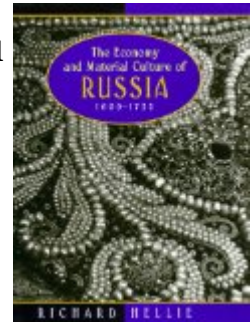


Richard Hellie. *The Economy and Material Culture of Russia 1600-1725.* Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1999. xi + 671 pp. \$42.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-226-32649-8.



Reviewed by Marshall T. Poe

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One of the most irritating problems of studying early modern Russia is our inability to "see" it as Muscovites did. I do not mean "see" in a sophisticated, post-modern sense. Whether historians can enter the "minds" of their subjects is perhaps an open question. There is no doubt, however, that so much of the material culture of early modern Russia has literally vanished that it is difficult for modern historians to get a feel for the physical presence that surrounded Muscovites in the course of their daily affairs. Certainly some of the "stuff" of Muscovite life has survived, but, paradoxically, what remains often gives a rather skewed impression of the world in which Muscovites lived. There is, as every tourist knows, quite a bit of Muscovite stone architecture scattered around Russia -- fortresses, churches, dwellings. But the vast majority of all structures built by Muscovites were wooden, and they have either completely disappeared or lie, in rather reduced form, under several "cultural levels" waiting to be unearthed by archeologists.

Museums hold various Muscovite "treasures"--fine jewelry, ceremonial clothing, elabo-

rate furniture. Suffice it to say that the "average Muscovite" never encountered any of these things, and besides, many of them are of foreign manufacture and therefore not "Muscovite" at all. Archives hold extensive collections of Muscovite documents, mostly of an administrative character issued by governmental bodies. But almost no Muscovite could read and, moreover, most Russians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had only fleeting contact with the tsar's court and its busy minions. And there is, of course, Russia itself--its cities, forests, and plains. Yet even here appearances can be deceiving. Soviet power may not have built socialism, but it surely succeeded in transforming the Russian environment by means of mass urbanization, deforestation, and collectivization.

Thanks to Richard Hellie's monumental new book, historians can finally "see" everyday life in Muscovy, or at least a very sizable portion of it. Hellie's work is ostensibly a history of prices in the seventeenth century. It is that to be sure, but the book's real value is as a virtual encyclopedia of Muscovite material culture and society. Almost

nothing that Muscovites ate, drank, wore, lived in, worked on, transported, worshipped, sold, or did for gain is omitted from *Economy and Material Culture*. The book catalogues over six thousand Muscovite goods and services. How did Hellie do it? The author and a team of over twenty assistants scoured something on the order of 350 printed sources as well as a handful of archival sources in search of "transactions," that is, records of instances in which one thing was exchanged for another. The vast majority of these sources were, as might be expected given the character of Muscovite culture, produced by the government.

The result of this collection enterprise is a database containing 107,000 records. Each transaction record includes a variety of economic data: the type of commodities exchanged (6828 types); its price (in rubles or, if in kind, converted to rubles); its unit (158 types recorded); the time at which the transaction took place (1600 to 1725); the place in which the transaction took place (1850 places recorded); the type of transaction [six types: fees/transaction costs (2549 records), gifts (7526 records), legal matters (12059 records), commodity and service prices (37540 records), taxes (15446 records), wages (31953 records)]. Each record in the database also includes information about the buyers and sellers: their identities (33,300 recorded); their ranks (300 types recorded); their jobs (1000 recorded); and their gender. All told, Hellie's database contains approximately 1.5 million bits of information about the Muscovite economy and the people who operated it.

Hellie admits that his data is not statistically representative of the Muscovite economy as whole: primary production (agriculture and extraction) make up 22.2 percent of the data set; secondary production (manufactured goods) make up 7.3 percent of the data set; and tertiary production (services) comprise 70.5 percent. Obviously, the fact that the data is largely drawn from government sources and concerns government activity (particularly remuneration for service) skewed

the data set. Russia was an overwhelmingly agricultural country and therefore primary production doubtless dominated the economy. Nonetheless, the relative value of commodities within the primary, secondary and tertiary arenas may be (and Hellie believes it is) a much truer reflection of the shape of those parts of the economy. Thus, on the macro level, the data is biased, but on a lower level, it may be representative of large parts of the economy.

For expository purposes, Hellie divides all the commodities he catalogues into twenty-two "sectors." A simple list of them should suffice to give an impression of the incredible scope of the book: agricultural products; domesticated animals and fowl; wild animals and furs; fish and fish/sea projects; processed and imported food, beverages and tobacco; forest products; construction materials; metals and minerals, chemicals, gunpowder, and currencies; paints, ink, dyes and oils; gems, perfumes, spices, drugs, and jewelry; metal and glass objects; wood, including furniture; domestic goods (books, candles, etc.); hides, leather, horn, feathers, and bristles; textiles; notions and linens; clothing and accessories; real estate; wages; vehicles and transportation costs; service and income transfers; taxes, fees, fines.

Successive chapters treat the price movement of commodities grouped in these sectors. Each chapter proceeds in virtually identical steps. It begins with a table listing the commodities in the sector, their basic unit of measure, the number of transactions in which they are recorded in the data set, the range of dates represented in the records, and, finally, the minimum, medium and maximum prices. The data for each commodity (or at least many of them) is then presented as a table with the following specifications: Prices on the y axis are listed on a logarithmic scale. A log scale (vs. a linear scale) was used for ease of display: the range of prices is almost always very large, from a few kopeks to hundreds of rubles, and could not therefore be represented on a man-

ageable linear graph (the y axis would be too "tall"). For example, the price of a chet' of rye ranged from 4 kopeks to 52 rubles. Years are represented on the x axis in a linear fashion, usually from 1600 to about 1710 (or whenever the data end).

Particular years have been highlighted for their historical significance: 1613 (the Romanov ascension); 1633 (the Smolensk War); 1648 (the urban riots); 1654 (the Thirteen Years War); 1663 (the Copper Riots); 1675 (the end of Aleksei's long reign); 1689 (Peter's ascension); 1700 (the Great Northern War); 1725 (Peter's death). Where appropriate (for example, with cereals), months occupy the x axis, rendering a depiction of seasonal price fluctuations. The data are plotted on the graphs and three computations are usually displayed: the median; a regression line (price with year), indicating long-term inflation or deflation; and a local trend line indicating annual price movements.

Each of these commodity graphs is then analyzed in a number of arrays. Most basically, the movements of the long-term (regression) trend line (inflation/deflation over the whole period) and the local trend line (annual price fluctuations) are explained with reference to macropolitical and economic events, e.g., wars, famines, political turmoil, changes in production techniques, transaction costs, and trade, etc. In addition, correlative analysis of prices with a number of variables is offered to, for example, judge the effect of the identity (rank, job) of the seller or buyer, the region in which the transactions took place, or the season in which the transaction took place on the price.

In order to give an idea of the relative expense of commodities, Hellie sometimes tells us what they cost in terms of the amount of time it took to earn the money necessary to buy them. Additional perspective is gained by comparisons of Muscovite goods/service prices with those found in Europe. At the end of every chapter an

aggregate table is offered in which the total expenditures for each commodity are given, together with their proportion (in percentages) in the entire sector. Hellie then discusses whether the commodity percentages are an accurate representation of the parts of the "actual" sector as a whole. If they are (and he believes they often are), the data give us some idea of true shape of the entire sector, that is, which commodities were more or less common than others.

Given the scope of the book and of this review, it would be impossible to render a sufficient summary of each of the twenty-two economic sectors and thousands of commodities discussed in *Economy and Material Culture*. So let us move on to general conclusions. Four stand out: 1) Muscovites were relatively poor in comparison to other (but not all) early modern Europeans; 2) There was very little if any long-term inflation in seventeenth-century Russia; 3) Temporary price instability was not caused by demographic pressure (though the population was rising), but rather by debasement of currency and climatic events; 4) New commodities, few and largely European in origin, entered the market, usually at the behest of the modernizing government and its elite, and mostly under Peter.

This profile of poverty, stability, and slow "Europeanization" can be largely explained by the autarchic character of the Muscovite economy and the role the Romanov state played in Russian society. Because the Russian economy was isolated from that of Europe and without a significant entrepreneurial class, it did not profit from Western innovations nor did it produce many productivity-enhancing advances of its own. Hence the endemically low productivity and poverty. Yet isolation had its benefits, for the autarchic Russian economy was immune to the European economic flu, for example, during the "crisis of the seventeenth century." Hence the absence of anything other than momentary inflation.

Except for the weather, only the state was in a position to affect the Muscovite economy and, as Hellie points out, the Romanovs were either unwilling or unable to do very much in this sphere. On the positive side, the Muscovite court could and did create a stable monetary system, standard weights and measures, and roads. On the negative side, it limited foreign trade (a virtual government monopoly) and occasionally debased the currency. Generally, the Romanovs left well enough alone. Only in Petrine times did the state become involved in programs for economic development on a sizable scale (though puny by modern standards and not terribly effective in the long term).

Though Hellie emphasizes that the role of the state in controlling the day-to-day operation of the economy (for example, in setting prices) was minimal, he also points out that in a deeper sense state policies were responsible for the distinctive macroeconomic shape of the Muscovite economy. In Europe, the "factors of production" -- land, labor, and capital -- were controlled by several actors (typically landlords, peasants and townsmen, and financiers) in a relatively unregulated market. Within the limits of the doctrine of "fair price," the market decided prices. In Muscovy, the factors of production were to a significant degree controlled by the state.

The court viewed income-producing land as a strategic resource. In 1556 it decreed that all landholders were required to provide for the defense of the realm, either by serving themselves or sending men to fight. If a landholder failed to fulfill his obligation (without excuse), confiscation followed. The sale of service land grants issued directly by the government (*pomestia*) was basically forbidden and the sale of clan estates (*votchiny*) was severely restricted by the right of clan redemption. Together, the service tax and the restrictions on alienation reduced the security (and value) of landed property. To be sure, lands were inherited, exchanged, and sold. But the market

was so weak that Hellie was unable to determine the price of land.

With labor, the story is similar. The only valuable land in Muscovy was that cultivated by peasants. Thus both the state and its military servitors (who lived largely on *pomestia*) had a vested interest in controlling peasant labor. This could not be done by market mechanisms. Neither the state nor its minions could pay peasants enough to keep them from setting off on their own: there was simply too little state money and too much free land. Therefore, by slow steps, the government bowed to pressure from the service cavalry to bind the peasantry to the land, a process completed in 1649. While the rural labor market was not completely destroyed by serfdom, it was (like the land market) severely warped by the hand of the government.

Finally, while it is true there was no capital market in Muscovy (indeed there were no banks), only the state was in a position to amass sufficiently large amounts of capital to engage in modernizing economic enterprises. Like land and labor, the state seemed to see "private" fortunes -- held by the church, big boyars, or merchants-- as resources to be used in state activities (especially defense). These fortunes were taxed at the pleasure of the government or sometimes simply confiscated. The court regularly audited the "private" wealth of even its own elite servitors, that is, the boyars in Moscow. It is perhaps worth noting that these men, the very governing class of Muscovy, repeatedly told foreign visitors that everything they owned was in fact the tsar's. There was some truth to this.

Hellie does not dwell on the long term implications of state control of the land, labor and capital, but clearly it was tremendously significant. Without security in property, landed wealth--the primary source and store of value in any agricultural economy--could not be amassed by Russian gentrymen. Without the wealth afforded by land, they could not invest in commercial enterprises

(as did their European counterparts) either at home or abroad. Without a proto-capitalist landed class, the state, under European military pressure, was forced to accumulate capital (by taxation) and push the economy forward. This of course only made the state stronger and society weaker. Similarly, without a free rural labor market, progressive landholders and urban entrepreneurs could not attract workers from the countryside (legally, at least). Again, the state was forced to use its own serfs in state-owned enterprises, with all the inefficiencies that normally obtain in "command economies." And finally, without the means to safely amass money or borrow it from creditors, Russian businessmen were deprived of one of the primary engines of economic growth in early modern Europe: venture capital.

As stated above, the state took on the role of financier for its own enterprises, none of which were subject to efficiency-enhancing market pressures. In the end, the Muscovite state sacrificed the economic freedom of its subjects for political and military security. Though this strategy perhaps saved Russia as an independent state, it had disastrous consequences for the Imperial and even Soviet economies. It is much to Richard Hellie's credit that he expended the time and effort necessary to lay bare the Muscovite origins of the modern Russian economic crisis.

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