

A 17th CENTURY GERMAN LOOKS AT RUSSIA

By H. H. WEIL

IN the middle of the Thirty Years' War the ruler of a small German dukedom on the Danish border decided to establish a new trade route to Persia. Since the Turkish conquest of Constantinople the old overland route had been blocked. The discovery of a seaway round the Cape had opened up new vistas, but the British and the Dutch had gradually managed to monopolize the Asian trade. In the face of rising German prices for silk, spices, and other Oriental goods and the Emperor's failure to revive the Hanseatic fleet, Duke Frederick III of Holstein-Gottorp came upon the idea of capitalising on his family relationship with Czar Michael Feodorowitch for permission to send a trade delegation down the Volga and the Caspian to Shah Sefi.

On November 6, 1633 he dispatched an advance party to Moscow to obtain the Czar's consent. After lengthy negotiations the request was granted on the condition that the envoys first collect their Duke's counter-signature on the document. Consequently it was not until the end of October 1635 that the actual trade mission—two plenipotentiaries and about eighty secretaries, officers, doctors, valets, cooks, and musicians, complete with their horses, cannon, presents for the Czar and the Shah, and supplies for two years—managed to set sail from Lubeck in a specially built vessel. Three weeks later they ran aground in the Gulf of Finland, but got ashore, recuperated at Reval, and finally arrived in Moscow in the Spring. After another three months of audiences and preparations they departed for Nizhnij Novgorod to take over another ship specially constructed for their purpose. By the winter they had successfully negotiated the Volga and crossed half the Caspian, only to be shipwrecked off Derbent. Once again most of them and their luggage were saved, and were welcomed ashore by Shah Sefi who had personally travelled to the border to accompany the strangers to his capital. At Shiraz they spent a year negotiating, celebrating, and sightseeing with their friendly hosts and the various resident Orientals and Europeans. With a favourable agreement in their pocket and a Persian envoy to Duke Frederick to accompany them the party—somewhat depleted by casualties and desertions—left for home at Christmas 1637.

This time they preferred the land route between the Caspian and the Caucasus, and after a slow and perilous journey through primitive regions they reached Moscow in the New Year 1639. There they found that the purpose of the mission was not to be achieved after all: in the meantime Russian merchants had persuaded the Czar that the passage of German trade through Muscovy was not in the national interest. When therefore the expedition arrived in Holstein on August 1st, 1639—almost four years after its departure—its tales temporarily aroused wide interest throughout the whole of Europe, but the failure of its real aims eventually consigned the whole venture to the dust of the archives.

Curiously enough it is the German literary historians who still remember it today, since one of the foremost poets of that period, Paul Fleming, served on this expedition. One of Fleming's companions and the posthumous editor of his works, however, is also worth remembering by Slavists, Orientalists, and Social Anthropologists. For Adam Olearius was a little of all that himself. A doctor of philosophy of Leipzig University and the assistant headmaster of a good school he was already a scholar of renown when, at 35 years of age, he joined the Holstein mission as its chief secretary. On the journey he added to his store of classical and modern Western languages a considerable knowledge of Russian and Persian, and also proved to be a skilful diplomatist. On his return Duke Frederick appointed him his court librarian and mathematician. And when he died in his seventies as a Ducal Councillor and a member of the foremost literary society of Germany, he not only left a number of volumes on the history of Holstein and the Duke's collections, but two books which had earned him European acclaim: the first translation into a Western language of the *Gulistan* by the 13th century Persian poet Saadi, and a detailed narrative of the trade mission's journey to Russia and Persia.

Particularly *The Voyages and Travells of the Ambassadors sent by Frederick Duke of Holstein to the Great Duke of Muscovy, and the King of Persia*, as the English title goes, was a great European success.¹ There were eight German editions, the first in 1647 and the last—which Goethe still found “most pleasant and instructive”—after the turn of the century, four

(1) *The Voyages and Travells of the Ambassadors sent by Frederick Duke of Holstein to the Great Duke of Muscovy, and the King of Persia*. . . Rendered into English, by John Davies, of Kidwelly. London. . . 1660. Title of the German edition: *Offt beehrte Beschreibung der Neuen Orientalischen Reise, so durch Gelegenheit einer hollsteinischen Legation an den König in Persien geschehen*. . . Schleswig 1647. (I shall quote from the German edition of 1656 and the English edition of 1666.)

in French, two in English, and one each in Dutch and Italian. For although Olearius' book was by no means the first of its kind, it evidently appeared when, as the book-fair catalogues tell us, people were more and more interested in non-European civilizations.² Also, his publication had more to offer to his contemporaries than its predecessors. While it was clearly based on actual diary entries it was presented in the ceremonious style of the polished 17th century courtier.³ The narrative was seasoned with quotations from the Ancients, references to previous travel books, such as Herberstein's classical *Commentarii Rerum Moscoviticarum*, and poems by Fleming and, we presume, the author himself. The account was repeatedly interrupted by digressions into Russian and Persian history and, above all, very extensive descriptions of the geography, population, customs, religions, and political systems of the countries through which the expedition passed. And every so often in the bulky folio volume there were engravings of the writer's own drawings and very carefully executed maps.

Much of this profuse material is still of interest today; so is the mental attitude of the "Baroque" author. Thus, Olearius is evidently proud of his scientific outlook and of technological progress in general, yet still seems to accept a number of quaint beliefs. He dislikes raffish conduct, injustice, and bloodshed, but appears to consider torture and mutilation normal judicial procedure. And conversely he never denies his pious Lutheranism, but can be singularly detached in his description of other Christian and even non-Christian faiths and practices. Throughout the book, however, we sense the belief in the superiority of Western Christianity. While he evidently holds that God made all mortals fundamentally alike and able to find the right way to salvation, on the one hand, and the best methods to deal with this world, on the other, he is of the opinion that in the strange lands which he visited there frequently seemed to be no incentive to true virtue and worldly improvements.

Nowhere is this outlook more transparent than in Olearius' appraisal of the Russian scene. He gives a detached picture of the Greek Orthodox Church, does not fail to praise the high moral qualities, education, and generous hospitality of certain people he met, and even calls the Russians very good soldiers ("in besieg'd places. . .not indeed so fortunate in the field"), but

(2) Cf. Paul Hazard, *La Crise de la Conscience Europeenne*, Paris, 1935, p. 3 ff.

(3) The style of John Davies' translation is simpler. Moreover, he sometimes mistranslates and omits passages so that I shall occasionally have to resort to the German original.

begins a whole chapter devoted to Muscovy with the unequivocal statement:

“If a man consider the natures and manner of life of the Muscovites, he will be forced to avow, there cannot be anything more barbarous than that people. Their boast is that they are descended from the ancient Greeks, but, to do them no injustice, there is no more comparison between the brutality of these barbarians, and the civility of the Greeks, to whom all other parts in the World are oblig'd for their literature and civilization, than there is between day and night.”

This harsh verdict undoubtedly proceeds from Olearius' impression that “not any of their action is directed to vertue and the glory which attends it”, but they “run themselves into all manner of vice.” He comments at length on the uninhibited sexual debauchery and drunkenness, the prevalence of obscene and blasphemous swearing, and the constant use of physical violence. Yet, while these vices are indulged in by the common people in a strikingly animal way, the author seems to detect the addition of sophisticated malice among the other social groups. He confirms the view of the former Danish ambassador, in his *Hodoeporicon Ruthenicum*, that Russians can be clever, but adds that “their industry and subtilty is chiefly seen in their Trafick in which there is no craft or cheat, but they make use of, rather to circumvent others, than to prevent being deceiv'd themselves”. And he relates the story of a Dutch merchant who outmanoeuvred his Russian counterparts, whereupon “these Gentlemen were so far from being troubled at it, that they spake of him, as of an excellent ingenious man, and desir'd that they might go Partners with him.” In a number of cases, however, such Russians avenge themselves against their adversaries in that they “get secretly convey'd into their Lodgings, whom they would accuse, those things which they would have believed were stolen from them, or they thrust them into their Enemies Boots”. The present Czar, adds Olearius, tried to curb that practice by decreeing the issue of transfer documents. He had also discontinued the procedure under Ivan the Terrible of having a man accused of high treason and sentenced “without any Process, Evidence, or Defence allow'd”.

That a lack of love for virtue is not the sole basis for Olearius' accusation of Russian barbarism appears from the passage with which he continues his actual indictment: “Dann die Russen” as the German wording goes, “keine freye Kunste und hohe Wissenschaften lieben/ viel weniger sich selbst darinnen zu

uben/ Lust haben. Ob es schon heisst: Dedicisse fideliter artes emollit mores, nec sinit esse feros". In fact, he adds, most Russians scoff at foreigners who love and practise these civilizing Humanities and Sciences. Not that doctors, for example, are held in ridicule. But they seem to be considered magicians, and Czars used to accuse unsuccessful physicians of treason and punish them. In any event, the Russians, "will not permit that people should make use of the same means as is done elsewhere to gain the perfection of that Science."

This anti-humanism, in other words, is linked with a distrustful isolationism. "To continue them in their lowness of spirit", relates Olearius, "the Muscovites are upon pain of death prohibited to go out of the Countrey, without the Great Duke's express permission" and since a privileged young man had not returned from his studies abroad, even such privileges had now been withdrawn. Even inside Russia, however, contacts with foreigners are made difficult. Olearius tells us that when the Holstein mission arrived in Moscow the Grand Duke sent lavish food and drinks to their residence, but "this done, the doors of our lodging was locked upon us, and a Guard of twelve Musketees set to prevent all communication between us, and the inhabitants, till after the first Audience". Later the staff were given permission to walk freely about the city "which were thought so great favours, that the Muscovites themselves were astonish'd at it; for till then it had not been suffer'd, that the Domesticks of Strange Ambassadors should walk about the Citie, but when their occasion oblig'd them to go abroad, they were accompany'd by one or more of the Musketeers." That even then they evidently had to watch their step can be inferred from the author's stories of ambassadors whom the Grand-Dukes had sent to Siberia. Among the Czar's subjects, on the other hand, the writer reports a variety of reactions to foreigners. Of receptions, for example, he remarks that the hosts were so hospitable that the guests were even required to kiss the hostess, but he comments on a stubborn emphasis on the Czar's precedence over all other rulers in the world, and he makes the observation that even the most well-bred Muscovites use "Ziemlich harte und Discretion leerer Worte" to their foreign counterparts, but do not seem to mind equally rude replies.

More than by this behaviour towards foreigners Olearius appears to have been taken aback by the established *mores* among the Russians themselves. Not only that adultery was

treated with leniency and divorce from unwanted wives was relatively easy, but wife-beating seemed an established practice. Legal proceedings not only implied similar floggings and torture, but there is "no invention but they make use of to force people to confesse the truth by torture", including the regular fall of drops of water on the shaven head. More disturbing to the writer is that serfs are "treated like beasts, rather than people endow'd with reason". And yet "those who are free-born, but poor, do so little value their advantage that they sell themselves with their family for a small matter; nay, they are so mindlesse of their liberty, that they will sell themselves a second time, after they had recover'd it, by the Death of their Master, or some other occasion". Not enough with that, "there are some will cast themselves at their Lords feet to give thanks after they had been sufficiently beaten by them." Their masters, however, stand in a somewhat similar relation to the Czar. For all the Grand Duke's subjects, the princes and the gentry as well as the commoners, are "his Golops or slaves". "He is not subject to the Laws; he only makes them. . . He creates Magistrates, and deposes them, ejects them, and orders them to be punished with such absolute power, that we may say of the Great Duke what the Prophet Daniel says of the King of Babylon, That 'he put to death whom he would, and saved whom he would' ". And "the Muscovites. . . are so far from opposing his will, that they say, the Justice and Word of their Prince is sacred and inviolable". From their infancy, in fact, they have been taught "to speak of the Czar as of God himself, not only in their acts and publick assemblies, but also in their entertainments and ordinary discourse. Thence proceed their submissive forms of speaking, 'The honour to see the brightness of the eyes of his Czaarick Majesty'; 'Only God and the Czar knows it'; 'All they have belong to God and the Czar' ". And Olearius concludes that all this looks similar to what the Persians say of their patron saint Ali: "That if he is not God, he must be a close relation of His".

Ironical as this conclusion may sound, it implies no challenge to the Czar's sovereignty. In fact, in another passage of his book this 17th century Lutheran servant of a German prince stresses that every legitimate ruler is entitled to uphold his authority as he thinks fit. He even wonders whether "the perverse disposition of the Muscovites", their laziness, lack of education, and ignorance of the value of freedom, would make it possible "to bring them to take any pains, but by the Whip

and the Cudgel". But when he reports that Russians not only name the Czar and God in the same breath, but seem to fear their ruler more than the Almighty, he suggests that the regime does not seem to differentiate between a mortal to whom God has given exalted earthly functions, and God himself. And when finally Olearius attempts to classify this strange system of government, he recalls Aristotle's passage "There is another form of monarchy which is to be met with among some of the Barbarians, in which the Kings are invested with powers nearly equal to a tyranny", and then comes to the conclusion that—since it is a general distinction between legitimate government and tyranny "that, in the one, the welfare of the subjects is of greatest consideration, in the other, the particular profit and advantage of the Prince"—the regime of Muscovy in fact "inclines much to Tyranny".⁴

Olearius himself, in any event, would not stay in Russia. For "those strangers who settle in Muscovy as are entertain'd in the Czar's service must resolve to do the same submissions, and be content with the same treatment. For what kindness soever he may have for them, it requires so small a matter to deserve the Whip, that there is hardly any can brag he hath not had it". He turned down an enticing offer to become the Czar's astronomer, and returned to the humbler, but safer appointment in Holstein.

(4) It is of note that John Davies, writing in the 1650s, translates "*there is no other difference between a legitimate Government and Tyranny*", while the original states, more vaguely, that is "*der allgemeine Unterscheid*".

BUDS

By ARTHUR S. BOURINOT

Witness the trees' resurrection,
The mystic bloom of the bud,
Worship the maple's perfection,
The Holy Grail and the Blood.