, the townsman had no lord but the Tsar and had much greater freedom of movement. The merchant of Moscow, like the merchant of most other towns in Central Russia, possessed this overwhelming privilege of not being a serf in the midst of millions of peasants who were serfs.

Within the towns, however, a small minority of townsman (mostly artisans) were, in effect, serfs. These men were the property of the great ecclesiastical lords, and possessed the dubious advantage of living in “white places,” that is, they were freed from the burden (tiaglo). The rest of the townsman, living in “black places” paid the burden and formed the legal community of the town. This community elected an elder (starosta) from among the “best” (i.e., richest) townsman and a number of assistants (tselovalniki) to assist him in his duties – the collecting of the burden from the town and the exercise of judicial authority at the lowest level. It also elected the “toll and tavern chief” (tamozhennyi i khabatskii golova) and a group of assistants (also called tselovalniki) to carry out the administration of the toll collection and state tavern monopoly in each town. All these offices were held by the richest merchants, and all the prominent merchants of a given town held all the offices at one time or another in their lifetime. In the two or three largest market towns (Archangel, Moscow,
Astrakhan) the toll and tavern chief was appointed by the financial office in Moscow responsible for the town, rather than elected by the townsmen. He was not, however, a bureaucrat but a great merchant of Moscow or some other commercial city. In one way or another the merchants stood at the head of the basic financial apparatus in the towns.

Looking at this system of elected financial officers, it would seem that the merchants had a great deal of power over the financial affairs of the state. However, this is not the conclusion drawn by the historians of Russia who have written about the merchants of the financial administration: The traditional view is that these offices were merely burdensome service obligations. The performance of such duties was supposed to signify the “binding” of the merchant to the town, and the binding of the urban population to the state, a view based mainly on the analysis of the theoretical legal significance of these obligations. The emphasis has been placed on the duty of the chief and his assistants to make up the deficit if the amount of money collected in a given year fell below the amount collected the previous year, and on the supposedly ruinous effect of this requirement. No attempt has been made to assess the likelihood of such an event, although it is obvious that either prolonged inflation or prosperity would reduce it to a minimum. It will be shown later that there is evidence that the merchants had some power in the financial sphere.

The city of Moscow

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, Moscow was a city built wholly in the tradition of the medieval Russian town. It possessed few large, open spaces and the center, pierced here and there by narrow streets, was a crowded jumble of mostly wooden houses and fences. For its time it was a large city, with almost a hundred thousand inhabitants. Spreading out in a circle from the Kremlin for several miles, the city was divided into five parts: the Kremlin, the Kitaigorod across Red Square from the Kremlin, the White City surrounding both, and the Earthen City in a concentric ring around the White City. Across the Moscow River to the south of the Kremlin was the Zamoskvorech’e. In the Middle Ages virtually the entire population had lived in the Kremlin and Kitaigorod, both protected by massive walls that still stood complete in 1700. After the unification of the Russian state at the end of the fifteenth century, the new capital burgeoned, and the White and Earthen cities became important and densely populated parts of the city for the first time.
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The growth of Moscow resulted in a change in the social complexion of the population in the different parts of the city. Formerly, not only the court and the church but much of the boyar aristocracy, and even minor nobles and craftsmen, had lived in the Kremlin. By 1600 the requirements of court and administration had pushed most of the boyars out, and by 1700 the boyar palaces within the Kremlin walls were almost extinct. Many boyars moved their residences across Red Square to the Kitaigorod, but this could not be a long-lasting solution. The Kitaigorod was becoming the commercial and ecclesiastical center of Moscow, and, as such, more and more crowded. The reason for this expansion was the proximity to Red Square, the main marketplace of Moscow. The square, which was only called the “Market” until about 1650, was not then the large, open space created by the architects and city planners of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but rather a small area enclosed on one side by the Kremlin and on the other side by the “trading rows” – the shops and stalls of the Moscow merchants. The only broad, open space was in front of the cathedral of the Intercession of the Virgin (St. Basil the Blessed), the memorial to the victories of Ivan the Terrible. Here was the lobnoe mesto (place of execution), the scene of most of the riots and revolts of the Muscovites, and the place where the Tsar spoke to the people when the occasion arose. But it was the marketplace that was the center of attention at most times, and it was the marketplace that drew the merchants to the Kitaigorod. Here the great merchants competed for space with the church and the boyars who still lived there. The Kitaigorod formed a rectangle with three main streets running east away from the Kremlin. To ease traffic and keep down fires the government required the main streets to be paved with logs and to be some twelve meters wide, but this rule was usually violated so that the streets were actually much narrower. The lesser streets were little more than alleys between the houses. Most of the population lived in the other three districts of Moscow, which contained people of every rank from beggars to boyars. The boyars already preferred certain streets to the west of the Kremlin (such as the Prechistenka) which in succeeding centuries became the great aristocratic streets of Moscow.

The inhabitants of the White and Earthen cities and the Zamoskvorech’e, however, were mostly artisans, traders, or soldiers, joined by some of the great merchants.²

The houses of the great boyars, which dominated the streets and clearly provided models for the merchant houses, had a number of distinctive features, quite different from the norm further west. By the end of the
Map 1. Moscow in the seventeenth century

Key:
1. Red Square
2. “Trading Row”
3. Chudov
4. Zaikonospasskii
5. Bogoyavlenskii
6. Androniev
7. Novospasskii
8. Kadashevo
9. Khamovniki
10. Old and New Koniushennyi

“Black” settlements and hundreds:
11. Arbatskaia
12. Vorontsovskaia
13. Golutvinskaia
14. Dmitrovskai
15. New Dmitrovskai
16. Ekaterininskaia
17. Kozhevnitskaia
18. Kuznetskaia
19. Miasnitskaia
20. Nikitskaia
21. Novgorodskai
22. Ordynskai
23. Pankratievskai
24. Pokrovskai
25. Rzhevskai
26. Semenovskai
27. Sretenskaia
28. Troitskaia
29. Ustiuzhskai
30. Chertolskaia
31. Aleskeevskai
32. Old Foreigners’ settlement
   (to 1652)
33. New Foreigners’ Settlement
   (after 1652)

State and church:
34. Tsar’s palace
35. Patriarch’s palace
36. Land Office
37. Foreign Office
sixteenth century, the nobility of Northern Europe was already beginning to construct the Renaissance and neoclassical palaces that have been the typical aristocratic dwellings until the present century. In Russia this fashion did not appear until the 1680s, and most aristocratic and merchant houses were still built in the traditional Russian style. Few secular buildings of the pre-Petrine era remain, and almost none of the wooden buildings that constituted the vast majority of boyar houses. Hence their appearance must be reconstructed from drawings and the remaining stone houses. The most distinctive feature of the Russian urban house, either that of a noble or that of a great merchant, was the fact that it did not have its facade on the street, but rather, that it stood in the center of a yard surrounded by a fence. The passerby in the street saw only a row of fences with barns and stables behind them, broken by elaborate gateways through which he might catch a glimpse of the house. Behind the house was usually a garden, both to supply the kitchen and to provide some color: We hear of flower gardens at least by 1650. The house itself was utterly unlike the structures that prevailed in Western Europe, either among nobles or among the burghers. Usually it had a partly sunken ground floor (called podklet') that served as a storeroom and servants’ quarters, and above it was the first floor with the dining rooms and receiving rooms of the householder. These two floors were of stone if the owner was extremely wealthy, but even if they were stone, the third floor was usually wooden: Wooden walls were warmer in winter and preferred even by the wealthiest boyars until the eighteenth century. The internal arrangement did not follow any conscious aesthetic plan, and usually the rooms were simply built in a long row with short halls between the rooms, causing the house to be long and narrow. As the houses grew larger, and as the boyars had to provide for the practice of dividing the house into a women’s and a men’s part in accordance with the Russian aristocratic custom of seclusion of the women, some of the houses were built in an L-shape. Only at the end of the century did the enfilade arrangement of the rooms give way to a boxlike ground plan of a square broken up into four quadrants. In the house of a great boyar the rooms were low and ill-lit, the gloom relieved by painting the walls and ceiling in bright colors and complex floral patterns. Imported cloths, silver utensils, richly decorated ikons, and elaborately carved furniture filled the rooms, the atmosphere of heavy luxury conveying an oppressive sense of rank and dignity. The exterior of the house was not as elaborate as the interior, but the assymetrical facade, the carved window frames, and the elaborate decoration of the front staircase
and the roof would have made the house picturesque to modern eyes, if not to the classical taste of Peter’s time.³

This was the kind of house that the great merchants of Moscow admired and tried to imitate when they could. Certain features were present even in the dwellings of merchants of moderate wealth: the fenced-in yard with the barns and stables around the edge, the position of the house in the center, the garden in the back. Other features were absent: the richness of decoration, the separate women’s half of the house, the great size, and often elaborate plan. Indeed the merchant’s house resembled more the house of the prosperous northern peasant than that of the great boyar. Above the podklet’ most merchants kept the ancient three-part plan of the peasant house, that of an entrance hall in the center (with the stove) and on each side a room of about equal size – one where guests were received and entertained and one where the family lived. A richer merchant usually built a third floor, especially if the first two were stone, and this was the family’s usual place in daily life. The very richest merchants imitated the boyars’ technique, building houses on the L-shaped plan and later (after 1700) imitating the neoclassical creations of the imported architects. Until the end of the century, however, most merchants continued the traditions of Russian domestic architecture. Lesser merchants and artisans stayed even closer to this tradition, building only small wooden houses of one room and an entrance-hall-cum-storeroom (the seni) with no podklet’ and often without any yard or only a very small one. Few such houses survive even in drawings, but they may be imagined from the small number of examples of stone houses of the lesser townsmen dating from the very last years of the seventeenth century. Many a great merchant began his life in just such a house, and of course most of the population of Moscow lived in such houses for the whole of their lives.

Moscow in the seventeenth century was the largest city in the Russian state. A good estimate of the size of the population is very hard to come by because the censuses of the seventeenth century are all incomplete and were made at different times. The population of the city was quite complex: According to the Soviet historian S. K. Bogoiaevenskii there were in Moscow around 20,000 households of musketeers (strel’tsy) and other soldiers and 17,470 households of civilians. (A large portion of the army was stationed in Moscow, and the soldiers were expected to partially support themselves by trading and crafts.) Of the civilians, some 50 percent were townsmen of varying legal status, who made up the “urban” society of Moscow. The rest included some 20 percent gentry and boyars with their
servants, 8 percent government officials, 10 percent clergy, and smaller groups as well. These figures should be thought of simply as estimates, especially because the townsfolk were the largest but least accurately counted group, and it may be presumed that their numbers were larger than the censuses report. It is impossible to evaluate the exact extent of participation of the soldiers in commercial activities, although it is well known that they did participate in large numbers. Furthermore, there were a number of so-called palace settlements, originally founded to serve the needs of the Tsar’s palace, but that by this period were also largely commercial in character. The commercial and artisan population of Moscow was thus much larger than the quarter of the whole that a literal reading of the figures implies.

The legal and administrative structure of Moscow was much more complicated than that of other towns. In most provincial towns, the urban population formed a single unit that elected its elder and toll chief as described above. The nonmilitary population of Moscow, however, was divided into four large groups. These four were (1) the ordinary townsfolk; (2) the palace and treasury settlements; (3) the monastery and ecclesiastical settlements; and (4) the foreigners.

The ordinary townsfolk, those who lived in black places and paid the burden, formed the largest group and were in turn divided into a number of “hundreds” (sotni) and “demihundreds” (polusotni), whose origin is obscure, but whose functions in the seventeenth century are fairly clear. Each hundred was a self-contained administrative unit on the model of a provincial town, with its own elder and his assistants responsible for the collection of the burden from that hundred. The hundred and demi-hundred elders did not, however, collect the toll, which in Moscow was collected by a single central office, the Great Toll Office (Bol’shaia Tamožn’ia), normally headed by a great merchant appointed by the government. The elders of the Moscow hundreds were also subject to the courts of the Land Office (Zemskii prikaz), an office of the central administration entrusted with the general administration of the city of Moscow. In Moscow there were some twenty-five hundreds, demihundreds, and other settlements (slobody) to which ordinary townsfolk belonged.

The second large group comprised the palace and treasury settlements, whose members had originally supplied the court with its needs in cloth, food, and services of many kinds. Some of these settlements were still mainly occupied with the service of the court, such as the Tsar’s stables (koniusheennaia sloboda), but even in these groups some men were traders or