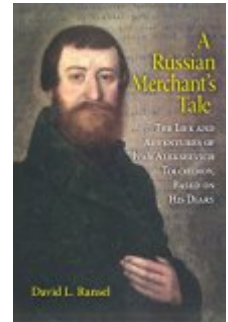


David L. Ransel. *A Russian Merchant's Tale: The Life and Adventures of Ivan Alekseevich Tolchënov, Based on His Diary.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009. 320 S. \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-253-22020-2.



Reviewed by Alison K. Smith

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Commissioned by Eva M. Stolberg (University of Duisburg-Essen, Germany)

David L. Ransel begins his exploration of the life of the merchant Ivan Alekseevich Tolchënov at a point of transition. He describes the moment in 1797 when Tolchënov and family set off from their once comfortable provincial life, now lost to financial misdeeds, for an uncertain future in Moscow. Tolchënov had been a “leading citizen” in the regional capital Dmitrov. The head of his family from the age of twenty-four, he was not content to continue the modest grain trade his father had pursued but instead diversified in search of social advancement. For a while he succeeded, and his grand house and particularly his garden brought him in regular contact not only with his fellow merchants but also with the nobility. Soon, though, the truth of debts and bad business practices came out, and Tolchënov, stripped of his assets, labeled a bankrupt, and demoted to the *meshchanstvo* (lower town social estate), sought new opportunities in Moscow. There, at least in Ransel’s account, Tolchënov began to fade out of his own story. His efforts to reestablish himself in the playing card business were complicated by

government policies and ill health, and the stories of his children begin to come to the fore. Tolchënov’s diary and story end abruptly in 1812, leaving his eventual fate unknown. This is perhaps fitting for the writer of a diary rather than a memoir; as Ransel himself notes in the introduction, diaries and journals, riddled as they often are by repetition, by gaps, or by concerns with the mundane, can be opaque, if rich, sources. In this case, Ransel makes this source knowable by building it into a rich account both of an individual merchant’s life and of provincial merchant life at the turn of the nineteenth century.

Ransel notes that Tolchënov in some ways meant his diary to be a monument to himself—he added a “reflective account” of his childhood and youth to fill out his life story, and later transcribed his original writing into neat volumes complete with year end summaries—but it was also clearly a true daily account, with entries that varied from detailed and discursive, to those that simply announced “I did not go anywhere” (pp. 23, 176-177). Ransel copes with this variety by presenting short

excerpts from Tolchënov's diary, following the various phases of Tolchënov's life, and then expanding on them, explicating and contextualizing them as needed. He draws on additional information about Tolchënov's own life, on other merchant memoirs, or on the work of historians of the eighteenth-century merchantry (particularly N. V. Kozlova). The coverage is not simply biographical, but also includes excerpts that highlight everything from the mundane (like the rather charming note that Tolchënov at one point acquired a new timepiece that allowed him to record his day by the minute) to the emotional (his love for his children), to the locally important (lengthy discussions of local politics in Dmitrov during the late eighteenth century), and to the nationally important (the threats of the Pugachev uprising and Napoleon).

In some ways, Ransel's work on *A Russian Merchant's Tale* seems related to his work as co-translator and editor of Olga Semyonova Tian-Shanskaia's *Village Life in Late Tsarist Russia* (1993). They are in some ways very different; while Semyonova's voice dominates in the earlier work, here the historian's voice is by far the dominant one, to the point that Tolchënov's is sometimes obscured. Despite this difference, the books are structured similarly, as both use the outline of a life to focus discussion of work and local politics. But even more, both books share a concern with the relationship between individual stories and general histories. Semyonova drew on her ethnographic observations of Russian village life to present not just those observations but also an abstracted "typical" figure to follow through his life. In that way, she--and particularly Ransel as editor--tried to find a balance between the general and the specific. In *A Russian Merchant's Tale*, Ransel does essentially the opposite task, by taking a specific life story and drawing out general observations from it. That this is Ransel's approach is all the more important because of a possible problem with Tolchënov's diary as a source. As Ransel notes in his introduction, Tolchënov's

tale could be considered too unusual a source and story to represent "normal" merchant life. Indeed, Ransel notes that his decision to work on Tolchënov was greeted by a Dmitrov historian with incredulity, because he considered Tolchënov to be a "freak of nature," and thus without value to a historian of the merchant estate (pp. xxiii-xxiv). Certainly Tolchënov's diary itself is an unusual object, and certainly there are elements of his personal history that are extreme to one extent or another. Not content simply to consort with nobles, Tolchënov built the finest house in Dmitrov; not content simply to grow his business, Tolchënov got involved in risky, almost Dickensian schemes that backfired; and not content simply to start again after his failure, Tolchënov moved to Moscow, the center of economic life (or at least merchant life) in Russia, in order to recast his life into a different form. These were extremes, but as Ransel argues, none of these individual elements were out of the ordinary for Russian merchants of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. They did strive for social and economic improvements, they did move from town to town, and they did fail. In the end, out of the story of this one "freak of nature" comes not simply an individual story, but rather a corrective to the still dominant view of the Russian merchant estate: not a stolid, hermetically sealed social backwater, but instead a more dynamic and colorful social space where characters like Tolchënov could flourish, fail, and start anew.

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