

# English Trade and Adventure to Russia in the Early Modern Era: the Muscovy Company, 1603-1649 (Empires and Entanglements in the Early Modern World)

Maria Salomon Arel, 2019

Publisher: Lexington Books

Pages: 362

Language: English

## Shahid Hussain, University College London

Anglo-Dutch rivalry in the Early Modern Period has received significant scholarly attention, with numerous academics discussing the growing commercial rivalry that eventually culminated in a series of Anglo-Dutch wars in the second half of the seventeenth century. Scholars such as Douglas Irwin, writing in the early 1990s, focused on the growing tensions between the British East India and Dutch East India companies in the subcontinent and South-East Asia, whilst the competition between the two in the Levant and Ottoman Empire has also been well covered by historians including Alastair Hamilton, Alexander Groot and Maurits van den Boogert. In her latest work, *English Trade and Adventure to Russia in the Early Modern Era*, Maria Salomon Arel masterfully shifts the theatre of the rivalry to Russia. Her focus on Muscovy as a centre of Anglo-Dutch tension is refreshing, particularly given merchants involved in the Muscovy Company were also active members of other trading companies, including the Levant and East India companies.

The book is split into seven chapters. Arel starts with a background of English trade to Russia in the sixteenth century, before moving onto trade and Anglo-Dutch competition in early seventeenth century Muscovy. In the second half of her work, the author examines how English and foreign merchants settled complex legal disputes in Muscovy, including how they dealt with the heavy handedness of tax-collectors, before concluding with an analysis of the events leading up to the gradual decline of the company in the second half of the seventeenth century.

Perhaps one of Arel's main accomplishments is to challenge standard narratives of English trade to Muscovy. The traditional view argues English trade to Russia in the later part of the sixteenth century and early seventeenth century was in decline, whilst Dutch exports to Archangel were increasing. This view has been roundly accepted by a number of prominent academics in the field of Anglo-Russian studies, including Inna Lubimenko. Arel draws attention to anti-Dutch pamphlets circulating in England, which argued that the Dutch were sending ten times as many ships to Muscovy as the English; this would appear to substantiate

such claims. However, by comparing this statement to hard shipping data found in the London Port Books, Archangel customs extracts and Amsterdam notarial records, the author is able to comprehensively refute this claim. In fact, it seems the number of ships sent by each nation in the first decades of the seventeenth century were very similar. Whilst the Dutch did obtain a steady increase over the English in the 1630s, this certainly was not 'ten times' as much, as has been originally claimed.

Another strength of the book is its sophisticated analysis of Anglo-Dutch relations. Whilst several chapters are dedicated to the commercial rivalry, instances of co-operation between the two, often missing from the academic record, are highlighted. One pertinent example is the caviar trade, which was originally controlled by the English, but later opened up to Dutch merchants. In high value, long-distance trading ventures, Arel is able to demonstrate that co-operation was not just prudent, but sometimes essential.

Arel's arguments are based on a wide range of archival materials and sources. Previous works on the Muscovy Company, particularly those written in the early twentieth century, have focused exclusively on English sources. However, the author's ability to combine the use of port records from both English, Russian and Dutch archives, as well as company records from the East India Company (whose members were also involved in the Muscovy trade) enables her to challenge misconceptions and provide a well-rounded view of Anglo-Muscovite trade and the developing Dutch rivalry. This is particularly impressive given most of the records of the early Muscovy company were destroyed by fire in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Despite this, there are a few minor areas in which the work could be improved.

The author focuses on English merchants who traded with Russia, however, many merchants also had a dual role as diplomats and messengers to the Tsar's court, and it would have been interesting to draw attention to their activities and 'adventures.' Whilst Arel does mention Sir John Merrick, one of the most important figures in seventeenth-century Anglo-Russian relations, individuals such as Sir Thomas Smythe and Dudley Digges, who acted as diplomats to the court of successive Russian Tsars and who were heavily involved in the Muscovy trade, are not mentioned. In fact, Digges later served as an ambassador to the Low Countries and was an investor in the Muscovy Company. A study of his networks and connections may have shed further light on merchant activity and Anglo-Dutch rivalry in Russia.

Overall, Maria Salomon Arel's book is a refreshing change from standard narratives of Anglo-Dutch tension. By using a wide range of archival sources previously neglected by historians, including shipping data and notarial records, she is able to successfully demonstrate that Russia was an important theatre for trading and mercantile rivalry.