The Russian Empire and Grand Duchy of Muscovy

A 17th Century French Account

JACQUES MARGERET

THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE AND GRAND DUCHY OF MUSCOVY

ESTAT
DE L'EMPIRE
DE RVSSIE ET GRANde Duché de Moſcouie.

AVEC

Ce qui ſ'y eſt paſſé de plus memorable & Tragique, pendant le regne de quatre Empereurs : à ſçauoir depuis l'an 1590. juſques en l'an 1606. en Septembre.

Par le Capitaine MARGERET.

A PARIS,
Chez MATHIEV GVILLEMOT, marchant Libraire au Palais, à la gallerie par où on va à la Chancellerie.

M. D. C. VII.
Auec priuilege du Roy.

JACQUES MARGERET

THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE AND Grand Duchy of Muscovy

A 17th-Century French Account

Translated and Edited by
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INTRODUCTION

MUSCOVITE Russia by the end of the sixteenth century had become one of the most extensive realms in Christendom, governed by one of Europe's few absolute monarchs. Yet for all the power and ambition of its rulers, that vast state was still relatively isolated from and unknown to most Europeans. Even though Tsar Ivan IV (r. 1547–84) had established significant commercial contacts with Western Europe, his unsuccessful Livonian War (1558–83), fought against Poland-Lithuania and Sweden, ended with Muscovy temporarily excluded from playing a major role in European affairs. Suffering from the cumulative effects of the "terrible" tsar's foreign and domestic policies, Russia itself was also exhausted by the time of Ivan's death. The state recovered somewhat during the reign of his simple-minded son Fedor, when the new tsar's brother-in-law, Boris Godunov, governed capably as regent. However, when Fedor died without an heir in 1598, the seven-hundred-year-old ruling dynasty of Russia came to an end. Boris became tsar and ruled wisely for several more years, but the combined shock waves of the extinction of the dynasty, the almost simultaneous enserfment of the Russian peasants, and the continuing conflicts among the Muscovite lords left over from the period of Ivan's reign ushered in a catastrophic decade for Russia known to history as the Time of Troubles. This period was characterized by political unrest, famine, social upheaval, economic disruption, and foreign intervention. For a time many

doubted that Russia would even survive as an independent state. The Time of Troubles finally ended with the founding of a new ruling dynasty by Mikhail Romanov in 1613, but for several years the tragic events occurring in Muscovy were widely and colorfully reported throughout Europe, stimulating an already awakening interest in that strange and distant land.

When the first printed French account of Russia, Jacques Margeret's *Estat de l'Empire de Russie et Grand Duché de Moscovie*, was published by command of King Henri IV in 1607, it became an immediate success. In Europe's Age of Discovery, Captain Margeret's carefully prepared little book greatly helped the French to "rediscover" Russia.[1] In many ways Margeret was uniquely qualified for this task. He was one of the first of his countrymen ever to travel to Russia and to learn to speak and read Russian. He lived in Muscovy for over six years, held high positions in the Muscovite military, and came to know the country and its leaders very well. Although not a professional writer, he produced a fascinating and readable account of what he saw and heard while in Russian service. His book became a minor classic and was unsurpassed by any other French study of Russia until the era of Peter the Great.[2] It later became one of the very first foreign accounts to be translated into Russian and to be used extensively by Russian historians.[3] For the past two centuries scholars have generally acknowledged Margeret's book to be an extremely valuable and accurate source for early modern Russian history.[4]

The earliest recorded contact between France and Russia dates from the mid-eleventh century, when Henri I married the daughter of Iaroslav the Wise, Grand Prince of Kiev. Although there were some indirect commercial contacts as well, and numerous references to Russia and the Russians in French literature, medieval Franco-Russian relations failed to develop any further.[5]

For many reasons, contact with and knowledge about Russia declined in Western Europe so precipitously that by the fourteenth century, if a Frenchman thought at all about that part of the world, he thought about legendary "Tartary," or Scythia, a land filled with savage horsemen and fabulous beasts. It was not until the Russians freed themselves from Mongol domination in the fifteenth century that significant contact between Russia and much of Europe was restored. Toward the end of the fifteenth century, Grand Prince Ivan III of Moscow tried to reopen direct communications with Western European merchants and governments, but in this he was only partially successful. Russia's isolation from Western Europe was finally and decisively shattered only in the 1550s—first, by the English discovery of the White Sea trade route, and second, by the Russian capture of the East Baltic port of Narva during the Livonian War. By the 1560s many Western Europeans knew about Muscovy, and a large number were engaged in direct trade with that country.

French interest in Russia developed quickly. The adventurer Hans Schlitte, seeking to supply Ivan IV with European artisans and technicians, was welcomed to Paris by Henri II in 1555.[6] Livonian nobles sought an alliance with the French king in 1558, hoping for a French military expedition to preserve Livonia from the advancing Russians.[7] French merchants, on the other hand, took advantage of the invasion of Livonia, and during the 1560s they carried on a vigorous trade directly with the Russians at Narva. The Baltic port offered a good outlet for French merchandise, but imported Russian products were never considered vital to the French nation.[8] The French government was therefore free to engage in Baltic politics. The dream of a French protectorate over Livonia, and presumably French dominance in the lucrative Russian market, was one of the motivations for the successful French proposal that the brother of Charles IX of France be elected

RUSSIA AT THE END OF THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

king of Poland in 1574.[9] Almost immediately, however, the new king left Poland to ascend the French throne as Henri III. He did not lose interest in Russia, though, even after French designs on Livonia were decisively checked by Swedish and Polish victories over the Russians, including the Swedish capture of Narva in 1581. Searching for an alternate trade route, Henri asked Tsar Fedor about the possibility of the French joining in the White Sea trade. Fedor responded by sending an envoy to France in 1585 to discuss commercial relations.[10] A French embassy went to Moscow in 1586, and in that same year French vessels sailed for the first time to the White Sea.[11] A French company was granted a guarantee of privileges by the Russians in 1587.[12] By the end of the sixteenth century a few French merchants had settled in Moscow where, though they never seriously rivaled their Dutch and English competitors, they made a good profit and had a chance to learn some Russian.[13]

Russia offered adventure as well as trade; along with the merchants came many French mercenary soldiers who served in Russia during its Time of Troubles.[14] The greatest of these French soldiers, as well as one of the first to enter Muscovite service, was Captain Jacques Margeret. Margeret, who came from the county of Auxonne (on the border between Burgundy and Franche-Comté), was a scion of a successful bourgeois family. The first known reference to the Margerets is found in Burgundian records of 1478.[15] By the 1560s the merchant Pierre Margeret was prospering;[16] and by 1571 Chrétien Margeret, who may have been Jacques' older brother or his cousin, was appointed counselor to the *Chambre des Comptes* of Dijon (the sovereign court of accounts for Burgundy), a position which gave him noble status for life. Within several years the Margerets also intermarried with the Bossuets, another respectable Burgundian family which later acquired great fame.[17]

Jacques was probably born in the 1560s.[18] He may have been trained in finance and trade as a youth, but he also learned something of the profession of arms, which was to be his main occupation for more than twenty years. He spoke, read, and wrote French and German fluently and may also have studied some Latin. His awareness of classical literature, the Bible, and the ideas of such giants of the French Renaissance as Montaigne and Jean Bodin suggests that he was a fairly well educated man.[19] The several positions of authority and trust which he held during his life also testify to his intelligence, initiative, and leadership.

Although Russian and Soviet historians have always assumed that Margeret was a Catholic, he was in fact almost certainly a Huguenot, and this undoubtedly influenced his interpretation of Russia.[20] In the later stages of the French Wars of Religion, Margeret and his family fought valiantly for the Protestant King Henri IV. The Catholic League sought revenge against the Margerets by arresting some members of the family and by confiscating Chrétien Margeret's house in Dijon.[21] For his part, Chrétien became deeply involved in successful efforts to obtain loans from the Swiss to support Henri's military operations.[22] In the meantime, royalist headquarters in Burgundy were set up in the strategically located town of Saint-Jean-de-Losne. One of the fifty men of arms chosen to form the mainstay of the town's defense was Jacques Margeret.[23] Despite repeated efforts to capture the town, the heroic defense by the royalists proved to be too difficult for the Catholic League to overcome. Jacques fought for the king elsewhere in Burgundy, and Chrétien Margeret continued to receive more and more responsibility from the king. For example, he was given authority to collect the salt tax (*gabelle*) over a wide area of the country, a task he performed successfully.[24]

When Henri converted to Catholicism in 1593, resistance to royal authority began to break down. The king's troops invaded

Burgundy in May 1595, and by July royalist officials were back in control in Dijon. There Chrétien Margeret resumed his official position which he retained until his death in 1617. By the end of 1595 the king was in control of most of France, and Jacques Margeret, finding no more use for his military skills in Henri's service, set out for employment abroad. It is important to remember that foreign military service was considered an honorable profession in the sixteenth century. In this Margeret fits a common pattern, and his story provides a good example of the transition from the condottiere of the sixteenth century to the leader of mercenary forces in the period of the Thirty Years' War.[25] Along with many French soldiers, Margeret joined the crusade against the Ottoman Turks then being waged in southeastern Europe.[26] He served first Prince Sigismund Bathory of Transylvania (r. 1581-1601) and then the Holy Roman Emperor Rudolph II (r. 1576-1612) in Hungary.[27] Next, Margeret appeared in Poland, where he was given command of a company of foot soldiers. The king of Poland at this time was Sigismund III Vasa (r. 1587-1632), a fanatic Catholic who was more interested in trying to regain the Swedish throne than in fighting the Turks. When Sigismund launched his unsuccessful invasion of Lutheran Sweden in 1598, Margeret was understandably not interested in participating. He soon left Poland for Germany— possibly even returning to Austrian territory, but apparently without reentering imperial service.[28]

In June 1599 the Russian ambassador Afanasii Vlas'ev was sent by Tsar Boris Godunov on an important mission to Emperor Rudolph. Vlas'ev was also on the lookout for talented foreigners who might serve the tsar. Somewhere en route to Prague, probably in one of the German or Czech towns through which he traveled, Vlas'ev met Margeret and persuaded him to enter Russian service. Margeret accompanied Vlas'ev to Moscow in 1600, and there he was well received by Boris.[29] Margeret's military experience,

linguistic ability, and lively intelligence were quickly recognized by the Russians. He received command of a cavalry company, a *pomest'e* land grant of 700 *chetverti* (nearly a thousand acres), and an annual salary of eighty rubles.[30] Margeret served Boris with zeal for several years, rising to share overall command of the tsar's foreign troops, which numbered several thousand.[31] During this time Margeret learned to speak and to read Russian.[32]

While in Boris's service Margeret had the opportunity to observe many activities at court, in Moscow, and in the field. He was in the tsar's army which was sent to repel the pretender Dmitrii Ivanovich's invasion of Muscovy in 1604-05. Margeret's actions at the battle of Dobrynichi were decisive in the defeat of Dmitrii's forces, for which he received special thanks from Boris.[33] Soon after the death of Boris, however, the tsar's army submitted to the pretender Dmitrii. To their credit, the foreign mercenaries resisted this temptation and remained loyal to Boris's son Fedor. But when the Godunov government was overthrown and the citizens of Moscow also submitted to the pretender, the foreign mercenaries had little choice but to join the Russians in recognizing Dmitrii as tsar. Along with most of his companions, Margeret entered Dmitrii's service, retaining his position of leadership.[34] Perhaps in part because Dmitrii's career reminded him of King Henri's, Margeret was quite willing to serve the new tsar well. Dmitrii was very impressed with the French captain, and in January 1606 Margeret became the commander of the tsar's new elite palace guard. He enjoyed many privileges and the complete confidence of Dmitrii. Contemporaries of Margeret who were in Russia at this time had great respect for him as an intelligent, sober, and valiant soldier.[35] He may even have made some contribution to military reform in Muscovy.[36]

When Dmitrii was assassinated in May 1606, Margeret was sick and not on duty. This probably saved his life and may even

have been a factor in the conspirators' decision to strike when they did.[37] The new tsar, Vasilii Shuiskii, asked the Frenchman to stay on in Russian service, which he did. Shuiskii's request was, of course, virtually a command; but the miserable plight of those foreign troops Shuiskii did dismiss at this time may also have influenced Margeret's decision to remain in Muscovy somewhat longer.[38] He actually detested Shuiskii, however, and took the first available opportunity to leave Russian service in good standing. By mid-summer he managed to secure the tsar's reluctant permission to return to France. Shuiskii gave him rich presents in recognition of his long and faithful service to Muscovy. Margeret left for France from Arkhangel'sk in September 1606. It has been claimed that he "abandoned" Russian service in 1606 because he saw the whole country rising in mutiny against the boiar-tsar Shuiskii.[39] This is simply not true. Margeret received permission to leave Muscovy at a time when Shuiskii was still confident that his forces could easily overcome any rebellion, and he actually departed from Arkhangel'sk before news of the scope of Bolotnikov's rebellion reached him.[40]

Once Margeret returned to France he immediately presented himself to his former master Henri IV. The king listened with pleasure to his stories about Russia and ordered him to write an account of that mysterious land for publication. Margeret completed work on his book during the winter of 1606–07 and then returned home.[41]

In the years following Tsar Dmitrii's death, rumors persisted throughout Europe that he had somehow miraculously escaped assassination in 1606. Margeret was undoubtedly interested in these rumors, which he had first heard in Moscow in the days immediately following Dmitrii's assassination.[42] Never completely convinced of Dmitrii's death (because he had not been an eyewitness), Margeret decided to return to Russia to find out for himself if the rumors were true. By 1609 he appeared at Tushino, the camp of a man who claimed to be Dmitrii. Margeret quickly

discovered, however, that the second pretender was a complete fraud—merely a convenient tool of the forces which had gathered in opposition to Vasilii Shuiskii. Real power at Tushino rested in the hands of several Polish-Lithuanian lords and a few Muscovite dignitaries Margeret knew personally, including the boiar Mikhail Saltykov and Filaret Romanov. With no illusions about the identity of the second pretender, Margeret remained in Tushinite service. No doubt he was a welcome addition, as much for the propaganda value of having the captain of Dmitrii's palace guard in camp as for his military skills. Margeret probably received generous land grants from the second Dmitrii Ivanovich.[43]

When the second pretender's camp broke up at the end of 1609, Margeret and the Tushinite dignitaries were faced with the unenviable choice of either submitting to the hated Tsar Shuiskii or entering into negotiations with King Sigismund III of Poland, whose forces were then invading Muscovy. Not surprisingly, the Tushinites chose to negotiate with the Poles and offered to support Sigismund's son Władysław as tsar once Shuiskii was overthrown.[44] This pleased Sigismund very much. He treated the Tushinite dignitaries as honored allies and promised them that, as tsar, Władysław would protect the Russian Orthodox church. Sigismund even planned to use the Tushinites as a directing staff for Muscovite affairs. Although Margeret has been criticized by some writers for joining Polish service at this point, in truth there were very few options open to him. He soon distinguished himself at the decisive battle of Klushino (June 1610) and on the subsequent march on Moscow.[45] Vasilii Shuiskii was at this point hastily overthrown by the Romanovs and other Russian lords, who joined the Tushinites in pledging support for Władysław if that prince was willing to convert to Orthodoxy. Once the Polish commander agreed to this, the gates of Moscow were opened to the Polish army. Margeret remained in Moscow for about a year, serving as one

of the commanders (as well as paymaster) of an elite group of mercenaries in the occupation force. During this period he worked closely with Saltykov and the pro-Władysław government.[46]

By the winter of 1610–11, many disparate groups gathered to oppose the pro-Władysław government; and by March 1611 the Poles in Moscow found themselves besieged by a native Russian army headed by Prince D. M. Pozharskii. Accounts of that confrontation vary widely, but there is no doubt that it was Captain Margeret's own personal bravery, cunning, and daring assaults on the Russian positions which saved the day for the disheartened and greatly outnumbered Poles. Prince Pozharskii was seriously wounded in the battle, and the Russian army was forced to retreat.[47] The Poles then burned the outskirts of Moscow, retired to the inner city, and held what was left of the capital for another year. Charges that Margeret was personally responsible for the burning of Moscow appear to be groundless.[48]

By summer 1611 Margeret became aware that Sigismund had no intention of allowing his son Władysław to become the Orthodox tsar of Russia, that instead the Catholic king planned to rule Muscovy himself. While Margeret could support Władysław as an Orthodox tsar, there can be little doubt that as a Huguenot he opposed the plan of the "Jesuit King" to subjugate Muscovy for the Counter-Reformation. Joining the next embassy headed for Poland, Margeret left Moscow in the fall of 1611, never to return. Charges that he once again "abandoned" Moscow, perceiving the hopelessness of the Polish position there, are completely false. Margeret's correspondence in this period makes it quite clear that he actually feared the Catholic Poles would prevail in Russia.[49] Another serious charge leveled against Margeret at this time was that he plundered the Kremlin treasury before his departure. This is a gross exaggeration. Although Margeret received a very high salary while in the service of the pro-Władysław government, he did not plunder the Kremlin treasury.[50]

Back in Poland, Margeret was warmly received by Sigismund, who offered him a place on the Polish royal council. There, plans for the complete conquest of Muscovy were being discussed.[51] Margeret had very different plans, however, and departed from Poland for Germany as soon as he was able to do so. In January 1612 he wrote from Hamburg to John Merrick, chief agent of the English Muscovy Company, expressing concern that the Russians would probably be overwhelmed by Sigismund's planned offensive that year unless they could obtain foreign troops to help them.[52] By this time Margeret was already deeply involved in efforts to raise troops in Germany for Russian service. Along with several others, he wrote to the insurgent Russian government of Prince Pozharskii requesting permission to serve against the Poles.[53] Pozharskii's negative reply, however, made it clear that Margeret was not trusted. According to Pozharskii, Margeret was undoubtedly still in Sigismund's service and planned some further treachery against Russia. Pozharskii immediately ordered the reinforcement of Arkhangel'sk in order to stop Margeret from reentering Russia or from seizing that vital port.[54] Pozharskii was wrong about Margeret's intentions, but who could blame him? While some historians have criticized Pozharskii for not employing the talented Frenchman, Margeret really did appear too compromised by this time. Pozharskii, and the Romanov government after him, continued to fear Margeret for many months. Arkhangel'sk was again put on the alert in 1613, and a search was made for phantom spies Margeret had supposedly sent to North Russia. Scathing denunciations of this "enemy of Russia" were also sent to the French and English governments.[55]

Despite the fears of the Muscovite government, Margeret never did plan to seize Arkhangel'sk. He was not acting as a double agent for the Polish government, as some writers have claimed, but was probably sincerely interested in aiding Muscovy.[56] Denied reentry

into Russian service, Margeret eventually settled in Germany. By 1619 he was a close confidant and financial consultant of the Calvinist Lithuanian Prince Janusz VI Radziwiłł and the margraves of Brandenburg. He was also by then acting as an agent of the French government, keeping it informed about military affairs in Eastern Europe.[57] Details of Captain Margeret's death have been lost, but it is known that his family continued its rise in French service.[58] Jacques' great-nephew, Pierre Margeret, eventually became *grand audiencier* of France, sat on the royal council of Louis XIV, and (as the seigneur de Pontault) obtained permanent noble status for the family. Pierre's eldest son served his country for nearly forty years as a cavalry officer and rose to the rank of brigadier-general by 1719.[59] Another member of the family who was ennobled in the mid-seventeenth century, Sébastien de Pontault, became a famous military engineer in the service of Louis XIV and is generally regarded as the first French military topographer.[60]

When Margeret's *Estat de l'Empire de Russie* appeared in 1607, Muscovy was still, to most French people, just as much an exotic *terra incognita* as the New World. But interest in that strange country was growing.[61] During the sixteenth century, accounts of voyages of discovery and histories of faraway lands enjoyed great popularity in France, especially when those works were written in French. In fact, the European discovery of new lands had stimulated an impressive quantity of French literature. Before 1610 more than five hundred fifty works in French were published on Asia, Africa, and America. The reading public delighted in detailed descriptions of faraway countries, their monarchies, courts, administrations, societies, customs, religions, military strength, and treasures. While at first these accounts merely attempted to convey a more or less accurate picture of newly discovered kingdoms and empires, gradually French writers began comparing some

"barbarous" and exotic countries with those of "civilized" Europe. They did not hesitate to praise the "barbarians" for their effective government, valor, virtue, and fortitude when it seemed appropriate.[62] These later works are noteworthy for their increasing realism and their accurate, detailed study of such key issues as religious tolerance and political organization. By the late sixteenth century the accumulation of a relatively large body of knowledge about far-off countries led many thoughtful French writers to reexamine some of the values and directions of European civilization. In fact, twentieth-century scholarship on the French Enlightenment has rather convincingly traced the origins of *l'esprit philosophique* or rationalism back to the sixteenth century and the influence of travel literature on French Renaissance writers. Exposure to the unity as well as the diversity of human societies encouraged the growth of a sense of cultural relativism, religious tolerance and a critical spirit.[63] Montaigne (1533–92) and Jean Bodin (1530–96) were deeply influenced by travel literature, and they in turn influenced the writing of many later French accounts of foreign lands, including that of Captain Margeret.

Rabelais (1494–1553) had urged the French to travel to new lands, but it was Montaigne who really popularized travel and the study of other societies as an effective means to broaden one's knowledge. By studying travel and geographical literature, he discovered to his satisfaction the essential unity of mankind, long hidden by superficial and exaggerated differences as well as by the ignorance of self-centered cultures unwilling to look beyond themselves.[64] Montaigne's works and ideas were very influential during the reign of Henri IV, and it is not surprising to find echoes of Montaigne in Captain Margeret's book. Margeret undoubtedly had Montaigne in mind when he proposed using the example of Muscovy to help broaden the knowledge of Frenchmen.[65]

One of the greatest political theorists of the French Renaissance was Jean Bodin, whose writings helped to lay the intellectual foundation of French absolutism. It is often forgotten that "absolutism" as a political theory came rather late to France. The idea of a "limited monarchy" was probably the dominant theory until the second half of the sixteenth century; and during the French Wars of Religion questions about absolute monarchy and the legitimate power of royal government were fiercely debated in France and elsewhere—some seeing absolute monarchy as the only solution, others calling it "tyranny." In his writings Bodin did much to enhance the reputation of royal absolutism. Before formulating his political theories, he informed himself about all ancient and modern governments and thus was familiar with the abundant travel literature of the day.[66] His popular and influential works were certainly known to Margeret, whose portrayal of Muscovite absolutism echoes Bodin's ideas.[67]

In analyzing the surge of geographical and historical literature which appeared during Henri IV's reign, one quickly discovers that the French were then primarily looking east. It is often forgotten, in light of later French colonial efforts in Canada, that at the beginning of the seventeenth century they were most interested in Turkey and East Asia—during the period 1598–1609 twice as many French works on Turkey were published as on the New World (works on East Asia and Tartary also outnumbered those on America).[68] Despite religious differences, the Turks were much admired in sixteenth-century France for their honesty, sobriety, discipline, religious tolerance, and effective government.[69] The desire to read about and learn from the Turks, which had long been strong in France, increased dramatically during the Hungarian War (1593–1606). Many Frenchmen served in that war, and many more wished to understand the strengths and weaknesses of the Ottoman Empire. Some books on Turkey were phenomenally