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978-0-521-03903-1 - By the Banks of the Neva: Chapters from the Lives and Careers of the British in Eighteenth-Century Russia

Anthony Cross

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION



Of the five centuries during which the British and Russians have been in more or less constant contact, the eighteenth century is the most interesting, the most attractive and the most varied in the forms that contact assumed, or so it appears to my undoubtedly prejudiced eye. The sixteenth century had the excitement of ‘first-footing’, the fascination of a rapprochement between a Russia ruled by Ivan the Terrible and an England under Elizabeth, and came to a close with a masque of the Muscovites in a Shakespearean comedy; the seventeenth century had its periods of warming relations under the enlightened Boris Godunov and of considerable cooling under Aleksei Mikhailovich; the nineteenth century, on the other hand, throws us deep into ‘Great Power’ struggles and love–hate relationships, Russophilia and Russophobia, Anglomania but never quite Anglophobia, the first really bloody conflict between the two nations notwithstanding; and the twentieth century, tsarist and soviet, offers infinite variety in cultural, ideological and political counterpoint and confrontation, with the pendulum swinging violently from Russian Fever to Red Menace, from ally to foe.¹ The eighteenth century had something of all these features and much that was distinctly its own.

In Peter I and Catherine II, it had pre-eminently two rulers on the Russian side whose personalities and activities made them the stuff of legend and whose generally positive attitudes towards Britain and the British brought to relations between the two countries the colour and drama which were conspicuously missing on the British side in the first Georges. These attitudes were, nonetheless, part of a wider preoccupation with Europe, with Russia’s place within it and with Russia’s demands upon it. Peter and Catherine consciously embarked on the ‘Great Experiment’ of trying to bring Russia into Europe and of using Europe, for a limited period, as mentor and training ground to achieve that goal. This is the significance of Peter’s oft-quoted assertion that ‘Europe is necessary to us for a few decades and then we shall turn our back on it’, which is not a Slavophile rejection of Europe but an aspiration to equal status within it. Europe for its part viewed Russia with varying degrees of condescension, superiority, amusement and growing fear.

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In the age of the Enlightenment it was prepared in principle to assist the sun's rays in illuminating and warming the frozen north, believing unshakably in its own cultural superiority and the need for Muscovy to emerge from a state of ignorance. At the same time Europe viewed Russia as a vast and highly desirable export/import market which it was cynically prepared to exploit to its advantage. The fear element in European perceptions of Russia inevitably derived from its growing military might, its territorial expansion, its increasing ability to disrupt the long-accepted balance of power.

The relationship between Britain and Russia, while obviously being part of this greater scheme of things, was, nevertheless, distinctive and 'special', or at least many on both sides wished to see it so. In his *View of the Importance of the Trade between Great Britain and Russia*, written in 1789 at a time of great tension in the relations between the two countries, Anthony Brough donned the enlightener's mantle in his influential defence of much less dignified commercial interests: 'There is no nation on the records of history that has so rapidly risen from a state of darkness and barbarism, to a great height of splendour and civilization, as the Russians have done during this century. The causes of this rapid and wonderful change have been many; but I would venture to affirm, that her intercourse with Great-Britain has been the greatest.'² He went on to affirm that Peter 'knew that the interest of Russia depended on her connexion with England: he came in person to our Court, to cement the friendship that already existed between the two nations' and he further suggested that 'the great plans he formed, she [Catherine] has executed'. This led him to the formula that 'there is no Russian, who is a friend to his own country, but what must be at the same time a friend to Great-Britain', which was near to the favourite maxim of the then Russian ambassador in London, Semen Vorontsov, that 'tout bon Anglais doit être bon Russe et tout bon Russe doit être un bon Anglais', but without its generous reciprocity.³ For all the impetus that Peter and Catherine gave to Anglo-Russian relations it is nonetheless noteworthy that it was precisely in the intervening decades between their reigns that the two lynchpins of Anglo-Russian entente arose: the concepts of 'the most favoured nation', enshrined in the first commercial treaty of 1734, and of 'faithful allies', emerging from diplomatic negotiations in the 1740s and 1750s. Of course, such concepts inevitably blur the realities of the ceaseless blips in the relationships, but perception is more powerful than truth; as the success of the campaign to dissuade Pitt from action against Russia in the 'Ochakov Crisis' of 1791 demonstrated, Russia enjoyed a generally favourable image, influenced by many different factors, including the fame of the Northern Semiramis, anti-war sentiment, commercial self-interest and threats to employment for the British both at home and in Russia.

Politics and all its trappings of ambassadors, negotiations, secret agendas,

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alliances and treaties loomed large, but they were the constant rumble in the background to what really characterised Anglo–Russian relations in the eighteenth century. It was the transmission of ideas, technological know-how and information, and the interflow of people embodying those ideas, teaching or acquiring skills, working, learning and observing, that occupied the foreground.

In an earlier book, *‘By the Banks of the Thames’: Russians in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (1980), I sought to describe one side of the exchange, to look at the activities of Russians in Britain subsequent to the epoch-making visit of Peter I himself. Peter initiated the tradition of Russians coming to Britain to study; indeed, of the approximately 400 Russians identified as residing here, the overwhelming majority were students. Some were attending the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, Glasgow and Edinburgh, but others were apprenticed to British specialists in such areas as instrument-making, weapon production, shipbuilding, and agriculture, or were learning seamanship in the British navy, or visiting factories, mines, canals and industrial centres. Even the Russian Grand Tourists of the last decades of the century came to admire and marvel at ‘le pays de la richesse, de la sécurité et de la raison’,⁴ and to study how the landed gentry managed their estates and created their landscape gardens (although many, it must be admitted, partook in equal, if not in greater measure, of the more social and leisured aspects of their tour). The Russian embassy and church in London acted as the focal point and organisational centre for the activities of Russians in Britain, but from ambassador and chaplain to humble embassy clerks and church choristers, these official representatives were also often keen students themselves of British achievements, particularly in agriculture.

The largely positive reaction to Britain experienced by Russians of all classes and backgrounds, punctuated rather than punctured by individual disappointments and disillusionments, may be seen as part of the growing European cult of all things British, the French-fostered Anglomania which spread to Germany and eventually to Russia. Among the beneficiaries of such a cult were the British themselves. ‘De tous les peuples qui habitent sur notre globe, les Anglais sont à ce que je crois les plus heureux et les plus à envier’, wrote a Russian visitor in 1772.⁵ With the heroes and heroines of French and German novels (many of which were translated into Russian) increasingly being cast as English, the British visitor to Europe, and particularly to Russia, often received a warm welcome on the basis of these literary portrayals.

In transferring attention from the Russians in Britain to the British in Russia, we are not dealing with a mirror-image, with a simple reflection of the reverse flow from Britain. The picture is of course complementary, but there is much that is different, both in the numbers of people and the nature

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of the activities involved and in the wider implications of the British presence in Russia. There is thus no overall correspondence between chapters, which are, nevertheless, organised along thematic lines in both studies, and it is instructive to highlight the continuities as well as the divergences.

The title of the book was chosen with some care. *'By the Banks of the Neva'* obviously echoes the first part of the title of the previous work; both are quotations and emphasise the dominant role of the capital cities. Russians, however, travelled and worked in other parts of Britain, as did the British in Russia, but to a much greater extent and over a vaster area. These wider geographical boundaries are implied in the second part of the titles, but in the present work the comprehensiveness to which I aspired in *'By the Banks of the Thames'*, either in the body of the work or in the checklist of Russians visiting Britain, was never considered feasible or desirable. The chapters in *'By the Banks of the Neva'*, which themselves include chapters from the lives and careers of numerous British subjects, are offered as parts of a much larger picture of the British presence in eighteenth-century Russia.

It is not possible to speak of a Russian community in eighteenth-century London. There was an embassy, or rather a townhouse, in which the ambassador and his staff lived and worked, and there was a Russian Orthodox church, known as the embassy church but not physically attached, where Russian visitors worshipped and to which Russian students were called periodically. The ambassador and the chaplain were the influential people among a group of some dozen or so assistants and helpers. How different this was to the situation in St Petersburg: here there was an ever-increasing and vibrant community, in which the key figures were the merchants of the British Factory (the name given to members of the Russia Company), and in which the church also played a central role, but the building belonged to the Company and the chaplain was its appointee. The British ambassador was essentially on the periphery of the community, a guest invited to its balls and other social functions but whose ambience was essentially the court. He had a house but not an embassy and no other staff but a secretary and the occasional assistant. The government appointee of more significance for the community was in reality the consul-general, who, more often than not, was also the agent of the Russia Company and a former merchant himself.

It is for such reasons that this book omits a chapter on the British ambassadors and the course of Anglo-Russian diplomatic relations and opens instead with a detailed study of the composition and increasingly rich and varied life of the British community, its clubs, institutions and entertainments. Although the Anglo-Russian commercial agreements guaranteed equal rights for British and Russian merchants in the receiving county, the Russian merchant in eighteenth-century Britain was a rare phenomenon, whereas his British counterpart with his often large family and conspicuous lifestyle was a

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dominant figure in the St Petersburg community. Merchants inevitably appear in the opening chapter, but it is in the second that more detailed attention is given to the careers of certain prominent individuals and of the consuls-general within the wider context of 'Factory matters'. There is no intention to investigate the vicissitudes and argue the statistics of Anglo-Russian trade: this is the territory of economic historians who seldom, however, see the people behind the trade figures and the names of commodities and firms. In contrast to what can only be a sampling of case histories and categories of activity, given the overwhelming number of merchants trading in Russia down the century, the third chapter attempts to trace the history of the English church in St Petersburg, physically and spiritually at the centre of the community, and to offer a detailed study of its chaplains, whose interests frequently went far beyond the theological.

The British went to Russia to find employment, to make their fortunes, and to practise and/or teach a whole range of skills (which many Russians also acquired during their periods of study in Britain) that were considered vital for Russia's modernisation. The men whose careers are described in chapters 4, 5 and 6 were all 'necessary foreigners' in the sense that their expertise, be it as doctors, naval officers, shipbuilders, instrument-makers, watchmakers, engineers or mechanics, was in demand – even if it was always hoped by the Russian authorities (and by Russians whose own prospects the foreigners' presence seemed to damage) that the demand would be short-lived. Each of the areas covered in these chapters could well merit monographic treatment, given its importance and the wealth of material, but it should be emphasised that the context for these studies is essentially that of an on-going British presence and they do not pretend to be, for instance, histories of Russian medicine or technology, within which the extent of a specifically British contribution might be confidently fixed. The chapters dealing with doctors and with specialists and craftsmen nevertheless attempt to be as inclusive as possible within their own parameters and to supply information that was hitherto unknown or overlooked. The challenge offered by naval officers and shipbuilders is of a different order. Hundreds of men were involved at some period from the beginning of Peter's reign to beyond that of Paul in the development of the Russian navy and were active in every campaign in the Baltic and in the south. This chapter seeks to demonstrate the extent of the British presence and the significance of the very real contribution that was made.

The British in the Russian navy is a self-recommending subject, the British in the Russian army during the same period, much less so. British mercenaries were very conspicuous in the armies of seventeenth-century Muscovy,⁶ but the situation changed in the eighteenth. British officers, notably Scots and Irish, figured prominently, however, in many battles during the first half of

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the century. Beginning with Peter's mentor General Patrick Gordon (d. 1699), the list would include other Gordons, Lacy, Ogilvie, Fullerton, Campbell, the venerable General George Brown, and, pre-eminently, Field-marshal James Keith (d. 1758), of whom much has been written but who still awaits a biographer. British officers gave their services as 'volunteers' in the wars against the Turks during the reigns of both Anna and Catherine; among them we find the Earl of Crawford in the 1730s and the noted Welshman Henry Lloyd, the diplomat William Fawkener, Hugh Elliot and many others in the 1770s. There is material enough for a chapter, but it remains one still to be written.⁷ It is the navy that provides the great military theme for the British in eighteenth-century Russia and a constant refrain in Anglo-Russian relations. Count Semen Vorontsov, the Russian ambassador in London, underlined their relative importance when he wrote in 1787 that 'I would very much like us to take as many Prussian officers as wished to enter our army and as many British officers as wished to serve in our navy'.⁸

The men who are the subject of chapter 7 are distinct from those discussed in the preceding three chapters – distinct not in their going to Russia to seek their fortunes but in the nature of what they offered. These were the architects, painters, engravers and landscape gardeners who catered for the court and the aristocracy. Foreign architects in particular had long practised in Russia, but the creation of St Petersburg led to a spectacular increase in the number of architects and other artists seeking employment in Russia. The British, however, were notable only by their absence before the reign of the great Catherine. France and Italy were and remained the dominant cultural influences, but a consequence of the Anglomania reaching Russia in the last decades of the century was the readiness to recognise and employ British artists. Painters contributed very little, but the skill of mezzotint engravers such as Walker and Saunders was highly valued. Cameron's contribution as an architect was distinctive, but it is in landscape gardening that the British left their indelible mark. The 'English gardens' that soon became a feature of many imperial and aristocratic estates were created in some cases by Russians sent to Britain to study the art but overwhelmingly by a phalanx of talented British gardeners in Russia, whose activities are little recognised there and scarcely suspected back in the land of their birth.

Some of the most valuable comments about the gardeners and their work are found in the diaries and accounts of contemporary British travellers to Russia. Visiting Russia 'out of curiosity' had its origins in the 1730s, but during Catherine's reign Russia formed part of the 'northern tour', offering new and exciting variations on the traditional Grand Tour. Books published by travellers (and by armchair travellers, taking advantage of the vogue) helped to form British opinion about the new Russia, emphasising its progress towards civilisation or exploiting old prejudices. Many more British

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travellers visited Russia than is usually conceded and they have left a wealth of unpublished letters and journals. The travellers' itineraries, reactions and impressions provide the substance for the closing chapter.

The ranks of these visitors contained many people, men and women, for whom Russia was but a brief interlude in their lives and who usually came from, and returned to, careers and lives of eminence and record in Britain. At random one might cite, to indicate the range and type of visitors from the 1770s to the 1790s, Sir Nathaniel Wraxall, the Rev. William Coxe (accompanying, firstly, Lord Herbert, and later, Samuel Whitbread II), Sir John Sinclair, Sir Richard Worsley, Jeremy Bentham, John Howard, Patrick Brydone, the Duchess of Kingston, Lady Elizabeth Craven. These are names which appear in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, a distinction enjoyed by few of the hundreds of people who appear in the earlier chapters of this study. To be sure, all the ambassadors receive their accolade, as do men who, like the travellers, were known before they went into Russia or who returned to enjoy some reputation for their subsequent writings or activities in Britain. Such were John Perry, Sir Charles Knowles, John Elphinstone, Samuel Bentham, and the former chaplains John Glen King and William Tooke. But invariably, the Russian episodes in their lives, which lasted from perhaps just a few years to many, are treated superficially and inaccurately through ignorance of the essential source material.

Neglected in British biographical sources, a number of the British claimed their place in the great but unfinished *Russkii biograficheskii slovar'* (25 vols, St Petersburg, Moscow, 1896–1916) and in other more specialised dictionaries of Russian military leaders, artists or clockmakers. Without any attempt at an exhaustive listing, the following are to be found either in the completed volumes of the dictionary or in the listing for projected volumes: Belli (Bailey), Berd (Baird), Bottom, Farvarson (Farquharson), Gainam (Hynam), Gaskoin (Gascoigne), Golidei (Halliday), Greig, Gutri (Guthrie), Keit (Keith), Kroun/Krovn/Kron (Crown) and Villie (Wylie). In some cases the original names are obvious, in others, they are obscured by the eccentricities of transliteration. We have a situation where British origins are lost for Russian readers amidst a plethora of foreign names (mainly German) absorbed into Russian, but equally so for British (and American) scholars using Russian sources (and some of the original documents offer the most bizarre of variants), who write of Belli and Kuzens or Cuzins (Cozens) and Menas (Manners), or who, knowing what sometimes happens in transliteration, render back Gutri correctly as Guthrie and Gop as Hope but can be sometimes undone, as in a notable instance, when the entrepreneur Gomm reappeared as Home.

It is not extravagant to suggest that we are dealing with a legion of forgotten men and with a community whose size and way of life and importance both for Britain and Russia have been but dimly perceived. The impulse to

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reconstruct that community is archaeological rather than antiquarian; and the move towards a sort of supplementary volume for the *DNB* – a *DEBR*, a dictionary of expatriate Britons in Russia, albeit only for the eighteenth century – is prompted not solely by the wish to rescue worthy men from unjust oblivion but by the need to show at an individual level the nature and variety of their activities in St Petersburg and in other parts of Russia and their interaction both with their fellow-countrymen at home and in Russia and with Russians. In sum, this is a case study of a significant and powerful expatriate community which may serve as a basis of comparison with other outposts of empire in other countries and in the same or other centuries.

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THE COLONY BY THE BANKS
OF THE NEVA*I*

The views upon the banks of the Neva exhibit the most grand and lively scenes I ever beheld. The river is in many places as broad as the Thames at London: it is also deep, rapid, and as transparent as chrystal; and its banks are lined on each side with a continued range of handsome buildings. On the north side the fortress, the Academy of Sciences, and the Academy of Arts, are the most striking objects; on the opposite side are the Imperial palace, the Admiralty, the mansions of many Russian nobles, and the English line, so called because the whole row is principally occupied by the English merchants. In the front of these buildings, on the south side, is the Quay, which stretches for three miles, except where it is interrupted by the Admiralty; and the Neva, during the whole of that space, has been lately embanked by a wall, parapet, and pavement of hewn granite; a magnificent and durable monument of imperial munificence.¹

Such were the impressions of the Rev. William Coxe on his first visit to St Petersburg in 1779. A visitor to the city some 200 years later would immediately recognise the scene and locate the buildings described; but if he was unfamiliar with the city's history, he would undoubtedly be puzzled by the reference to the 'English line'. However, for a century and a half up to the October Revolution, the English Line or Embankment was almost as famous as the Nevskii Prospekt and seemingly a permanent reminder of the link between the British and Peter's city. The link has now been re-established with the renaming of the embankment in 1994 to mark the visit of Queen Elizabeth II.

In the first years of its existence from 1703 the city would have seen few Britons and few indeed would have wished to be there, as hordes of peasants, soldiers and prisoners drove the piles and attempted to drain the marshy islands of the Neva delta. It was a place where there was 'on one side the sea, on the other sorrow, on the third moss, on the fourth a sigh'.² The city nevertheless grew rapidly, initially on the Petersburg (now Petrograd) side, to the east of the Peter and Paul Fortress, where the fifteen major wooden houses in 1704 had increased to 150 by 1709. The victory over Charles XII at Poltava in 1709 brought security to the new city, which became Russia's

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capital officially in 1712. The sense of permanence was increased by the construction of more stone buildings and in 1714 building in stone outside the capital was forbidden by imperial decree. The great series of buildings by the Italian architect Domenico Trezzini, including the Peter and Paul Cathedral, the Summer Palace, the Twelve Colleges and the Exchange and Warehouses, was built from 1710 onwards. The last of these, the Exchange and Warehouses (1723–35), was to be the heart of Petersburg's commerce and house the headquarters of the association of Russia-based members of the Russia Company, known as the British Factory, which was obliged to move from Moscow in 1723. It is from 1723 that a real British community in the capital may be said to date, although a number of Britons, particularly those in Russian service but also some merchants, had been there during the previous decade. There is little information, however, about precisely where in these early years the British lived.

In 1704 the Admiralty, which was then merely a shipyard, was begun on the mainland, or Admiralty Island, on the left bank of the Neva. In its immediate vicinity there grew up a Foreigners' Quarter, a far more temporary and haphazard area than its Moscow counterpart. Among the mass of wooden huts Prince Menshikov was said to have built a large lodging-house where foreign workmen could hire a room; nearby stood a tavern where they passed their dreary nights. Beyond this settlement others grew up on this side of the river, where small craftsmen and tradesmen settled. But fire, which along with flooding was a constant danger, devastated large areas of the city on the Admiralty Side in 1736 and 1737; this led to decrees forbidding the construction of wooden buildings without stone foundations and to the removal of wooden structures standing next to stone buildings. It also saw the setting up of the Commission for the Orderly Development of St Petersburg. Even more significant was to be the creation in 1762 of the Commission for the Stone Construction of St Petersburg and Moscow. Already in the first third of the century, along the waterfront to the west of the Admiralty, houses had been built both in wood and stone for members of the Russian aristocracy and for important foreigners: the British shipbuilders Joseph Nye and Richard Cozens had houses there in the 1720s, for example. Several of these houses survived into Catherine's reign, but were subject to considerable alteration and rebuilding, dictated not only by necessity but by changing tastes and styles. One building to keep its original baroque façade from Petrine times until after the end of the eighteenth century was the mansion of Count Boris Sheremetev. In 1753 this was bought by the British Factory and converted for use as the English Church; it was to become the centre of the British community's life in more senses than one. One of the important provisions of the Anglo-Russian Commercial Treaty of 1734 was that British merchants were spared the imposition of having soldiers billeted in the