

ИСТОРИОГРАФИЯ, ИСТОЧНИКОВЕДЕНИЕ, МЕТОДЫ ИСТОРИЧЕСКОГО ИССЛЕДОВАНИЯ

Т. Плат

Плат Тильман, доктор исторических наук, доцент, Институт истории, Санкт-Петербургский государственный университет, Privatdozent, Universität Greifswald.

E-mail: tilmanplath@yahoo.de

ИМПЕРИЯ НА ПЕРИФЕРИИ? РАЗНЫЕ ВЗГЛЯДЫ НА МЕСТО РОССИИ В МИРОВОЙ ТОРГОВЛЕ В XVIII ВЕКЕ

Русская внешняя торговля XVIII в. представляет собой явление большой неоднозначности, так как, с одной стороны, показатели вывоза сырья постоянно возрастали и торговое сальдо обогащало государственный бюджет, а с другой - засилье иностранных купцов, торговлю русскими товарами в международных водах не могли заменить русские купцы. В то время как иерархические интерпретации этого феномена в последнее время стали непопулярными для объяснения этого вопроса, в данной статье делается ссылка на почти забытую теорию миросистем Иммануила Валлерстайна, чтобы помочь понять конкретное положение России как полупериферии в XVIII веке. Сочетая это со ссылками на российскую экономическую мысль, в статье утверждается, что Россия приняла правильные экономические принципы (политическую экономию Адама Смита) в неподходящее время и тем самым укрепила иерархическую констелляцию в отношении западного бизнеса.

Ключевые слова: русская внешняя торговля XVIII века, миросистемная теория, русская экономическая мысль, Россия и Европа в XVIII веке, колонизация.

T. Plath

Plath Tilman, Doctor of Historical Sciences, Docent, Institute of History, St. Petersburg State University, St. Petersburg, Russian Federation, Privatdozent Universität Greifswald.

E-mail: tilmanplath@yahoo.de

EMPIRE AT THE PERIPHERY? CONFLICTING INTERPRETATIONS CONCERNING THE PLACE OF RUSSIA IN WORLD TRADE DURING THE 18th CENTURY

Russian foreign trade of the 18th century is a phenomenon of great ambiguity, since on the one hand export figures of raw materials were in a constant rise and a trade surplus was enriching the state budget, but on the other hand the dominance of foreign merchants, trading with Russian goods in international waters couldn't be replaced by Russian merchants. While hierarchical interpretations of this phenomenon had recently become unpopular to explain the matter, the paper at hand refers to the almost forgotten World system theory of Immanuel Wallerstein to help to understand the specific situation of Russia as a semi periphery during the 18th Century. Combining it with references to Russian economic thought the paper argues, that Russia adopted the right economic principles (political economy by Adam Smith) at the wrong time and by doing so reinforcing the hierarchical constellation with regard to western business.

Keywords: Russian foreign trade of the 18th Century, World System Theory, Russian Economic Thought, Russia and Europe during the 18th Century, Colonization.

Introduction:

“The eighteenth century was the century of trade!¹”

Karl Marx's remark certainly applies to Russia in the 18th century. The growth rate alone clearly indicates the degree of success that Peter's trading window to Europe has had in the form of his port city of St. Petersburg.

But was Russia's trade policy in the 18th century successful on the whole?

Without a doubt, from the statistics compiled by Storch, it is clear that the goal of increasing state revenues through foreign trade was achieved regardless of inflation and regardless of the prevailing economic doctrine: be it mercantilist, as under Peter I, protectionist, as between 1725 and 1762, or liberal-protectionist, as under Catherine - the result has always been an upward curve of income from customs duties².

But taking into account the mercantilist goal of controlling foreign trade through its own merchants the overall picture is changing. This goal was not consistently achieved, although it was pursued throughout the 18th century. One of the main

¹ Marx K., Engels F. Werke. Die deutsche Ideologie. (Band 3). Berlin, 1969. S. 59.

² Storch H. von. Supplementband zum fünften, sechsten und siebenten Theil des Historisch-statistischen Gemäldes des Russischen Reichs. Leipzig, 1803. S. 3.

reasons for the failure of this line of policy was the social status of Russian merchants, who could not meet their foreign counterparts on an equal footing³. Accordingly, first of all, the position of Russian merchants within Russia and in relation to foreign merchants will be considered, which ultimately leads to the historiographic classification of Russia in world trade.

The position of merchants in Russia:

England was repeatedly mentioned as a model of commercial policy in the theoretical writings of the 18th century. First of all, the authors agreed that the English merchants succeeded in asserting political influence in the interests of national trade. Nothing like this has happened in Russia⁴. Although Peter treated the merchants with some sympathy and some measures were taken to accommodate their interests, he died quite soon after the end of the Great Northern War, so that free trade only began to develop during his reign. On the other hand, Peter too much relied on his immediate political circle, that is, the high nobility and the few social careerists, such as Menshikov and Shafirov, who also got rich from trade and acted as competitors to the merchants. In total there was no broad and systematic support of the Russian merchants under him, as the Russian merchant Ivan Pososhkov could critically report⁵.

Things were no better in the post-Petrine period. On the contrary, Soviet studies have already indicated that both under Anna (“the Germans”) and under Elizabeth, the inner circles of the higher nobility in St. Petersburg was enriched in trade, and the Russian merchants could not build a secure existence against this internal competition between nobles and merchants. In particular, contemporaries, including Tatishchev, sharply criticized the method of granting monopolies to the highest nobility in the reign of Elizabeth.

In the social sphere, the Russian historian Petrukhintsev rightly pointed out that Russian trade policy was characterized by a striking paradox: on the one hand, trade was the central theme of the Russian version of mercantilism, but on the other hand, merchants were politically underrepresented and their interests were practically not taken into account in Russian trade policy, since it was the nobility that was closer to political power. This observation applies far beyond the 1730s to the entire century.

³ On the role of Western merchants in Russia in the 18th century, see: *Zacharov V. N. Zapadnoevropejskie kupcy v rossijskom trgovle XVIII veka*. Moskva, 2005.

⁴ *Kagarlickij B. Iu. Periferijnaja imperija. Rossija i mirosistema*. Moskva, 2003. P. 256.

⁵ *Posoškov I. T. Kniga o skudosti i bogatstve. i drugie sočinenija* / I. T. Posoškov. Red. i komentarii B. B. Kafengauza. Moskva, 1951; *Rogačevskaja M. A. Pervyj russkij èkonomist Ivan Tichonovič Posoškov*, in *Eko – vserossijskij èkonomičeskij žurnal*. 2000. P. 116–137.

For even under Catherine the position of Russian merchants did not improve significantly. Urban reforms of 1775 and 1785 brought some legal security, but not the demanded privileges in relation to the nobility and its merchant peasants. Because of her dubious rise to power, Catherine II was too dependent on the leading circles of the nobility to effect fundamental social change.

The Position of merchants in relation to foreign competition:

Without domestic support, the promotion of Russian merchants in comparison with foreign competition and the expectation of them to be more active in international trade had only limited effectiveness. Recurring measures such as tariff concessions, raising the level of education by sending merchant sons abroad or opening schools, setting up an overseas network of trade consuls abroad had little or no chance of success, or were completely lost as the set of reasons for failure was similar to the "Gordian knot" that could not be cut⁶.

This constellation led to the controversial position that Russia was an internationally recognized and feared maritime power, as demonstrated by the first naval battles under Peter I or the armed neutrality under Catherine II, but at the same time could hardly trade with its own ships.

Hierarchical interpretation in historiography:

The issue of the inferiority of Russian merchants compared to foreign competition has led to a hierarchically model of interpretation in historiography in two ways: first, diachronically in the context of the modernization theory as an interpretation of various stages of development, which leads to the concept of potential "backwardness". And secondly, synchronously in a Marxist/post-Marxist context as an interpretation of the unequal dependence of different trading partners, which leads to the context of colonial exploitation and should here be briefly considered in the context of Wallerstein's world-system analysis⁷. Both interpretations can also be found in relation to Russia's foreign trade in the 18th century and the respective historiography.

Diachronic - "backwardness":

⁶ *Kulišer I. M.* Očerok istorii ruskoi torgovli. Peterburg, 1923. P. 224; *Firsov N. N.* Pravitel'stvo i občestvo v ich otnošenijach k vněšnej torgovle Rossii v carstvovanie Imperatricy Ekateriny II. Moskva, 1902. C. 334.

⁷ *Wallerstein I.* The Modern World-System as a Capitalist World-Economy, in Lechner F. J., Boli J. (Hrsg.). The globalization reader. Hoboken, NJ 2019. P. 52–58.

The fact that the history of Russia in the 18th century can be understood in context of the modernization theory⁸ was already recognized by contemporaries and they emphasized the central role of trade, as noted, for example, by the Baltic German scholar Wilhelm Christian Friebe:

"The sequence of stages of culture and education in Russia, of course, can be determined by the course of trade and the money circulation associated with it."⁹

To reach out to Western Europe as a model, Russia still had to climb a few steps. Elsewhere he says in the same vein:

"As for the craftsmen, manufacturers, whom she receives from her people, Russia in general is still, in comparison with foreigners, at a very secondary level of perfection."¹⁰

Echoes of this view can be found among the Westerners of the 19th century, but it is also a frequent theme not least in Western historiography, especially during the Cold War period¹¹.

Synchronous - colonial dependency:

However, the comparison with Western Europe makes it possible to view Russia not only in a diachronic sense as "left behind", but also in a synchronic sense in a hierarchical scheme as dependent on the West¹². This was accepted by contemporaries in the 18th century, as clearly evidenced by the memorandum of the College of Commerce on the position of Russian merchants in comparison with their Western counterparts in 1765:

"Today, Russian merchants are nothing more than classic hired workers, or, better, suppliers of foreign merchants in Russia. After all, having collected Russian goods from all over the country, they bring them to the port, but do not transport them further, but hand them over to foreign merchants on ships."¹³

The "colonial" interpretation of Russia's position was then propagated not least by Marxist scholarship, as Serafim Pokrovsky explains in the introduction to his study of Russian trade policy, where he hints that Western trading companies made an

⁸ For context see: *Dixon S.* The modernisation of Russia, 1676-1825. (New approaches to European history, Bd. 15). Cambridge, New York, 1999. P. 7-27.

⁹ *Friebe W. Ch.* Ueber Rußlands Handel, landwirtschaftliche Kultur, Industrie und Produkte. Die mittleren und nördlichen Provinzen des europäischen Rußlands. (Bd. 2). Gotha [u.a.], 1797. S. 122.

¹⁰ *Friebe W. Ch.* Ueber Rußlands Handel, landwirtschaftliche Kultur, Industrie und Produkte (wie Anm. 9). S. 404.

¹¹ *Hildermeier M.* Geschichte Russlands. Vom Mittelalter bis zur Oktoberrevolution. 3. Aufl. München, 2016. S. 1315-1346.

¹² *Plath T.* Vnutrennjaja ili vnešnjaja kolonizacija? Celi i sredstva torgovoj politiki Rossii v XVIII v., in: *Peterburgskij istoričeskij žurnal.* 2015. P. 5-16.

¹³ *ASPBIIRAN.* Donošenie 1765. F. 36. Op.1. D. 550. Bl. 8.

attempt in the 18th century to turn Russia into a colony like India or America. The result of this attempt was at least the status of a semi-colony for Russia¹⁴.

However, at present, the colonial interpretation of Russia's position in relation to the West is completely out of fashion. The modernization-theoretical approach of “backward” Russia is also practically not found at the present time, which is probably primarily due to the cultural turn and post-colonial studies and the fundamentally Eurocentric self-criticism associated with it, which excludes the interpretation of Russia as a Western colony or a “backward” version of the Western model¹⁵. In post-Soviet Russia itself, on its turn, the Marxist-inspired idea of itself as a “semi-colony” is equally unacceptable against the backdrop of an increasingly patriotic historical science¹⁶.

World Systems Theory - Immanuel Wallerstein:

Nevertheless, it is worth to refer to one of the possible interpretative schemes that offer an explanation for the phenomenon of Russian merchant failure, namely the analysis of world systems developed by Immanuel Wallerstein. According to Wallerstein, the world system consists of a center, a semi-periphery, and a periphery. Outside the world system, there may still be an outside world that is not part of that system¹⁷. Where Russia can be located within this system during the 18th century? In the 18th century, Russia and its inhabitants faced a problem that had repeatedly occupied world trade in other times, namely, the strategic dilemma of an economically weaker region (periphery/semi-periphery) vis-a-vis an economically stronger region (center). How can a weaker region learn and benefit from contact with a stronger region without becoming dependent and stuck in its inferior position from which it can no longer extricate itself?

With the founding of St. Petersburg and the promotion of trade by Peter I in the northwestern port cities of the empire, a connection was established with world trade, and this very question arose before Peter I. How could he make Russia a part of the world system without remaining in a peripheral status?

Hans Heinrich Nolte and Georgy D. Gloveli view Russia in the Wallerstein model as a semi-periphery due to unequal trade and Russia's political structure as an authoritarian state¹⁸.

¹⁴ *Pokrovskij S. A.* Vnešnjaja trgovlja i vnešnjaja trgovaja politika Rossii. Moskva, 1947. P. 4-7.

¹⁵ *Hildermeier*, Geschichte Russlands (wie Anm. 11). S. 1321.

¹⁶ *Weiss-Wendt A.* Putin's Russia and the falsification of history. Reasserting control over the past. London, New York, Oxford, New Delhi, Sydney, 2021.

¹⁷ *Wallerstein*. The Modern World-System as a Capitalist World-Economy (wie Anm. 7).

¹⁸ *Nolte H.-H.* Zur Stellung Osteuropas im System der Frühen Neuzeit. Außenhandel und Sozialgeschichte bei der Bestimmung der Regionen, in *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*.

And it is in this interplay of hierarchically structured trade relations, on the one hand, and a static social order that allows only the country's political elite to share in the profits from trade, on the other, that this approach is possible to explain the failures of the Russian merchant class.

Neither Peter I nor his successors allowed for a social mobilization that would have distributed the profits from trade among wider social groups beyond the nobility and thus created a society capable of competing with the West¹⁹.

Hence the disillusioning conclusion remains that the semi-periphery has little chance of catching up with its position as an economic center, especially since local elites, in cooperation with a stronger economic center, impede social changes in the country itself²⁰. It was more profitable for them to export agricultural products than to achieve long-term internal technical and social modernization.

Only by continuing the protectionist policy initiated by Peter I, and at the same time promoting the merchants and the urban population in the homeland, it was possible to achieve such a social change that would ultimately lead to equal participation in the world system²¹.

Conclusion:

Particularly tragic is the fact that Russia caught up with the development of economic thinking and followed the fashionable ideas of Western Europe by the Physiocrats and Adam Smith, at a time when continuation of protectionist policies would have been more effective²².

As a result, although Russia became part of Europe in terms of intellectual history, which Catherine II aspired to, but at the same time, in terms of trade policy, this increased hierarchical dependence and thus forced Russia to remain a semi-periphery in economic and social terms.

1980. № 28. S. 161–197. *Gloveli G. D.* Merkantilistskaja geokul'tura i "prozel'naja gorjacest": Nasledie Ju. Križaniča i I. Posoškova v kontekste mir-sistemnogo podchoda, in *Istoriko-ekonomičeskie issledovanija*. 2014. № 15. P. 239–269.

¹⁹ *Allisson F.* Russia and Ukraine, in: Vincent Barnett (Hrsg.), *Routledge handbook of the history of global economic thought*. (Routledge Handbooks) Abingdon, Oxon, New York, 2015. P. 105. *Shirokorad L.* Russian Economic thought in the Age of Enlightenment, in Vincent Barnett/Joachim Zweynert (Hrsg.). *Economics in Russia. Studies in intellectual history*. (Modern economic and social history series). Aldershot, England, Burlington, VT 2008. P. 25.

²⁰ *Kagarlickij B. Iu.* Periferijnaja imperija (wie Anm. 4). S. 243.

²¹ *Gloveli G. D.* Merkantilistskaja geokul'tura i "prozel'naja gorjacest": Nasledie Ju. Križaniča i I. Posoškova v kontekste mir-sistemnogo podchoda (wie Anm. 18). S. 255–258.

²² On the connection between protectionism and progress see: *Kaps K., Eder J.* Kann Protektionismus fortschrittlich sein? Eine wirtschaftshistorische Analyse von protektionistischer Theorie und Praxis, in *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*. 2020. № 46. S. 175–208.

Thus, Russia adopted the right economics (the political economy of Adam Smith) at the wrong time.

This has put Russia in a position that is a fundamental problem of the semi-periphery. Here is what economist Eric Reinert advises politicians in poor countries to do:

„If you want to understand the causes of American and European prosperity, study the politics of those who created it, not the advice of their forgetful successors!²³“

Similarly, in early 19th century America, looking at the liberal economic theories of David Ricardo, there was a saying:

„Don't do as the English tell you to do, do as the English did!²⁴“

And in Russia at the beginning of the 18th century, Pososhkov made a strikingly similar recommendation regarding foreigners (Germans):

“The Germans never teach us how to live carefully and not to spend anything in vain, they only detect how they can make profit and not us, and by doing so they drive us more into poverty. ²⁵”

For this reason, the concept of “backwardness” or “catching up” with Western models is also problematic for Russia. Russia could not simply imitate the model because the entry requirements were different due to a different position in the world system. Boris Kagarlitsky writes:

“The more backward the Russian Empire became, the more successfully it integrated into the world system!²⁶“

It was this economic inferiority and structural conditions of the semi-periphery that, despite cultural changes in the northwestern port cities, hindered social progress and at the same time contrasted sharply with Russia's foreign policy power. However, Russia's military resources, including the powerful Russian Baltic Fleet, could not change the situation. On the contrary, numerous wars worsened the budgetary situation and thus, despite the victorious results, had a rather negative effect on Russian trade policy, so in the end we should quote Benedict Scherer, an 18th century scholar, with his perhaps timeless remark:

²³ Reinert E. S. How rich countries got rich ... and why poor countries stay poor. London, 2008. S. XXIX.

²⁴ Reinert E. S. How rich countries got rich ... and why poor countries stay poor (wie Anm. 23). S. 23.

²⁵ Posoškov. Kniga o skudosti i bogatstve (wie Anm. 5). S. 764.

²⁶ Kagarlickij. Periferijnaja imperija (wie Anm. 4). S. 246.

"Russia will never reap the fruits of Peter's efforts, which will bring the balance of trade to her side, she will never become enlightened and prosperous until she gives up the thirst for conquest²⁷".

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²⁷ Scherer J. B. von. Geschichte und gegenwärtiger Zustand des russischen Handels. Aus dem Französischen. In einem Aufzuge mit Anmerkungen und Zusätzen von Karl Hammerdörfer. Leipzig, 1789. S. 49.

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