



## BOOK REVIEW

# Trade, Politics and Borderlands: Russia and Britain in the Age of Enterprise

Review of Matthew P. Romaniello (2019). *Enterprising Empires: Russia and Britain in Eighteenth-Century Eurasia*. Cambridge University Press

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In this well-written book, Matthew P. Romaniello presents a study of the commercial relationships between the British and Russian empires throughout the long eighteenth century. The book title is accurately chosen. The author describes not only British efforts to establish trade with Russia (or through Russia’s lands), but also surveys Russian commercial enterprises in both Asia and America, revealing the Russian government’s great desire to take advantages of its vast territory and the political situation in the borderlands. Both Russia and Britain were equally enterprising commercially—this is probably the main idea behind the whole book. With a caveat on the difference between the two in terms of naval power and financial resources, the author claims that “the traditional argument of Russia’s economic ‘backwardness’ can be challenged”, and the Russian “eighteenth-century commercial economy was undoubtedly robust and as successful as those of Europe’s leading countries” (Romaniello, 2019, p. 3).

The author points out that this observation is not new. His work is indeed based on a large historiographical tradition, which holds divergent opinions and investigates different aspects of Russian and British commercial relations within this period. On the one hand, the abundance of literature makes it difficult for any new study to present novelty and uniqueness, but, on the other, this historiographical situation provides an opportunity to use a great deal of facts

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and figures collected in studies of Anglo-Russian trade and diplomacy. Romaniello has managed to find his own focus: the book is centered on significant actors, such as traders, entrepreneurs, and diplomats. It is based on different narrative and private sources—travel accounts, diplomatic correspondence, letters, and memoirs. With these documents, the author explains to us the aims and course of eighteenth-century British trade in Russia, Asia, and America. Talking a lot about people, the book contains few figures: the author takes full advantage of previous studies (Kaplan, 1995) to assess the volume of finance and goods. This approach helps explore human dimension in international commerce.

The other important “heroes” of the book are commercial companies. The research is concerned with commercial activity of all chartered British companies involved in the trade with Russia including the Russia Company, the Levant Company, the Eastland Company, and the East India Company. The author studies their business, efforts, and rivalry, touching on a wide range of matters from commercial competition to parliamentary lobbying. It is especially valuable that the book covers the eighteenth-century history of the Russia Company. It has long been held that the heyday of this company occurred in previous centuries, with the eighteenth century being largely neglected. Romaniello reveals that the company was very active in several decades of the eighteenth century, namely in the 1730s and 40s, immediately after the signing of the Anglo-Russian commercial treaty (1734). From the Russian side, significant attention is paid to the Russian American Company, the first Russian established company to trade North American commodities. Although the scale of this company cannot be compared with its English counterparts, it was once a very significant enterprise for the Russian Empire and allows the author to some extent equate Russian business with its British counterpart, at least in terms of its organizational forms and goals.

The list of archival sources is impressive (Romaniello, 2019, pp. 264–265). The author uses documents from Britain, Russia, the United States, Spain, and Denmark. The British Library, the National Archives in Kew, the National Library of Scotland, the National Records of Scotland, the Russian State Archive of Ancient Acts, the Library of Congress, and the National Archives and Records Administration (USA) are the most significant depositories employed. There is a certain inclination towards English archival sources, as is also the case for the published primary sources. This has an impact on the visibility of Russian characters and positions, which I will discuss later.

The book is arranged chronologically and encompasses around 150 years: from Muscovite trade regulations (codes) issued in the 1650–60s to the Napoleonic era, when Russia for a short time joined the so-called Continental System. The chronological arrangement does not mean that the author describes every set of events in Anglo-Russian relations. The five chapters are dedicated to different chronological periods. Within each period, the author focuses on significant points in imperial entrepreneurship that were crucial for Anglo-Russian commerce.

The first chapter analyses the struggle of English merchants to regain commercial privileges in Russia in the second half of the seventeenth century.

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The *Torgovyi ustav* (1653) and its renewal in 1667 marked the Russian transition to mercantilism. It put an end to the earlier policy of massive privileges for foreign merchants and companies. At the same time, England introduced a more organized approach to its merchant companies, putting its trade under governmental control through the Navigation Acts. The moderate success of British enterprises in Russia is investigated in chapter two. Britain achieved its long-sought goal to sell American tobacco in Russia (1698). British interests included the transition trade with China, with the English medic John Bell making his way to this country through Russia. But the most desirable destination was Iran. From the sixteenth century, when Antony Jenkinson travelled through Russia down the Volga River, the English deemed the Iranian trade highly profitable. The attempts to establish a steady route failed in the sixteenth century and during the reigns of the early Romanovs. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the Russia Company doubled its efforts, but did not succeed until the 1730s.

The third chapter studies the Iranian affair. It begins with the signing of the Anglo-Russian commercial treaty of 1734, which was a great achievement of British diplomats. The treaty allowed British merchants to trade with Iran through Astrakhan. Soon after this, the British adventurer and naval captain John Elton made it down the Volga, reaching Astrakhan and then Iran. When his activities became suspicious to the Russian government, the Russia Company dispatched Jonas Hanway in an attempt to mitigate the situation. The account left by Hanway (a very detailed book, in fact) is one of the main sources for Romaniello. The failure of the British to secure a foothold in the Iranian silk trade (1746) and the later desperate attempts to rectify the situation are also matters of concern in the chapter. Additionally, the author follows Russian success in Siberia and Iran, looking closely at the treaties and institutions of Russian commercial agents and consuls on the Caspian Sea. The important conclusion of the third chapter is that Russia had the upper hand in trade relationships at the time, as the British navy was dependent on raw materials from Russia.

Chapter four investigates the time of Catherine the Great. In this period, Britain did succeed in signing a new treaty with Russia (1766), but it did not give British merchants the same privileges as the previous agreement. Russia made advances in the Black Sea region by waging war against the Ottoman Empire: this contributed to deterioration in the Anglo-Russian relationship. The chapter describes how the new notion of Russia as a rival emerged. Russian success in the Far East and North American exploration added to these fears. In the fifth chapter, a broad picture of Russian enterprises is built up. The chapter focuses on the Pacific region where the Russian American Company emerged (1799), but the European theater and the Black Sea are not omitted.

The close look at Russian borderland territories has an unexpected outcome: the book can be considered a history of commerce on the Russian frontier and in the empire's remote regions. The actions of British agents and companies in these territories are thoroughly studied by Romaniello. Both the personal and institutional dimensions are examined. For example, the author provides a quite in-depth description of the interactions between the Russian administration in Astrakhan and

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British merchants, focusing on the encounters of John Elton and Jonas Hanway with the Astrakhan governor Vasilii Tatishchev. The latter was a big proponent of the merchants, although he was suspicious of British enterprise. This part of the book also has a downside however: the author does not really take into account the fact that some of Russia's remote territories had a special status, with their administrators exercising considerable power over internal and external affairs (Lazarev, 2017). Taking the role of regional administrators and elites more fully into account would give a broader perspective on the reasons for the ups and downs in both British and Russian commercial enterprises.

Another potential criticism is rooted in the weakness of the book's Russian characters. While British voices are clearly audible, Russian actors remain nearly silent most of the time. This can be easily explained by the composition of the sources. The author tends to rely on English sources, which leads to more detailed description of British characters. In most cases, the author gives a very accurate image of the events, but there are some gaps. For instance, the denunciation of the Anglo-Russian treaty deserves a more thorough study from the Russian side. Romaniello, following English accounts, explains that Captain John Elton was the main culprit, with his activities on the Caspian Sea (he built several warships for the Iranian shah) resulting in Russian withdrawal from the treaty. However, as Russian sources show, the new government of Empress Elizabeth (1741–61) embarked on a policy of protectionism in favor of domestic merchants (Lukht, 1994), and therefore Elton's malevolent activity was rather a pretext than the true reason for the abolition of the Anglo-Russian commercial treaty.

This minor criticism does not undermine my overall positive opinion of the book. The study's selectiveness gives it a much-needed focus, and a certain lack of the Russian viewpoint is compensated by a quite comprehensive English source base. This is the research of this issue that has long been needed: a personality-centered, very well-written, and academically in-depth book exploring the vast geography of Anglo-Russian commercial and diplomatic interactions in the Age of Enlightenment.

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