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[Review of] Enterprising Empires: Russia and Britain in Eighteenth-Century Eurasia, written by Matthew P. Romaniello

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Matthew P. Romaniello, *Enterprising Empires: Russia and Britain in Eighteenth-Century Eurasia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019, 304 pp. ISBN 9781108628600. \$99.99.

Matthew Romaniello's *Enterprising Empires* presents a rich and compelling narrative of British and Russian commercial and diplomatic interactions over the course of the long eighteenth century. Approaching the subject from the perspective of global economic history, Romaniello argues that the ebb and flow of this relationship was directly molded by, and responded to, the broader shifts and patterns of the early modern world of commerce. Eighteenth-century Russia was just as entangled in international trade and the creation of its enterprising empire as Britain. Within this context, the traditional claim that the Russian economy was "backward," while that of its European trading partners was thriving, becomes an obvious misconception. The Russia of Romaniello's narrative has a vibrant and prosperous economy, though not without deficits, fueled by its expansionist and protectionist trading policies and a growing commercial network stretching from Riga to Arkhangelsk, and Kiakhta to Rasht. Trading relations with Japan and the South Pacific remained unattained but not for lack of effort and ambition.

In the Anglo-Russian trade, it was Russia rather than Britain that held the upper hand. While the British navy relied on the continuity of Russian imports of hemp, flax, tar, and iron (the increasing involvement of government ministers within the affairs of the English Russia Company supports this notion), the Russians faced no similar predicament. Wool could be procured from the Dutch; tobacco was banned, and colonial products could be sourced directly from the Americans. Unsurprisingly, the ratification of Anglo-Russian commercial treaties often took fifteen to twenty years, but revocation took less than five. If we are to subscribe to Romaniello's portrayal of the Russian Empire as the juggernaut of commercial enterprise (and the persuasive tone of the book accomplishes that), Russian economic stagnation in the nineteenth century is startling. Romaniello attributes the decline to the Russian inability to conform to changing economic conditions. Industrialization rendered flax and hemp unprofitable, transit trade was in decline. The golden age of Russian commerce was naturally over.

Parallel narrative features prominently within each chapter to offer a contextualized discussion of Anglo-Russian relations that elucidates the political and economic concerns of each nation. The study weaves between the examination of British concerns, Russian commercial developments, and the impact of geopolitical events (like the American Revolution), peppered with amusing anecdotes of English misbehavior and diplomatic scandal. The arrest of the

Russian ambassador for debt by the British in 1708 discussed in Chapter Two presents a bemusing example. The resulting narrative encourages the reader to go beyond associating Anglo-Russian relations only with the activities of the Russia Company and instead explore the interconnection of Russian, British, Eurasian, and colonial commerce and commodities. Chapter Two (and to an extent Chapter One) is concerned with the tobacco trade. From the British perspective, the colonial tobacco crisis caused the search for new markets, propelled a successful takeover of the Russia Company by the Eastland merchants, and established a diplomatic dialogue between Britain and Russia for the procurement of a tobacco contract and a commercial treaty. Tobacco played no less significant a role in Russia, where its cultivation developed in Ukraine, and the establishment of Russo-Chinese trade secured a direct supply of the product to Siberia.

Similarly, English wool and Iranian silk underpin the analysis of Chapters Three and Four, which focus on the background and the negotiations of the Anglo-Russian commercial treaties of 1734 and 1766, though tobacco makes a brief resurgence in Chapters Four and Five. The subject of Chapter Five is of notable mention as it moves beyond the Eurasian framework suggested by the book's title. It explores Russian commercial interaction with America during the continental system. The discussion addresses Russia's first joint-stock company (Russian American Company) and maps its futile efforts to establish and consolidate its presence in the Pacific. Collectively, the chapters present a plethora of insight and inspire thought-provoking discussions, though readers less familiar with the subject might find themselves, from time to time, overwhelmed with the abundance of presented material and interwoven narratives.

The strength of Romaniello's approach lies in the discussion of the individual experiences of (predominantly) British merchants, diplomats, and servitors. As he rightfully notes, individuals shaped historical situations with their opinions and perceptions, a point best exemplified by the careers of John Elton and Peter Dobell. The repercussions of their actions continued to reverberate even after their respective deaths. At the same time, men like John Bell and Samuel Bentham demonstrate the possibility of being entangled with both British and Russian governments. The men gathered vital commercial information for Britain while serving the Russian sovereign. Romaniello observes that individuals cared more about securing potential benefits for themselves and their families than any empire or company for which they worked. Notably, women might not have had access to formal channels of information-gathering, but as illustrated by Katherine Harris and Jane Rondeau, their contributions were no less significant. If early modern globalization is to be viewed not as an abstract

result of cross-cultural exchange of commodities but an ongoing process of transformation within the daily lives of people, then the examination of the experiences and responses of contemporary individuals can only benefit our understanding.

Confronting the outdated assumptions of the traditional narrative, Romaniello portrays a Russian Empire in control of its economy and at the apex of its commercial prosperity. The British, despite the petitions of the Russia Company merchants bemoaning their conditions and prophesizing impending economic doom, retained their role as Russia's principal trading partners in both volume and value. Individual merchants continued to prosper, though success was often best enjoyed in silence.

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