Exploring Russia in the Elizabethan Commonwealth: The Muscovy Company and Giles Fletcher, the elder

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Author: Felicity Stout
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Reviewer: Tatyana A. Zhukova

Felicity Stout’s monograph Exploring Russia in the Elizabethan Commonwealth incorporates elements of her PhD thesis and is a welcome addition to the discussion of Elizabethan political culture and England’s mercantile interactions with Muscovy in the late 16th century.(1) Exploring the themes of commonwealth, corruption and tyranny, the book draws upon Giles Fletcher’s experiences and writings of Russia to address the multi-generic nature of Fletcher’s Of the Russe Common Wealth (thereafter RCW), and the repercussions of theorising upon tyrannical governments through an image of foreign land to entice parallels with the Elizabethan state. Broadly, the book examines the literary methodology through which individuals, like Fletcher, were able to mediate on contemporary events, political developments and changing forms of governments.

Stout initiates her exploration by offering a succinct overview of the English ‘discovery’ of Russia; the formation of the Muscovy Company and early diplomatic interaction between Elizabeth I and Ivan IV (chapter one). She rightly notes that previous scholarship of travel literature has favoured the discoveries of the ‘new world’, ignoring the less familiar, though as important, discoveries of the North, including Russia. As a result, the research on early modern travel remains disproportionate, and this book contributes towards the emerging less insular trend of this scholarship. Predominantly, the first chapter is concerned with the ‘commonwealth culture’ of the Muscovy Company and the Governors’ anxiety to guard against tyranny and corruption amidst Russian barbarity and religious immorality. Stout’s portrayal of the Company as a
microcosm of the English state in Russia is interesting, especially as similar propositions have not been discussed previously. As Stout points out the Company’s joint-stock trading mirrored the Tudor political concept of the ‘commonwealth’, within which ‘all members of the body politic had a duty to contribute to the public good’ (p. 32). However, maintaining ideals of civility, honour and order within the context of Russian barbarity was difficult. By examining an assortment of archival and printed material relating to the Company’s daily life the chapter offers expedient examples of merchant disobedience and dishonour, from private trade to the colourful figure of Jerome Horsey. As Stout notes, order was necessary for the ‘maintenance of the English (royal) identity to the Russian authorities’ (p. 39). Hence, ungoverned Englishmen abroad posed a serious threat to the honour of the Elizabethan commonwealth. The chapter concludes by stating that the themes of ideal civil commonwealth and disorderly corruption were dominant within the accounts of the Company, and the correspondence of private traders; the themes were likewise present within the experiences and writings of English diplomats.

The second chapter introduces the protagonist of Stout’s book, Giles Fletcher. It examines his humanistic upbringing, his pursuit of vita activa and his diplomatic mission to Russia in 1588–9. By tracing Fletcher’s career, first as a bursar of the King’s College, Cambridge, and then a remembrancer of the city of London, Stout identifies Fletcher’s exposure to religious and humanistic influences which later appear to resonate within the RCW. Amongst these was the Protestant poets’ network and Fletcher’s acquaintance with learned men of business, like William Fleetwood and Robert Beale. The narration of Fletcher’s embassy to Moscow is devoted to the discussion of the surrounding Anglo-Russian diplomatic context and the embassy’s aims and outcomes, especially the potential Spanish and papal threat arising from a proposed Russo-Spanish alliance against the Turks. Whilst the diplomatic narrative builds upon familiar printed material and secondary literature, it is Stout’s use of Fletcher’s two diplomatic reports that are of most interest. The first, ‘The Summe of My Negotiation’ (pp. 78–81) details Fletcher’s own experiences at the Muscovite royal court. It emphasises the ambassador’s presumed ill-treatment and reaffirms Fletcher’s view of Russians as violent and vindictive. The second, ‘Meanes of Decay & Remedies’ (pp. 81–4) addresses the practical means of reducing corruption within the Company and ensuring increased trade and civil behaviour. The novelty of these texts lies in Fletcher’s accusation of the infectious barbarity of the Russians as the cause of the depraved behaviour of English merchants in Moscow. The theme is almost exclusive to Fletcher’s writings (Stout notes that it is not present elsewhere in Muscovy Company literature) and recurs at length in the RCW treatise. Regrettably, the discussion of each text is brief, yet it highlights the potential usefulness of the texts for future research.
The following two chapters (three and four) address Fletcher’s response to and representation of Russia as expressed within *Of the Russe Commonwealth* (1591). The origins of the treatise lay in Fletcher’s ‘true intelligence’ to the Queen and Privy Council, presented upon his return to England. Stout traces the evolution of the text’s composition by looking at three surviving manuscripts of the text prior to its publication in 1591, noting omissions, edits and alternations, and the possible reasoning behind the changes. The resulting picture shows that unlike contemporary travel literature on Russia, Fletcher’s treatise focused less on the gold and the cold, but upon the manipulation and corruption of the Russian commonwealth. Fletcher’s Russians were ‘uncivilised, cruel, drunk and tyrannical’ and their ‘corrupt tyrannical commonwealth was far worse than honest savagery with no government’ (p. 103). Fletcher’s fundamental argument rested upon the assumption of the ‘seemingly unbounded potential of Russia, juxtaposed with its current failure to realise its potential as a supposedly Christian, and therefore civil land’ (p. 121).

Throughout the fourth chapter Stout address Fletcher’s identified types of corruption and offers an interpretation of his arguments. For instance, she attributes Fletcher’s criticism of Oprichnina to the influence of Aristotelian thought, whereby tyranny occurred through a lack of good counsel and an absence of virtuous nobility. Likewise, Russia’s corrupt Christianity served to support the emperor’s tyrannical government ‘through keeping the commons ignorant and prohibiting the movements of ideas’ (p. 137), thereby preventing rebellions. The consequence of such tyranny was the existence of a state in which people lived in servility rather than civility. Fletcher’s levelled criticism of corrupt forms of government and religion that had capacity to be civil but brought only depravity, had, according to Stout, ‘relevance not only as a discussion of Russia’ (p. 140).

The fifth chapter offers parallels between Fletcher’s criticisms found in the RCW and the contemporary English political and economic context of the 1590s. Stout also investigates whether Fletcher’s Russian commonwealth was a veiled critique of the Elizabethan government or a multi-generic text that the readers were able to interpret to suit their own agenda. For instance, the discussion on the Russian succession crisis offered the readers an opportunity to ponder on the one closer to home. Both Elizabeth and Feodor I had no direct heir and whilst Feodor was surrounded by ‘evil counsellors’ in the person of Boris Godunov, a similar critique could be applied to the men surrounding the Queen, notably to Cecil and Essex. Moreover, Fletcher had identified the causes of tyrannical government as a lack of good counsel, an absence of virtuous nobility, an absence of written law or justice, an economic oppression and an imposition of corrupt religion; most of these criticisms could also be applied to Elizabethan England. Ivan’s forced removal of the nobility from state appointments could be linked to Elizabeth’s execution of Norfolk and her refusal to award her nobles with government posts in the last decades. Likewise, Fletcher’s claim that Russia needed to be liberated from its tyranny through a foreign invasion was congruent with the views of dissenting Catholics. Even the attack on the corruption of Russian religion could have been seen as reverberation of puritan surveys of Elizabethan churches. As the chapter argues Fletcher’s text echoed the ‘anxieties and concerns that riddled the political and religious consciences and contexts of late Elizabethan England’ (p. 168), and although such views might not have been held by Fletcher himself, the text could have been accused of aiding dissention. Additionally, the chapter address the wider implications of Fletcher’s text. Stout looks at contemporary English and European polemical literature to explore the models of tyranny present in Elizabethan England and addresses the propositions of such tracts upon methods of resisting tyrannical rule, including the matter of whether a tyrant could be legally or morally deposited for the benefit of the commonwealth. As the chapter concludes, Fletcher’s text ‘widened his remit of counsel from queen and court to the public audience of the commonwealth’ (p. 180), and engaged the ‘public sphere’ of Elizabethan England in a discussion of how to safeguard the English commonwealth from all form of infectious tyranny.

The last chapter examines Fletcher’s later career and seeks to determine whether his literary pursuits might have contributed towards his inability to find stable patronage after his return from Russia. Stout also looks at Fletcher’s later poetry to trace the themes of tyranny and corruption reoccurring in Fletcher’s writings. Following the publication of RCW in 1591, the treatise was suppressed by the Privy Council following complaints by the Muscovy Company that it would potentially damage Anglo-Russian mercantile relations. However, as Stout notes, ‘themes of tyranny, evil counsel, economic and religious oppression, succession
crises and resistance to a tyrant’ (p. 197) were in danger of resonating with the English political situation and the censorship of Fletcher’s work might have had political origins. Further versions of the text incorporated into Richard Hakluyt’s Principall Navigations (1598–1600) were missing 15 chapters, and that incorporated into Samuel Purchas’s Hakluytus Posthumus or Purchas his Pilgrimes (1625) was severely edited. Potentially, a text theorising upon tyrannical government and ‘a consideration of how such government could be confronted or avoided’ (p. 194) was unlikely to receive royal approval. Stout continues the study of Fletcher’s literary career by exploring his collection of sonnets, Licia, or poemes of Love (published anonymously in 1593) and a poem on the tyranny of Richard III. Analysing the language and literary techniques employed by Fletcher within his poetry, Stout demonstrates how such works were appropriated as a vehicle for presenting a veiled critique of ‘an obsequious and tyrannical system’ of Elizabethan patronage (p. 205). She further notes that ‘writing poetry was a distinct political act in the later sixteenth century’ (p. 205). Thus, Fletcher’s Licia bears a resemblance to Elizabeth, whilst the fundamental argument of ‘Richard III’ is Fletcher’s reoccurring theme of the ‘crucial role of the poet as a counsellor’ (p. 213), whose advice the monarch ignored at their own peril. Stout also poses the question whether it was Fletcher’s writings that hindered his career, and although such a notion is attractive, Stout warns the reader to remember the significant depletion of literary patronage in the 1590s. The chapter culminates with Fletcher’s last words, which best summarise his life,

‘My son, had I followed the course of this World, and would either have given, or taken bribes, I might (happily) have made you rich, but now must leave you nothing but your education’ (pp. 218–19).

As a ‘successful diplomat, civil lawyer, Elizabethan man-of-business and humanist poet of advanced Protestant views’ (p. 218), Giles Fletcher presents an intriguing subject matter, whilst Of the Russe Common Wealth remains a key text of Anglo-Russian perceptions and interactions in the late 16th century. Previous scholarship has predominantly analysed the treatise as a source of contemporary English perceptions of foreign places and peoples, or striven to identify the validity of Fletcher’s claims regarding the Muscovite royal court. In contrast, Stout’s monograph invigorates the examination of RWC by combining the discussion of travel literature with that of political culture. The book should also be commended for augmenting material, such as travel accounts and treaties on governments of foreign lands, to literary material traditionally used for exploration of Elizabethan political culture (plays, poetry, etc.). It also encourages the reader to consider the broader implications of Fletcher’s treatise, including the ways in which individuals, like Fletcher, were able to voice their anxieties and fears, offer counsel, and discuss their ideas on the nature and function of a commonwealth in Elizabethan England. Likewise, publications, circulations and suppressions of texts of literary theorising makes us consider the broader political and cultural contexts of the Elizabethan regime, whilst travel narratives and diplomatic reports note that the response of Englishmen to unfamiliar lands and governments was more complex that the concept of the ‘other’ favoured by previous historiography.

Despite its invigorating discussion, succinct methodology and excellent employment of a variety of archival and printed source material there are a few unanswered questions. Although Stout notes the presence of humanistic influence in Fletcher’s work, there is a notable absence of discussion surrounding Fletcher’s acquisition of Russian material. For instance, during his embassy to Moscow, the ambassador spent the majority of his time under house arrest at the merchants’ house (as was the general custom) and was unlikely to gather information first-hand regarding contemporary Russian government, society, religious practices and topography. Thus, how did Fletcher acquire such information? Did Fletcher rely and borrow material from previous travel narratives of Russia (specifically that of Baron Sigismund von Herberstein’s Rerum Moscoviticarum Commentarii (1549)) or gather information from merchants like Jerome Horsey? Likewise, although not a direct critique of Stout’s work, the monograph does serve as a good example of one of the major hindrances in contemporary scholarship on Anglo-Russian relations -- the distinct lack of the juxtaposition of both English and Russian source material. For instance, the book offers only a brief reference to the Russian report of Fletcher’s embassy but does not employ its contents within its discussion
of Fletcher’s visit to Moscow. Hence, this reviewer is left wondering whether the incorporation of Russian material might have enriched our understanding of Fletcher’s experience. For instance, Stout mentions that Fletcher’s diplomatic report is full of wounded pride at his perceived ill-treatment as the Queen’s ambassador (p. 79), yet within the Russian sources Fletcher is listed as the Queen’s envoy rather than an ambassador and thus viewed and treated as a lesser representative. Likewise, the rejection of Fletcher’s gifts stemmed from a difference in cultural etiquette rather than a deliberate political slight. The gifts brought by the ambassador were most likely medals which the Russians mistook for coins. Traditionally, coins were weighted to determine their value and in this instance Feodor is reported to have exclaimed that the weight of the coins was only suitable as a pay to the most lowest-ranked guardsman. Hence, the gift was perceived as a manifestation of Elizabeth’s miserliness and might have further complicated the ongoing Anglo-Russian negotiations.

Overall, this monograph is a useful depiction of the literary pursuits of Giles Fletcher the elder, and will appeal to students and researchers of Elizabethan political culture, literary studies, early modern travel and Anglo-Russian mercantile relations.

Notes

1. Felicity Jane Stout, ‘Giles Fletcher, the elder (1546-1611) and the writing of Russia’ (PhD thesis, University of Sheffield, 2008, supervised by Mike Braddick). Back to (1)

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