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On Language Learning and Intercultural Communication in Seventeenth-Century Russia

1. Introduction

The British Library preserves a remarkable collection of Russian documents from the early age of Tsar Peter the Great. The Cyrillic texts, 114 folios in total, are part of a large and heterogeneous convolute (Harley 6356), including twenty-two other manuscripts written in different languages (English, Latin, French, and Arabic). The texts have recently been published by P.S. Stefanović and B.N. Morozov under the title “Roman Vilimović v gostijach u Petra Ignat’evića: Pakovskij archiv anglijskogo kupca 1680-ch godov.” The title already indicates that we would be dealing with a unique collection: an “archive” of an English merchant with the russelsified name Roman Vilimović, who was visiting a certain Petar Ignat’ević in Pskov in the late seventeenth-century.

This paper offers an analysis of the collection and a critical review of the far-reaching conclusions drawn by the editors. I will first discuss the manuscript and its contents (par. 2 and 3) and then focus on the identification of persons, in particular foreigners, mentioned in the collection and the assumed close intercultural relationship between the two main characters, Roman Vilimović and Petar Ignat’ević (par. 4 and 5). In the remainder of the paper (par. 6 and 7), I will argue that the editors have overlooked a very obvious identification of the person Roman Vilimović and that the proposed alternative explanation puts the collection in a totally different light.

2. The manuscript and its edition

On codicological grounds, the collection can be divided into three parts, labeled here as A, B, and C. On the basis of their contents, parts A and C can be subdivided into two and four sections, respectively:

(A1) A memorandum of 27 July 1667 from Tsar Aleksey Michajlović to the governor of Pskov (fol. 228r–230r) about the New Trade Statute (Novotorgovyj Ustanov), which was introduced by him in the same year.


(B) A copy of Luther’s Catechism according to the 1627 edition, which was printed in Stockholm, with some additional excerpts from the Gospel (fol. 269r–289r).

(C) A miscellaneous set of texts (fol. 300r–341r), consisting of:

(C1) a copy of the “Parable on Why it is Inappropriate to Leave Church During Chanting” (fol. 300r–302r), a moralistic-religious story (also known as “The Story of the

* Text last revised on November 2, 2010.

1 For a description of Harley 6356, see Catalogue, pp. 359–360.
that are written on this card, you might want to ask me, and I am glad to explain everything to your Grace.” In letter no. 22, RV thanks PI for all his letters: “... and I am glad to see them for learning (ditja učenija) ...” Letters nos. 14 and 15 give us an insight how PI proceeded in correcting RV’s letters: “I did not correct your letter, because there is little room between the lines to add (pripisat’)” (no. 14); “Please, do not blame me for copying the letter you have sent on this sheet of paper, so that it will be clear and intelligible (razumno i vjerno) to you” (no. 15). Also, PI often provides RV with alternatives for idiomatic expressions and phrases. An illustrative example can be found in letter no. 2: “... and I am a disgrace or a shame (razumno ili sstbo) to all good Russian people and foreigners because I was often drunk and always drank a lot, and that I was lazy, and that I did not write anything to you, and that you have wasted a lot of time without learning because of my laziness. And for this, for everything (za to za sve) I ask you forgiveness, have mercy on me for this, forgive (prostui u tebi provććenia, počalui menja v tom, prostui)”. From the correspondence we also learn that RV was living at PI’s house and that PI was paid for housing and teaching him (cf. letters nos. 7 and 8, and 16 and 17). Judging from the fact that several letters were exchanged on the same day (cf. nos. 7, 8, 16, and 17), it is mentioned. According to PI’s letter on the same day (cf. above with regard to factual information which can be gained from the correspondence particularly applies to the identity of RV. We can confidently draw conclusions about PI’s professional life, but who was Roman Vilimovic? First of all, it is important to note that nowhere in the correspondence the place of residence of RV and PI is mentioned. According to Stefanovic and Morozov (pp. 14–15), the collection provides strong evidence that this must have been Pskov; section A1 is connected with Pskov, and in eight formulae in C3 we find the same place name. For instance, the first five samples of business letters are all from a Pskovian townsman (pskovitin pskovskoi čelovek) called Grigore Lukin, and are addressed to the English merchant (angličen torgovavni čelovek)” Ivan Ivanovič Peke”, who was active in Narva (Rugodin). The lin-

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3 Note that letter no. 17 is not dated 25 August 1684, as stated in the edition (p. 87), but 25 August 1686. In letter no. 16, RV erroneously puts the date 27 August 1686 at the end, which is pointed out by PI in his reply on the same day (“you have made a mistake in the dates and days”).

4 See HAMMERICH / JAKOBSSON, Manual, pp. VIII–IX.
guistic features of the correspondence (see par. 2 above) corroborate the assumption that Pskov indeed was the place where RV and PI were meeting each other. The editors have not been able to find a Petr Ignat’evich in archives and historical sources related to Pskov, although there are some hints that he might have been a member of the Pskovian family of the Koljagins (cf. pp. 19–22).

But again, who was Roman Vilimovich? We do not know his surname and in the correspondence he does not write anything about his professional activities. The only thing we learn from his own letters is that on 25 August 1686 he informs PI that he is thinking of going to Narva the following week (no. 16). On 17 March 1687 he writes PI that he has been in Narva (no. 19): “... I have not written a single line to you for half a year and this can all be justified by the fact that I was in Rugodiw and neglected my studies”. The editors connect this piece of information with the English merchant community in Narva, to which section C3 is strongly related. Here, we not only find the name of “Ivan Ivanovič Peket”, but also those of other foreigners (inozemcy) who were active in Narva: the Englishman “Eroféj Bokin, son of Fomin” (no. 6), a certain “Ivan Drach” from England (no. 7), and “Ivan Tirmán”, the sender of sample letter no. 18. The editors have been able to identify this last person as John Tyerman, a representative of the Eastland Company.

In sample letter no. 18, “Ivan Tirmán”/ John Tyerman not only refers to “Ivan Peket”, who is obviously the same person as “Ivan Ivanovič Peket” mentioned earlier, but also to “Roman Darvin”: “And I have written about this to Pekov, to Roman Darvin...”. The editors speculate (pp. 18–19, 109) that “Roman Darvin” (Robert Darwin in English) may be identical with Roman Vilimovich. In the sample letters, the first name “Roman” also appears in no. 8. Again, the editors contend that this could be RV (p. 101). They also conjecture that his father might be mentioned in the Pis’movnik in nos. 15 (dated as early as 7 September 1682) and 16, we encounter a person named “Vilim”/ “Vilimko” (pp. 106–107). Of course, given the fact that Roman / Robert and Vilim / William are very common names, it is a mere guess that “Roman Darvin” and “Vilim” / “Vilimko” in the Pis’movnik can be linked to Roman Vilimovich in the correspondence.

5 See also ERPENBECK Engländcr in Narva, p. 493.
7 BISSET Eastland Company York Residence, pp. 1–13. The list is online available at the address: http://www.york.ac.uk/media/library/documents/borthwick/3.1.3.2Eastland.pdf (accessed on: 31 October 2010).
8 For instance, in the two lists of the Eastland Company York Residence (see the two previous footnotes), we find nine other merchants with the name Robert, and as much as thirty-seven people called William.

5 Evidence of intercultural communication

On the basis of all these pieces of indirect evidence, Stefanović and Morozov come to the following characterization of RV:

“Apparently, RV was an Englishman, who either lived in Narva, or was staying there for longer periods, with relatives or friends. He was somehow settled there, conducting transit trade between Russia and England. For running his trade operations successfully, he needed to have knowledge of the Russian language and to have business contacts in northwestern Russian cities. This explains his long-term stay in Pskov and his lessons with a Russian ‘tutor’ (repetitor)” (p. 17)

After having established this profile, the editors point out (see especially pp. 24–46) that the correspondence contains topics which testify to a unique intercultural type of communication between a foreigner and a Russian in the late seventeenth century. PI writes to RV about religious and spiritual issues, quoting the Gospel on several occasions (cf. letters nos. 4, 14, and 20). In return, RV answers: “As you wrote to me, that God does not love a man who does not love his brother, I hope that this is true, and we Christians are all born into this world from one Father” (no. 5). PI also discusses personal affairs, like the poor health of his wife Pelageya (no. 9; cf. RV’s response in no. 13). In letter no. 6, PI (or Mitka Eversev) – see par. 3 above – asks RV to lend him two books (etrētā) – “The Story of the Seven Sages” (Povest’ o sem’i mudrečach) and “The Story of Ahikar the Wise” (Povest’ ob Ahire Premadrom) – which according to the editors “clearly shows that everyday reading of divining literature was just as normal for a Muscovite as for an Englishman” (p. 35). In the English summary of the edition, they come to a far-reaching appraisal of the collection and the correspondence in particular:

“The very possibility of such a dialogue in Muscovite Russia shatters the stereotype of mutual mistrust and dislike between Russians and West-European visitors. It is significant that the two men avoid such issues as icons, saints, ritualistic differences to leave the path of conflict and seek shared values. Examples of such relationship between native Russians and visiting westerners are rare (see, e.g., the dialogue of religion in Grammatica Russica by Heinrich Wilhelm Ludolf), but they do exist – which means that the Petrov reforms had their potential – support not only among the boyar elite but also in certain circles of the urban middle class. This dialogue was greatly encouraged by the multicultural, rather open-minded environment of the Russian border market town.” (p. 166)

6. Roman Vilimovich’s identity questioned

To be sure, Stefanović and Morozov emphasize on several occasions that their conclusions are mainly based on circumstantial evidence, which for the larger part is drawn from section C3, the Pis’movnik, not directly from C2, the correspondence between RV and PI

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itself. The identity of RV is a reconstruction which could not be supported by solid evidence: “Efforts to find any traces of the presence of a foreigner in Russia with the name Roman Vilimovič (i.e. Robert, son of William) in the available sources—both published and archival—have not led to a success” (p. 18).

It is surprising that the editors have not found any historical clue about the identity of Roman Vilimovič because it is not very difficult to find a person with the same name, who lived in Russia in the 1680s and who can be directly connected with the city of Pskov: Roman Vilimovič Brjus, or Robert Bruce, born in 1668 in Pskov, son of William Bruce, who was of noble Scottish descent and immigrated to Russia in 1647, and brother of Jakov Vilimovič Brjus, or James (Daniel) Bruce, who was born in Moscow one year after Robert and later became famous as General Field Marshal (“Generalfeldzeugmeister”)—being the most high-ranking foreigner in the Russian Empire of Peter the Great—as well as a naturalist and astronomer.

It is all the more surprising that the editors have not explored the possible identification of Roman Vilimovič with Robert Bruce, because this link was already made as early as 1926 by Vladimir Burtsev in his description of the collection Harley 6356: “Was not this Roman Willimovich the renowned R.V. Bruce, one of the Generals and Statesmen of Peter the Great? Many things in this volume appear to confirm this surmise.”

The question is whether the contents of the collection indeed can be brought in line with what we know about Robert Bruce. In the years that RV corresponded with PI (1686–1687), Bruce must have been 18 or 19 years old. Obviously, his permanent residence was no longer Pskov at that moment; his father had already died in 1680 and since 1683 he was, together with his brother, a member of the Mock Troops (potchynie voiska) of Peter the Great, which later became known as the Preobrazhensky Regiment (Preobraženskiy polk). The historical sources do not give us much more information about his early years. He and his brother must have had a good home education in Russia. Of James we know that he also studied in England; perhaps Robert was also sent there in his youth for further education. Later, Robert Bruce made an outstanding military career in the Russian army, became the first commander of St Petersburg in 1704, and earned the rank of Lieutenant-General in 1710. In 1704 or 1705 he founded Saint Anna’s Church, the first Lutheran church in St Petersburg. He died in 1720, just after his appointment as a member of the College of War, and was buried in Saints Peter and Paul’s Cathedral.

Considering the fact that Robert Bruce was born and raised in Russia, we may assume that he must have had a rather good practical knowledge of the language. This is not in conflict with the type of correspondence and with the inclusion of the Pis’movnik in the collection. Both sections deal specifically with the correct use of the written language. The correspondence does not reflect first-stage language exercises for a non-native speaker. It is rather an ‘advanced course’, designed for a specific goal: to write official letters


10 See Enciklopedičeskij leksikon, pp. 213–214; Fedosov, Russian Bruces, pp. 63–64. Information about Robert Bruce on the Internet is mainly based on the article in the eighth volume of the Brockhaus & Efron Encyclopedia (1891). On Scottish-Russian relationships in the seventeenth century in general, see the collection of articles in Artem’eva/Mikesin Scotland and Russia.

11 See Azancevskij Istorija, p. 2.

and use standard phrases. This is a goal that would fit the profile of someone like Robert Bruce—his background and his age at the time of the correspondence.

What about the type of texts which are included in the Pis’movnik? These do not reflect Bruce’s later career. However, we have to keep in mind that in the 1680s he was still a young man. He may have planned several future activities and the acquisition of a general knowledge of a broad range of text types would always come in handy.

7. Conclusion

What are the odds that Roman Vilimovič is the same person as Robert Bruce, son of William? These odds are so obvious that Stefanovič and Morozov should have taken up the task to thoroughly investigate the contents of the collection in the light of an identification of both persons. To my opinion, the collection does not provide any evidence which can refute such identification. This also implies that the far-reaching statements of the editors about revising our views on intercultural communication between foreigners and Russians in Muscovite Russia are difficult to uphold. Bruce was not a foreign visitor, not a Western merchant in a far and exotic country, trying to communicate with its natives in their own language and to explore intercultural relationships. He was an immigrant, who in his younger years tried to learn the subtleties of the written Russian language and oriented himself on a future career in the land where he was born and raised. If RV is in fact Robert Bruce, the collection now published as a “Pskovian archive of an English merchant” would be more adequately described as a “Pskovian archive of a Scottish immigrant.”

Cited Literature


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Summary

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The article offers a critical analysis of a recently published collection of late seventeenth-century Russian texts. According to the editors, the collection not only enhances our knowledge about Russian language learning by Western foreigners in the pre-Petrine era, but also testifies to an “intercultural dialogue” in Muscovite Russia, which fundamentally changes the general view of (negative) stereotypes of “mutual mistrust and dislike.” I argue that the collection indeed gives us valuable and detailed first-hand information about the methods and procedures in Russian language learning. However, the claim that the collection is a unique example of (positive) “intercultural communication” in the seventeenth-century should be rejected in view of the most obvious identification of the main foreign character which figures in the collection: Roman Vilimovič.

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Russian Geschichtelehrbücher für die 11. Klasse der allgemeinbildenden Schulen
Eine Sammelbesprechung


Dazugehörige didaktische Hilfsmittel:


