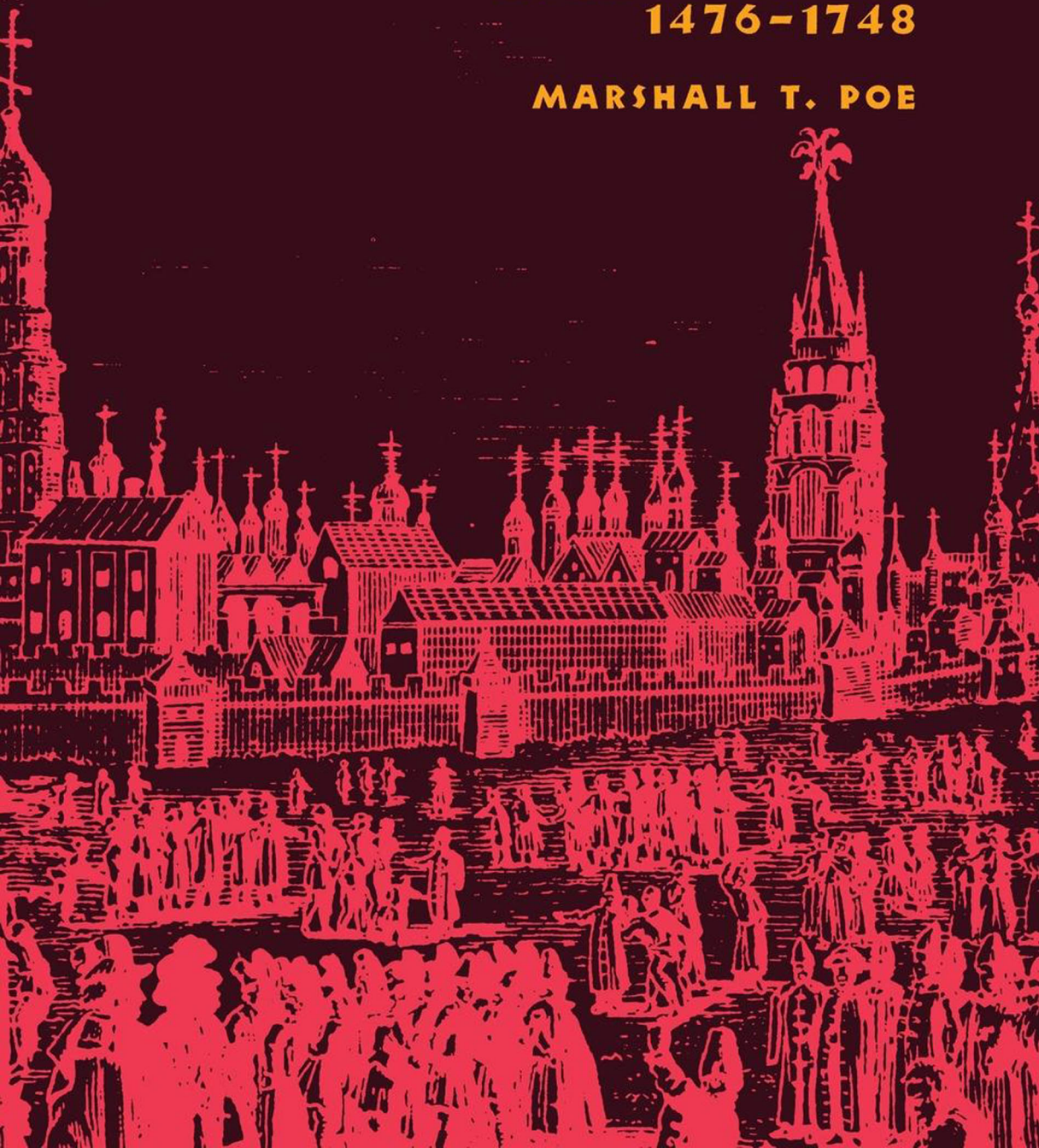


"A PEOPLE BORN TO SLAVERY"

RUSSIA IN EARLY
MODERN EUROPEAN
ETHNOGRAPHY,
1476-1748

MARSHALL T. POE



"A PEOPLE BORN TO SLAVERY"

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BORIS: But I would say instead, "Whoever barks is a dog." Our neighbors show their envy when they malign us, and we should therefore ignore them. Those who despise should be despised. Whoever thinks I am a barbarian, I consider him a barbarian.

KHREVOI: Brother, you are mistaken. It is easier to say than to do, for whoever ignores the view of the outside world knows neither shame nor honor. He is like some ancient fool who considers himself a philosopher, but who is merely a cynic.

IURI KRIZHANICH, 1663-66

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M. P.

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A Note on Abbreviations

BECAUSE OF THE large number of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century books repeatedly cited in the notes to this work, the following system of abbreviation has been adopted: “[author’s last name] ([approximate dates of drafting]), [page numbers].” For example, Sigismund von Herberstein, *Rerum moscoviticarum commentarii. In hijs commentarijs sparsim contenta habebis, candide Lector, Russiae et, que nunc ejus metropolis est, Moscoviae brevissimam descriptionem. De religione quoque varia inserta sunt et quae nostra cum religione non conveniunt. Chorographiam denique totius imperij Moscici et vicinorum quorundam mentionem. Quis denique modus excipiendi et tractandi oratores disseritur. Itineraria quoque duo in Moscoviam sunt adjuncta* (Vienna, 1549), has been abbreviated in the notes as “Herberstein (1517–49).” For complete bibliographic information about the first edition of the texts cited in this fashion, as well as the editions to which page numbers in the notes refer, see Bibliography 1 at the end of this book.

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“A PEOPLE BORN TO SLAVERY”

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INTRODUCTION

The History of “Russian Tyranny”

All confess themselves to be the *chlopos*, that is, slaves of the prince.

SIGISMUND VON HERBERSTEIN, 1549

It is not now for the first time that foreigners have been struck with astonishment at contemplating the attachment of this people to their slavery. The following passage, which is an extract from the correspondence of the Baron Herberstein . . . I have found in Karamzin.

MARQUIS DE CUSTINE, 1839

Historians who have written that the tyranny of the tsars conditioned the nation to accept the tyranny of the Communists have missed the fact that Russian habits of obedience have been the cause, not the result, of political autocracy.

NICHOLAS P. VAKAR, 1961

What I am proposing to do here is to construct a psychoanalytic model of the mentality behind both slavish behavior and its cultural signification in Russia.

DANIEL RANCOUR-LAFERRIERE, 1995

IN AUGUST 1953 George F. Kennan—America’s foremost Russia expert, author of the policy of “containment,” and former ambassador to the Soviet Union—attended a conference on “the problem of Soviet imperialism” sponsored by the School of Advanced International Studies in Washington.¹ Some years earlier, Kennan had broken with the Truman administration over the issue of the nature of Soviet behavior. Since his famous “long telegram” of February 22, 1946, Kennan had consistently argued that the

¹ On the conference, see C. Grove Haines, Foreword to Haines, *Threat of Soviet Imperialism*, v.

sources of Soviet domestic and international policy were a function not only of Communist ideology but also of traditional Russian paranoia.² Marxist thought was indeed, Kennan believed, an important and novel force behind Russian actions at home and abroad. But the Bolsheviks were not only Communists; they were also the inheritors of a style of thinking that had been conditioned by centuries of political instability and foreign aggression, or at the very least by the perception of instability and aggression. Though Washington had once accepted Kennan's views, the momentous events of 1949 (the explosion of a Soviet atom bomb, the victory of the Chinese Communists, the formation of the German Democratic Republic) led the American political and policy elite to believe that the Politburo was in fact following a Marxist-inspired "plan" aimed at internal repression and world domination. On the basis of this erroneous assumption, Kennan argued, Truman and Acheson had incorrectly concluded that only a militarized form of containment could halt Soviet "totalitarianism" and "imperialism." Eisenhower and Dulles strayed even further afield, suggesting that the aim of American policy should be the "liberation" of Soviet-occupied areas and Russia itself.³ Kennan felt that a militant approach would only confirm traditional Russian suspicions about Western aggression, now under the guise of the Communist theory of "capitalist encirclement." Not surprisingly, Kennan's opinions cost him his job, first as head of the Policy Planning Staff in mid-1949 and then in the State Department itself in early 1953.⁴

Having "retired" from the foreign service, Kennan had time to flesh out his thoughts on the long-term Russian historical attitudes that informed much of Soviet policy, and he took the opportunity provided by the conference at the School of Advanced International Studies to air his conclusions. In his nuanced and subtle essay "The Soviet Union and the Noncommunist World in Historical Perspective," Kennan reiterated his conviction that Soviet behavior was motivated not only by Marxist ideology but also by age-old Russian habits. As early as "the days of the Grand Duchy of Muscovy," he wrote, "many things were noted by foreign observers that seem now, in retrospect, to have had a certain prophetic tinge and to have presaged the conflict of our time."⁵ "The importance and significance of these observations," he continued, "cannot be denied," for they offered proof that "traits were indeed becoming visible in old Muscovy that were destined later to play an important part in the psychological composition of Soviet power." What were these "traits"?

² George F. Kennan, "Moscow Embassy Telegram no. 511, February 22, 1946." Kennan later published his views anonymously: X [George F. Kennan], "Sources of Soviet Conduct."

³ Walter L. Hixton, *George F. Kennan*, 131-54.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 89-90, 136.

⁵ The citations in this paragraph are from George F. Kennan, "Soviet Union and the Non-communist World," 5-6.

There was a tendency to a messianic concept of Russia's role in history; an intolerance of foreign outlooks and values; a pronounced xenophobia of Russian officialdom; an insistence on isolating the Russian people from foreign contacts; a secretiveness and deviousness of diplomatic practice; a seeming inability to understand anything in the nature of a permanently peaceful and equal relationship between states; a tendency to view every treaty of peace as being in the nature of a provisional armistice; a tendency to think of conflict as the normal, peace as the provisional and abnormal.

Kennan carefully qualified this striking statement of historical continuity by assuring his readers that many of these Muscovite attitudes "were more common in their own context of time and place than they are today." Nonetheless, he was struck by the prescience of the early European observers, for it could not be denied that the "political habits and outlook" of modern Russians bore a striking resemblance to those described in the accounts of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European travelers to Muscovy. In a later work, Kennan repeated his contention that in the form of Soviet power, Old Russia had somehow survived into the modern age. Bolshevism, he wrote, reinvigorated "the spirit and practices of the Grand Duchy of Muscovy: the defiant, xenophobic sense of religious orthodoxy, the breakdown of communication with the West, the messianic dreams of Moscow as the Third Rome, the terrible punishments, and the sultry, intrigue-laden air of the stuffy chambers of the Kremlin."⁶

Kennan was neither the first nor the last to find a key to the mysteries of Russian politics in the writings of early modern European travelers. Since the Petrine era, the opinions first formulated by Sigismund von Herberstein, Antonio Possevino, Adam Olearius, and the other early visitors exercised a remarkable hold over both European and Russian consciousness. In the eighteenth century, Western luminaries often contrasted "civilized" Europe with "barbaric" Russia, just as the travelers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had done.⁷ In the nineteenth century, Karl Marx, Max Weber, and other Western thinkers refigured the traditional opposition in terms of a theory of historical development in which the West was "progressive" while Russia was "backward," or perhaps even a stagnant "Asiatic despotism."⁸ In the twentieth century, Western hostility toward Bolshevism once again led to a reform of the European-Russian distinction: the West now appeared as "democratic" while the Soviet Union was "totalitarian."⁹ The opposition between the West and Russia had an even greater impact on Russia's self-understanding.¹⁰ The imperial elite of the eighteenth century idealized the

⁶ George F. Kennan, *Marquis de Custine and His Russia in 1839*, 130.

⁷ Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*.

⁸ Bruno Naarden, "Marx and Russia"; Richard Pipes, "Max Weber and Russia."

⁹ Abbot Gleason, *Totalitarianism*.

¹⁰ Liah Greenfeld, "Formation of Russian National Identity" and *Nationalism*, 189–274.

West and, paradoxically, incorporated traditional European criticism of Muscovite "barbarity" into its own national identity. In the nineteenth century, this tendency toward self-deprecation before an imaginary West enlivened its opposite: extreme Russian nationalism ("Slavophilism") built on a sense of complete detachment from and even superiority to "corrupt" Europe.¹¹ The Bolsheviks inherited this peculiar form of national schizophrenia: on the one hand, they were extreme Westernizers who fought to eradicate everything Russian about Russia and replace it with a Western-inspired industrial utopia; on the other hand, the Russian Communists were (as Kennan pointed out) xenophobic patriots who desired to live apart from the "bourgeois" West. One may reasonably doubt that the early travelers were as prescient as Kennan believed, but they were certainly more influential than the careful statesmen understood.

This book attempts to elucidate the origins of the modern image of Russia through an analysis of European accounts of Muscovy written from the late fifteenth to the early eighteenth century. The subject is hardly new. Since the noted imperial Russian historian Vasilii Kliuchevskii wrote his *Foreigners' Tales about the Muscovite State* in the late nineteenth century, many scholars have attempted to trace the general contours of the early modern European image of Russia.¹² The present treatment, however, differs in several significant respects from previous investigations of European thought about Russia. First, this study is focused on one important aspect of European thought about Russia. Europeans wrote many things about the Muscovites, all of which were combined in a general stereotype of Russia and Russians. This book makes no attempt to reconstruct every dimension of that image, but instead concentrates narrowly on the early history of a single, seminal idea—that the tsar was a tyrant who ruled over slave-subjects. This parsimonious approach to the history of European conceptions of Russia is warranted by the fact that "Russian tyranny" was and indeed remains central to the stereotype of Russia. Over the past four centuries, the idea has served as the chief (though by no means only) *differentia* distinguishing Russia from Europe. For this reason, in what follows European comments about Russian government take center stage, while discussions of Muscovite religion, social customs, trade, and so on are broached only in passing. Second, this exploration concentrates on the patterns of thought characteristic of an elite group of European travelers and theorists rather than on general public opinion about Russia. It is true that the mentalities of this select group reflected wider European thought, and that the visitors' writings in turn influenced general beliefs concerning the realm of the tsar. This book, however, makes no claims to offer a complete survey of what "typical Europeans" thought

¹¹ Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, *Russia and the West in the Teaching of the Slavophiles*.

¹² Marshall T. Poe, *Foreign Descriptions of Muscovy*.

about Muscovy, for it is first and foremost a study of expert opinion. Finally, this investigation attempts to address the question of the correspondence of European perception to Russian reality. This is an important though neglected problem in early modern Russian historiography. Historians of Muscovy have traditionally been of two minds about the value of the European accounts. On the one hand, the travelers' descriptions are seen as essential sources, for they provide information on a host of topics poorly attested in indigenous Muscovite texts. On the other hand, the testimony of Europeans is often viewed with grave skepticism, for it is commonly assumed that they were ignorant of Russian ways, biased against Russian manners, fooled by Russian stagecraft, or misled by their own self-serving desire to create a Russian antipode to the "civilized" nations of Europe.¹³ I attempt to shed light on the veracity of the foreign accounts by offering a detailed investigation of the experiences of foreigners in Russia and the ways in which they used European categories to conceptualize Russian society.

The sources treated here are conveniently divided into four types: (1) descriptions written between 1486 and 1549 by Europeans who had never been to Russia; (2) eyewitness accounts drafted between 1549 and 1700 by visiting European diplomats and merchants who remained in Muscovy for relatively short periods of time; (3) eyewitness accounts penned between 1559 and 1699 by European residents who worked in Muscovy for many years; (4) theoretical treatises written between 1576 and 1748 by European scholars who sought to conceptualize Muscovite government in political scientific terms. The approximately ninety accounts discussed represent only a small portion of all European Moscovitica.¹⁴ They have been chosen according to various criteria, depending on their value to particular eras and subjects. In the first half of the sixteenth century, Europeans knew very little about Russia and wrote less. Since only about sixteen accounts written before 1549 survive, all them have been treated. In the second half of the sixteenth century the number of European descriptions increased so rapidly that it is fruitless to attempt to explore them all. For this period, 1549 to 1700, only the thirty or so richest and most influential eyewitness accounts have been selected for analysis. Finally, the number of early modern political scientific accounts touching on Muscovy is quite small, only five, and thus all are discussed here.

The texts in the following survey were written according to the conventions of various early modern genres. Most of them are "ethnographies"; that is, works that offer a general description of Russia according to a standard template of topics—geography, the royal court, the administration, the army, social classes, popular customs and mores, the economy, religion, and

¹³ Edward L. Keenan, "Muscovite Political Folkways"; Nancy S. Kollmann, *Kinship and Politics*, 146–51; Gabriele Scheidegger, *Perverse Abendland—barbarisches Russland*.

¹⁴ See Poe, *Foreign Descriptions of Muscovy*, where over 600 pieces of European Moscovitica are catalogued.

so on. It is, of course, to some degree anachronistic to call works in this vein "ethnographies," for the word itself never appears in any of the early modern accounts and was, in fact, the invention of a later era. Nevertheless, the similarity of items of this type makes clear that sixteenth- and seventeenth-century authors understood the general description of states to be a distinct *kind* of enterprise, even if they did not have a common name for it. Several of the titles treated here, particularly in the early period of European exploration of Muscovy, are "cosmographies"; that is, works presenting under one cover several brief ethnographic vignettes of important states, principalities, and regions. There is no anachronism in the use of "cosmography" as a name for this genre, for early modern "cosmographers" were sure both of the nature of their discipline and of its title. Naturally, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century authors did not confine themselves to static descriptions of the "present state" (as the titular convention had it) of principalities. When they witnessed momentous events, ethnography and cosmography quickly gave way to another tried and true Renaissance genre, "history." "Histories" were of course narratives detailing significant or (as authors at the time put it) "delightful and instructive" events. Again, there is no hint of anachronism in the use of the term "history," for sixteenth- and seventeenth-century authors often used precisely this word to designate their efforts. A mixed genre sometimes used by the travelers was the "diplomatic report"; that is, a work detailing the progress of an embassy. Like ethnographies, diplomatic reports often contain general observations about the country visited. Like histories, they are basically narratives of events, in this case the events that punctuated the course of an ambassadorial mission. Though diplomatic reports went under various names (*raporte, relazione, Bericht*, etc.), they were all written according to stable generic conventions conditioned by their obviously administrative nature. Finally, the essence of the "political scientific treatise" need hardly be explained. Since the reception of Aristotle's *Politics* in the early Renaissance, theoretically inclined Europeans had been following the Stagerite down the well-trodden road to political wisdom, describing the kinds of commonwealths and their characteristic tendencies. By the mid-sixteenth century, when information about Muscovy first appeared in political scientific tracts, the writing of books in the vein of the *Politics* was hardly an unusual pursuit.

Most of the methods used here to analyze the emergence of the modern image of Russia were invented by other scholars in the field. Leonid Iuzefovich is to be credited with drawing attention to what might be called the "lived experience" of foreign ambassadors in Muscovy and its impact on the nature of their observations.¹⁵ He pointed out that the Muscovite authorities and their guests were locked in a kind of struggle throughout the course of an ambassadorial visit: the Russians strove to impress the foreigners with the

¹⁵ Leonid A. Iuzefovich, *Kak v posol'skikh obychaiakh vedetsia*.

might of the tsar and the unanimity of his subjects, while the foreigners attempted to peer through the curtain of court ceremony into the heart of Russian reality. Though Iuzefovich focused on ambassadors, his basic methodological thesis may be extended to all visitors: in order to understand what Europeans said about Muscovy, one must reconstruct their experiences in the country at the hands of Muscovite authorities. Andreas Kappeler, Walter Leitsch, and Samuel Baron are responsible for pioneering the study of borrowing among the European travelers.¹⁶ In a series of fundamental works these three scholars demonstrated that early printed descriptions of Russia, and particularly Herberstein's *Notes on the Muscovites*, exercised significant influence on later accounts. They showed that both the letter and the spirit of Herberstein's seminal book were borrowed by later writers, almost always without acknowledgment. Again, their specific point about Herberstein is valid for all the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Russia experts: in order to comprehend the character of any given description of Russia, one must take into account the possibility of borrowing from earlier accounts. Finally, Gabriele Scheidegger performed a cardinal service by exploring the ways in which European conceptual baggage shaped the foreigners' understanding of Russian reality.¹⁷ She pointed out that Europeans brought ideas about political power, civility, and religious propriety that powerfully shaped their impressions of the Russians. According to Scheidegger, the Europeans projected their own fears, desires, and fantasies on the Muscovites and (in her striking phrase) viewed "themselves in the other." Though my analysis to some degree diverges from Scheidegger's, her chief methodological point is extremely valuable: in order to understand what the Europeans wrote about Russia, one must take into account the nature of their mental furniture.

This book begins with a discussion of the earliest European descriptions of Russia, all of them drafted by men who had never set foot there and all of them populated by fantastic images. Chapters 2 and 3 turn from fantasy to reality and examine the experience of Europeans in Muscovy and its relation to the evolution of the idea of Russian tyranny. Chapter 2 concentrates on ambassadors and merchants, both of whom visited Russia under special conditions and remained for relatively short periods of time. Chapter 3 explores the experience of European residents in Muscovy, technicians and mercenaries who had traveled to Russia in search of permanent employment. Chapter 4 moves from the analysis of the lived experience of Europeans in Russia to an exploration of the literary forces that influenced their accounts. Specifically, this chapter examines the impact of Herberstein's seminal *Notes on the Muscovites* of 1549 on later descriptions of Russia. The next two chapters turn from literary influence to the impact of political scientific concepts on Euro-

¹⁶ Andreas Kappeler, *Ivan Groznyi im Spiegel der ausländischen Druckschriften seiner Zeit*; Walter Leitsch, "Herberstein's Impact on the Reports about Muscovy"; Samuel H. Baron, "Herberstein's Image of Russia and Its Transmission through Later Writers."

¹⁷ Scheidegger, *Perverse Abendland—barbarisches Russland*.

pean thought about Russian civic life. Chapter 5 explores the ways in which European ethnographers conceptualized Russian government within Classical and Renaissance political categories. I conclude the book by asking whether the European ethnographers have anything of value to offer the student of early modern Russia, whether their impression that Russian society was despotic is in any sense valid.

It is perhaps appropriate to close with a few words about terminology. Studies of this kind ordinarily use the term "Russia" to designate the realm of the tsar and "Russian" to indicate those who lived there, and they employ "the West" to signal Europe beyond the Dnieper and "Western" to indicate those who resided there. I follow the former convention but abandon the latter. As any reader of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Muscovite documents or Renaissance travelers' accounts will know, the most common native and foreign ethnonym for what we call "Russians" was in fact "Muscovites." Two considerations, however, suggest that a certain anachronism is to be permitted here. First, the terminological situation was somewhat confused even in early modern times. One can find both native and foreign documents in which "Russia" and "Russian" are attested, indicating that these terms were semantically similar to the more common "Muscovy" and "Muscovite." Second, both "Muscovy" and "Muscovite" have been supplanted so completely in modern times by "Russia" and "Russian" as to be incomprehensible to all but specialists. Therefore I use "Russia" as a synonym for "Muscovy" and "Russian" for "Muscovite." The terms "West" and "Western" are much more anachronistic. Before the eighteenth century, there was only the faintest idea of the "West" as a term of collective identity in Europe. Certainly papal and Orthodox officials spoke of the "Western" and "Eastern" churches, but this usage is not the equivalent of the modern distinction between the "West" and the "East," nor is it genealogically related to it in any direct way. Proof of the absence of the idea of a distinct "West" and "East" is found on the very pages of the European travelers' accounts. Certainly if those who visited Russia had thought in such terms, they would have called themselves "Westerners," noted that they were passing to the "East," or offered some characterization of the differences between "Western" and "Eastern" culture. But this vocabulary is almost entirely absent from the early modern European accounts of Russia. The writers of the early descriptions of Muscovy preferred to identify themselves with particular kingdoms or kings, and when they used compass orientations (very rarely), they chose "the North" and "the South," Muscovy being an accepted part of the North.¹⁸ It seems obvious, then, that "West" and "Western" must be put aside. In this book I call the men who traveled to Russia in the sixteenth

¹⁸ Hans Lemberg, "Zur Entstehung des Osteuropabegriffs im 19. Jahrhundert vom 'Norden' zum 'Osten' Europas." Possevino (1586), 26, identified the Muscovites as one of the "peoples of the northern expanse." Hakluyt (1969), 2:v, placed the English accounts of Muscovy under the rubric of "voyages . . . to the North and Northeast quarters."

and seventeenth centuries "Europeans" and their home "Europe." One might argue that this is simply to substitute one anachronism for another, for it is true that the idea of Europe as a cultural sphere was not well developed at the time, that the travelers do not call themselves Europeans, and that, when they mention Europe, it is in a geographical sense and includes Russia. Nonetheless, there are several reasons to think that "Europe" is the lesser of two evils: the term reflects the fact that the Russians, though in Europe, did not join the wider European system of states until the seventeenth century; it reflects the fact that the Russians had long been isolated from the European cultural stream; and finally, it reflects the collective sense of difference that the travelers felt when they passed over the Muscovite frontier.

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TERRA INCOGNITA

The Earliest European Descriptions of Muscovy

In thus entering upon the description of Moscow, which is the capital of Russia, and which extends its sway far and wide through Scythia, it will be indispensable, candid reader, that I should in this work touch upon many parts of the north, which have not been sufficiently known either to ancient authors or those of our own day.

SIGISMUND VON HERBERSTEIN, 1549

NEITHER THE HUNGARIAN Jacob Piso nor the Dutchman Albert Campensé had ever been to Muscovy. This was hardly odd in the first half of the sixteenth century, for at that time Europeans were only beginning to travel to Russia. What was somewhat unusual about Piso and Campensé is that both wrote brief descriptions of Muscovy, in fact two of the first accounts of the northern country ever put to paper by Europeans. Their fascination with Russia was occupationally inspired: both Piso and Campensé were in the service of the papacy, and the bishop of Rome had taken a keen interest in Muscovy as a possible ally against the advancing Turks. Interestingly, though they were ostensibly describing the same country, Piso and Campensé offered radically different pictures of Russia. Piso's Russia was a place of universal slavery and barbarity, whereas Campensé's Muscovy was a country of deep loyalty to a just prince and abiding faith in God.

Why did the two men disagree so sharply about the character of the distant northern land? Like all those who wrote the earliest European descriptions of Russia, Piso and Campensé knew very little about the place. The first generation of European ethnographers and cosmographers of Russia relied on occasional interviews with passing Muscovite diplomats, the tales told by the few Europeans who had traveled to Russia, and, in some cases, the meager stock of written information about Muscovy that slowly built up in the course of the first half of the sixteenth century. Most important, almost none

of the earliest authors had ever seen Russia with their own eyes. For men such as Piso and Campensé, without reliable intelligence on the very place they were attempting to describe, Russia served as a kind of *terra incognita* upon which they projected their own political desires. For reasons that will become clear in due course, Piso was hostile to the Russians and dismissed the idea of ecclesiastical union or military alliance with them, whereas Campensé saw the Muscovites as the best hope for saving Catholicism from the Reformation and the menacing Turks. Their descriptions were in essence a mirror of their own fantasies. In this chapter we will explore how Europeans first came to write ethnographic and cosmographical accounts of Muscovy and how their hopes, fears, and ignorance led them to produce a variety of confused images of that little-known northern land.

The “Discovery” of Muscovy and the Birth of Renaissance Ethnography

Despite the lore of a long scholarly tradition, Russia was not “discovered” by Europeans in the first quarter of the sixteenth century.¹ By the time Sigismund von Herberstein, the Imperial ambassador often credited with first bringing news of Russia to Europe, traveled to Muscovy in 1517, northern Europeans—Poles, Lithuanians, Baltic Germans, and Scandinavians—had been in continuous contact with the East Slavs since at least the eleventh century. Even southern and central European states—the Italian principalities, the Holy Roman Empire, and Hungary—had known something of the East Slavs since the time of Prince Vladimir. The extent of early Russian-European contact should not, however, be exaggerated. Even at Kiev’s zenith, in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, political links between the Riurikid and European princely families were weak, amounting to little more than a few marriages, mostly to Germans and Poles. Almost no Europeans traveled to Russia in medieval times, and those who did were on their way to the Mongol Horde or China. European chroniclers discussed Kievan Russia only in passing. The destruction of Kiev by the Mongols in the thirteenth century further isolated Russia from Europe. Stretching out along the Dnieper, the Kievan realm had been in close proximity to a number of important European polities. In contrast, the Riurikid principalities of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were situated in the Oka and Upper Volga basins, far to the north and far off the track beaten by European civilization. It is hardly surprising that in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries political interaction between Russia and the principalities of southern and central Europe all but ceased, that no Italians, French, or Germans visited the far corner of northeastern

¹ Mikhail A. Alpatov, *Russkaia istoricheskaia mysl' i Zapadnaia Europa XII–XVII vv.*, 27–109.

Europe, or that late medieval annalists of Europe all but forgot about Russia. Only the northern trading cites of Pskov and Novgorod maintained ties to the Baltic and points west during the Mongol period.

In the course of the fifteenth century, a major shift in the geopolitical configuration of western Eurasia slowly eroded the barrier dividing the Oka and Upper Volga regions from Europe. As Byzantium declined and the Mongol Horde fragmented, Muscovy emerged as an important force in northeastern European politics. Under the leadership of Grand Prince Ivan III, the Muscovites attacked their neighbors Sweden, Livonia, and Lithuania. Ivan also formed alliances with courts farther to the west, including Hungary and the Empire, and with the aid of papal officials he succeeded in marrying Sophia, the niece of the last Byzantine emperor. As a result of his military and diplomatic activity, Ivan and the once insignificant principality he ruled were gradually drawn deeper and deeper into European affairs. It is no coincidence that Europeans began to travel to Muscovy at this time.² The most numerous visitors were probably merchants, who were attracted to northeastern Russia by the Hanseatic trade in Novgorod. They were followed by the Italian and German craftsmen who built Ivan III's Renaissance palace, by Greeks who made their way to Orthodox Muscovy after the capture of Constantinople in 1453, and by the retainers in Sophia's entourage in 1472. Finally, European diplomats began to travel to Russia in force—Swedish, Livonian, Lithuanian, Italian, Hungarian, Moldavian, and Imperial. A Russian source of the sixteenth century described the influx of foreign envoys who came to pay court to Ivan III.

And so then, before and after, with God's aid, many emperors, kings, grand princes, and other rulers and potentates—from old Rome from the pope, from the [Holy Roman] emperor, from Constantinople, from the Turkish sultan, from Crimea, from the emperor and other hordes, from the Polish kingdom, from Lithuania . . . and from many other lands—[each] sent [envoys] to the autocrat, to the divinely protected grand prince, Ivan [III] Vasil'evich.³

So too did the Muscovites begin to visit Europe. In 1439, Metropolitan Isidor of Moscow traveled with a large Russian entourage to Italy to attend the Council of Florence. After the annexation of Novgorod in 1480, Muscovite ambassadors were dispatched to Livonia, Sweden, and Lithuania. In the late fifteenth century, Muscovite embassies appeared in Hungary, Moldavia, the Empire, and Milan.

² On foreign visitors to Muscovy in the era of Ivan III, see Gustav Alef, "Origins of Muscovite Autocracy," 255; Norbert Angermann, "Kulturbeziehungen zwischen dem Hanseraum und dem Moskauer Rußland um 1500"; Mikhail N. Tikhomirov, "Ital'ianty v Rossii XIV–XVI stoletii"; Edgar Hösch, "Die Stellung Moskoviens in den Kreuzzugsplänen des Abendlands"; Robert M. Croskey, "Byzantine Greeks in Late Fifteenth- and Early Sixteenth-Century Russia."

³ *Polnoe sobranie russkikh letopisei*, 21:554. The passage was written in the mid-sixteenth century and describes events ca. 1491.

The timing of the European "rediscovery" of Russia was fortuitous, at least from the modern historian's point of view, for it was precisely in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries that Europeans first seriously put their minds to the description of foreign peoples. The "Age of Discovery" brought with it the birth of ethnography, and it is thanks to the emergence of the ethnographic genre that we possess the earliest descriptions of Russia. To be sure, medieval Europeans practiced a kind of ethnography. Pilgrimages to the Holy Land, pseudo-scientific explorations such as Sir John Mandeville's, and diplomatic missions by Marco Polo to China, William of Rubruk to the Mongols, and John de Plano Carpini to the Tatars (all in the thirteenth century) produced a small literature on the actual and imagined peoples of distant places. Nonetheless, only the most tenuous lineage can be traced between the works of Piso, Campensé, or Herberstein and these travel descriptions. Rather, Renaissance ethnography was a novel fusion of three disparate streams—newly revived Classical ethnography, emerging diplomatic praxis, and a Humanist interest in the variety of human experience.

The importance of the Classical precedents as an inspiration for early European ethnography may be seen in Herberstein's own apologia for his work. "In ancient days," he informed his readers, "when the Romans sent ambassadors to any distant and unknown country, they are said to have charged them as a duty to commit carefully to writing a description of the manners, institutes, and entire mode of living of the people with whom their embassy brought them in contact." Indeed, he continued, "so much importance was afterwards attached to such descriptions, that upon the termination of an embassy, the ambassador's commentaries were deposited in the temple of Saturn for the instruction of posterity."⁴ Though it is not entirely clear whether the Romans ever had such a practice, Herberstein's desire to authorize his own ethnographic work by linking it to the esteemed ancients is transparent. Herberstein would not be the only Renaissance ethnographer to imagine himself continuing the work of Herodotus, Pliny, Tacitus, Ptolemy, and the others, for the names of the Classical geographers appear very frequently in late fifteenth- and sixteenth-century ethnography.⁵ The *auctores* provided wide-eyed Europeans with both a method of description and a stable frame of reference within which newly discovered peoples could be placed. Herberstein and his fellows had the greatest confidence that a revival of the ancient art of ethnographic reporting would yield significant benefits. If the Roman practice were followed, he concluded, "we should perhaps have had more light, and certainly less trash, infused into history."⁶

Though Herberstein claimed to be aping Classical statesmen, it is much more likely that he was inspired by modern ambassadors who were, at the very time he was traveling to Muscovy, reinventing diplomatic ethnography.

⁴ Herberstein (1517–49), 1:clix.

⁵ Margaret T. Hodgen, *Early Anthropology in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, passim.

⁶ Herberstein (1517–49), 1:clix.

Advice books for envoys had long stressed the importance of careful observation of foreign manners.⁷ It was not until the last quarter of the fifteenth century, however, that ethnographic description became a regular part of the ambassador's duties, as can be seen in the appearance of the famous Venetian *relazioni*.⁸ The *relazioni* were legally mandated intelligence reports, read before the Venetian senate and recorded in special registers. The accounts were based on the ambassador's personal recollections, information provided by other envoys, local officials and spies, books of various sorts, and preceding *relazioni*. These raw data were crafted into a well-organized analysis of the results of an embassy and the disposition of the state it visited. A typical *relazione* described a principality's geography, ruling factions, military forces, administration, revenues and expenses, and occasionally popular life, customs, and the economy. The *relazioni* grew famous in the sixteenth century. They were copied, collected, circulated, and eventually published. Herberstein's work, in fact, began its life as a kind of Habsburg *relazione*. The emperor had sent Herberstein to Russia not only to make peace between the Lithuanians and Muscovites but also to describe the manners and customs of the Russians for the benefit of his countrymen.⁹

A third force behind Renaissance ethnography was of course Humanism. It was inevitable that the Humanists, having placed man at the center of their interests, would be drawn both to investigate the curious customs reported in the burgeoning ethnographic accounts and to promote the production of new ethnographies. Montaigne, to offer an obvious example, was fascinated by reports of the Brazilians, for they provided not only a picture of another way of life but also a novel perspective on the peculiarities of his native France.¹⁰ Yet Humanist interest was hardly confined to the oddities recorded in treatments of newly discovered regions, for men such as Montaigne realized full well that Europe itself was not sufficiently understood. They urged young men to travel to see for themselves the great variety of peoples that inhabited their native continent and to write accounts of their discoveries. In the first quarter of the sixteenth century, travel instructions, including suggestions on how to observe a foreign land, began to appear in print.¹¹ The first such textbook of travel went to press in 1518, and by 1550 six more had been published.¹² More books in this vein quickly followed: from 1551 to 1600 forty-two additional textbooks of travel appeared, one of which gave

⁷ Garrett Mattingly, *Renaissance Diplomacy*, 212–14; B. Behrens, "Treatises on the Ambassador Written in the Fifteenth and Early Sixteenth Centuries," 617–18.

⁸ Donald E. Queller, *Office of Ambassador in the Middle Ages*, 176–81, and "Development of the Ambassadorial Relazioni," 42–43.

⁹ Herberstein (1517–49), 1:clxi, notes that Ferdinand encouraged his work on *Notes on the Muscovites*. On his request for a report about Russia in 1526, see Frank Kämpfer, "Herbersteins nicht eingestandene Abhängigkeit von Johann Fabri aus Leutkirch," 3.

¹⁰ Montaigne, "Of Cannibals."

¹¹ Justin Stagl, "Der wohl unterwiesene Passagier" and "Das Reisen als Kunst und als Wissenschaft."

¹² Hellius E. Hesus, *A profectio ad Des. Erasmus hodoeporican*. The following figures are drawn from Justin Stagl, comp., *Apodemiken*.

the genre its name, *ars apodemica*, or "art of travel."¹³ Further, the Humanists suggested that knowledge of European lands could be of great value, particularly for princes eager to improve their own realms. In the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries a spate of books appeared offering detailed analyses of European principalities. Understandably, Italians were the most productive practitioners of what might be called "political ethnography," but they were not alone, as can be seen in the works of Sir John Fortesque and Claude de Seyssel on the governments of England and France, respectively.¹⁴ European political thinkers also began to describe extra-European polities on which sufficient information was available. Beginning in the second half of the fifteenth century, European scholars, statesmen, and travelers invested considerable energy in describing the customs of the peculiarly despotic Turks.¹⁵ A great number of treatises on the Ottomans followed.

In sum, under the leadership of Ivan III the Muscovites not only moved into the European political sphere but also entered European consciousness via the evolving discourse of Renaissance ethnography. These two developments were not unrelated. Had the Russians been more distant from Europe or had they been perceived as a minor power, European ethnographers would probably have ignored them. But, as the rapid and aggressive movement of Ivan III into the eastern fringe of Renaissance civilization demonstrated, the Russians were both uncomfortably near and seemingly very powerful, at least from the point of view of Livonia, Lithuania, Poland, and the Empire. The leaders of these states—and indeed the rulers of principalities farther west—must have been troubled by the almost complete lack of reliable information about the Russians and their intentions. Clearly, more had to be known about the Muscovites if Europeans hoped to deal effectively with them. It was precisely the early ethnographers' task to provide statesmen with the information necessary to make a productive interchange with the Russians possible. As we will presently see, they generally failed to achieve their goal, though for reasons that are at once understandable and characteristic of the age in which they wrote.

The Earliest Renaissance Ethnographies of Russia, 1476–1526

The first Renaissance description of Muscovy was written by an Italian, Ambrogio Contarini. It is often said that Contarini was the first European to travel to Muscovy and return to draft a description of the distant northern land. This account is to some extent true, but it must be understood that the

¹³ H. Pyrckmair's *Commentariolus de arte apodemica*. On Pyrckmair, see Stagl, *Apodemiken*, 84–85, and Stagl's "Methodizing of Travel in the Sixteenth Century" and "Die Apodemik oder 'Reisekunst' als Methodik der Sozialforschung," 132–33.

¹⁴ Quentin Skinner, *Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, 1:139–44, 2:273–74.

¹⁵ Robert Schwoebel, *Shadow of the Crescent*, 208–9; Carl Göllner, *Turcica*.