

Kuranty and Cross-Cultural Communication

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Review of: *Daniel C. Waugh and Ingrid Maier, Cross-Cultural Communication in Early Modern Russia: Foreign News in Context*. Seattle, WA, and Uppsala: ResearchWorks of University of Washington Libraries, 2023. 893 p. (Open Access). <https://doi.org/10.6069/XCSQ-BF71>.

Cross-Cultural Communication in Early Modern Russia is the latest – and largest – work by two major scholars of news in Muscovy. As Daniel C. Waugh explains in his lengthy introduction on the writing of this open access e-book, this work builds on topics he has tackled over the past half century. Waugh brings to the volume his expertise on the context of exchange of information between Western Europe and Russia in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; his frequent collaborator, Ingrid Maier, brings her always meticulous historical linguistic work. Together they examine the *Kuranty*, translations of Western European newspapers produced for the Russian court, and how they sat in a broader context of Muscovite desire for foreign news principally driven by governmental concerns.

The book consists of twenty-two chapters divided into six sections accompanied throughout by black and white and full color illustrations, primarily examples of the Western European and Russian documents under discussion. To say this is an expansive work would be an understatement: the first section, “Preliminaries,” takes up nearly one hundred pages alone. That section introduces us to the *Kuranty* documents, and to the intertwined histories of news and post in early modern Western Europe that fed into the development of this Russian document tradition. Section two, “The News in The Record of Moscow’s Diplomacy,” gives an extensive account of information gathering as a key diplomatic task. Here, as elsewhere, the stars of the show are documents, with a close focus on two kinds of diplomatic documents – the *otpiski*, reports prepared by diplomats during their mission, and the *stateinye spiski*, the final reports of such missions – and how they reveal the information gathering priorities of the Moscow court. Section three, “Translators and Translation in Early Modern Russia,” looks at the resources available in early modern Russia to translate Western newspapers and similar documents, arguing for a respectable range of translators, European languages covered, and quality of translation.

Section four, “The *Kuranty* in Context,” shifts gear, using a more chronological and case-study-based approach. Waugh and Maier select major geopolitical issues from the seventeenth century, including conflicts in which Russia had a direct stake, like the Khmelnytsky Uprising, and events in which they had a more indirect concern, like the Thirty Years’ War. They draw the conclusion that the Russians were happy to receive hasty early reports, but those led them into poor decision making when the information proved inaccurate. Section five, “The Era of The Foreign Post,” picks up chronologically where the previous section leaves off, with the creation of the Russian International Post system in 1665, a development the authors see as directly linked to the government’s desire for a greater volume, as well as faster and more accurate, information. The final section, “Readership and The News,” considers whether the circulation of the *Kuranty* was really as limited to the upper echelons of the court as often supposed.

Cross-Cultural Communication then sets itself the mammoth task of placing the *Kuranty* within domestic and pan-European developments relating to geopolitical events, news and information exchange, translation, and the value of news to governmental decision-making. Given both its coverage and its length, the numerous subsections are very helpful in guiding the reader to whichever aspects of the work they find most interesting. In that sense the work may appeal more as a collection to dip into than a work to be read cover-to-digital-cover. Indeed, leaving aside the "Preliminaries" section, each chapter does emphasize its own aspect of Waugh and Maier's overall point – despite the *Kuranty* being produced on the basis of Western European texts, they were a Muscovite phenomenon, created and adapted according to the needs of the Moscow court, rather than an unthinking reproduction of Western trends.

However, despite its huge length, this work does have some odd lacunae. In section 3, Waugh and Maier argue that translations in early seventeenth-century Russia were of better quality than has sometimes been supposed. Maier has long been rightfully lauded for her painstaking historical linguistic analysis, and this volume is no exception to that, but the historiographical work in this section leaves something to be desired. Waugh and Maier review the substantial literature on translation in early modern Russia beyond the *Kuranty*, and yet they make surprising omissions here. They are particularly interested in the translation work of the Diplomatic Chancery and yet do not use the work of Maier's student Christine Watson, *Tradition and Translation: Maciej Strykowski's Polish Chronicle in Seventeenth-century Russian Manuscripts*, which specifically deals with Diplomatic Chancery translation work.¹ Waugh and Maier's argument about the quality of early seventeenth-century translation work also relates to the Slavic Greek Latin Academy, established in 1682. This institution trained students in a range of subjects, including translation, and has been seen as a turning point in the history of Muscovite translation, both improving the overall quality of the translations, and professionalizing the official translator corp. Given the availability of works on the Academy, such as Nikolaos Chrissidis' *An Academy at The Court of The Tsars*,² and the relevance of the Academy for a discussion of Muscovite translation history, it is odd that Waugh and Maier did not find space for consideration of this important institution. For such a long and in some ways very detailed book, the absence of works like those of Watson and Chrissidis seems strange.

Cross-Cultural Communication, as a collection of work by two of the major scholars of the *Kuranty*, is certainly something that will be picked up by specialists in early modern Russia. The sections on information gathering as a key diplomatic duty, and on the use of *Kuranty* and other foreign sources of information in shaping governmental decisions are welcome contributions on subjects that have previously not received this level of attention. However, the overwhelming size of the volume and the notable lacunae in the literature on the history of translation make this a slightly troubling volume. The text is best approached as a series of interconnected essays, some more successful than others, but nevertheless a useful collection for those interested in the Moscow court's information gathering activities.

¹ Christine Watson, *Tradition and Translation: Maciej Strykowski's Polish Chronicle in Seventeenth-Century Russian Manuscripts* (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 2012).

² Nikolaos A. Chrissidis, *An Academy at the Court of the Tsars: Greek Scholars and Jesuit Education in Early Modern Russia* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2016).