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The Emergence of the Eastern Powers, 1756-1775

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The publication of H.M. Scott's *The Rise of the Eastern Powers* marks the culmination of three decades of distinguished scholarship in international history from the Seven Years War to the American Revolution. It is, as we might expect, an elegant and learned book, and its significance is apparent from the outset. Professor Scott practises what many international historians merely preach: his book 'rests upon the conviction that the trajectory of an individual state can only be fully understood in the context of other national foreign policies and the wider evolution of the European system' (pp. 2-3). He has broken away from the proliferation of narrowly-focused monographs on a single state's foreign policy and studies of bilateral relations in favour of a detailed examination of the states system as a whole.

He has chosen a time-frame short enough to permit command of a great array of primary sources, but one which was also vital in the evolution of the system that would dominate European politics until the First World War. Professor Scott demonstrates conclusively that the pentarchy of great powers, which was sanctioned by the Congress of Vienna, had already emerged in the years after the Seven Years' War. The gap between first- and second-rank powers widened, and none would subsequently cross it. France's defeat and Britain's isolation meant that the continent's centre of political gravity shifted eastwards. Habsburg-Hohenzollern rivalry gave Russia the chance to assert itself as Europe's most powerful and aggressive state. Scott argues that the partition of Poland in 1772 and the seizures from the Ottoman Empire in 1774 and 1775

were the most significant territorial changes of the eighteenth century before the French Revolutionary Wars. They even eclipsed (and this point is arguable) Russia's displacement of Sweden as the leading Baltic power during the Great Northern War of 1700-21. By the 1770s the efforts of the western powers to mediate in conflicts involving the eastern powers were being rebuffed, while the eastern powers aspired to mediate between Britain and France. Particularly in connection with the partition of Poland, British and especially French contemporaries noticed and lamented this shift. Those who shaped British foreign policy were however unwilling to co-operate with France in order to resist it. The introduction also features some enlightening paragraphs on the concept of the 'great power'. The expression bedded down in the lexicon of statesmen at this time, and 'puissance'/'Macht' was defined and measured by ever more sophisticated and precise methods. These calculations exerted a great influence on the haggling that delineated the acquisitions from Poland, as Scott shows on p. 220.

The quantity and quality of the research underpinning this book are impressive. It is based upon a wealth of printed primary sources for the period from 1763, supplemented by copious manuscript material (principally in Berlin and Paris, but also in Vienna, London, Edinburgh and Vincennes) in the obvious gaps. One gap that remains unfilled is a large, unpublished part of Austrian diplomatic correspondence; here Scott has relied on Alfred Ritter von Arneth's massive *Geschichte Maria Theresias* (10 vols, Vienna, 1863-79). He has not visited Russian archives, which is understandable – the undersigned has not ventured there either. However, it should be realised that understanding of Russia's Polish policies in the eighteenth century is currently being modified by research on materials not included in *Sbornik imperatorskogo russkogo istoricheskogo obshchestva* (St Petersburg and elsewhere, 1867-1916) and tendentiously summarised by Sergei Soloviev in his *History of Russia* (originally published as *Istoriia Rossii s drevneishikh vremen*, 29 volumes, St Petersburg, 1851-79). Professor Scott's use of the German and French secondary literature, new and old, also inspires respect.

Chapter 1 gives a general analysis of the rise of the eastern powers until 1756. Professor Scott uses to good effect that grasp of the internal strengths and weaknesses of the three eastern powers which was already apparent in his edited collections *Enlightened Absolutism* (Macmillan; Basingstoke, 1990) and *The European Nobilities in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (2 vols, Longman; London, 1995). Both the dry-as-dust school of diplomatic history and hubris-laden theorists of international relations should take note. Reacting against some of the more sanguine interpretations of the Petrine and post-Petrine Empire, he stresses the late emergence of Russia as a great European power, as opposed to an important military regional one. Russia remained on the margins of the European states system until after the Seven Years' War. Russia did not fully adopt the diplomatic culture of the rest of Europe until then, while the organisation of the states system around Anglo-French rivalry did not leave a clear role for her to play. Still more crucially, no Russian statesman before the reign of Catherine the Great had a sophisticated understanding of the calibrations and nuances of international politics as a whole. The role of individual leadership is convincingly emphasised throughout the book, and the introduction includes an appreciation of the exceptional skill and vision of Frederick the Great. At no stage, however, does Scott lose his main object from view: one typically perceptive point is that Prussia's rise depended on a constellation of Franco-Habsburg hostility, but that that very rise undermined that system (p. 28).

Despite the cogency of the argument, some statements cannot be left unchallenged. Muscovy did not maintain a permanent representative in Poland-Lithuania before the reign of Peter the Great; missions, although frequent and sometimes lengthy, were very much ad hoc (cf. p. 16).⁽¹⁾ It is also debatable whether Brandenburg-Prussia was the leader of the *corpus evangelicorum* in the Reich after 1697 (p. 20). Although the electors of Saxony converted to Catholicism in their pursuit of the Polish throne, Saxony formally remained a Lutheran state as well as an overwhelmingly Lutheran society. On pp. 29-30, the account of the Diplomatic Revolution curiously ignores Russian anger with the British for signing the Convention of Westminster with Prussia – which torpedoed the mission of the unfortunate Sir Charles Hanbury Williams – given that it mentions Russian preparations to attack Prussia in the spring of 1756. Chapter 2 examines the impact of the Seven Years' War upon international relations. The division of Europe into separate eastern and western spheres was accentuated as the war went on. Despite this, the Austro-French alliance proved

enduring (in contrast to the ephemeral Franco-Russian rapprochement). Maria Theresa's resentment at what she saw as her abandonment by Catherine also contributed to a prolongation of Austro-Russian hostility (pp. 45-6).

There is an illuminating discussion of France's diminished prestige and influence in continental affairs. The war dramatically re-ordered the hierarchy of powers. All the powers were exhausted, including Russia, whose military problems as well as achievements are stressed (pp. 47-8). However, the traditional theatres of Habsburg-Bourbon conflict – the Netherlands, the Rhineland and (Northern) Italy – were neutralised as a result of the *renversement des alliances* and enjoyed decades of peace as political backwaters. This provokes a reflection which the judicious author does not spell out – did the resulting prosperity of these regions contribute in the long term to the cultural and economic division of Europe between East and West?

Chapter 3 will be welcomed by students of the eastern powers' domestic history, as it shows how the outcome of the Seven Years' War led European statesmen to give priority to domestic reconstruction. That in turn had implications for international relations. Yet Scott does not fail to consider the importance of the personal sorrows of Maria Theresa in causing her to adopt a pacific policy (p. 77). The chapter also contains a vivid and very useful analysis of Frederick the Great's personal rule.

Chapter 4 covers the period 1763-66. It has a valuable analysis of the importance of Polish interregnum of 1763-64 for the crystallisation and stabilisation of the international system. The post-war weakness of France and Austria was conclusively demonstrated by their inability to intervene in Poland on behalf of the House of Saxony, so leaving the field clear for an initially nervous Catherine II to impose Stanisław Poniatowski. Frederick the Great's exceptional diplomatic skill emerges from his success in convincing Catherine that he was on the point of allying with the Porte. This episode shows the importance in the eighteenth-century system of having shrewd diplomats in place; Dolgorukov in Berlin was patently not one of them. Scott gives a fine analysis of Panin's Francophobic Northern System, and is lucid on Swedish affairs.

A serious factual error needs correcting at this point. The Grand Hetman was not Poland's ruler during the interregnum (cf. p. 112), although his position afforded him considerable influence if he had the personality to exploit it. The Roman Catholic Primate, the Archbishop of Gniezno, was the titular interrex, and, advised by other senators, he exercised some, although not all, of the functions of the king.

The assertion on p. 116 of Frederick's 'almost equal influence' in Poland as a result of the Russo-Prussian alliance of 1764 is an old, but doubtful proposition. His influence was almost entirely confined to further weakening his larger Polish neighbour (as in his gunning down of the general customs tariff that had begun to improve Polish state finances dramatically in 1765). He made no attempt to construct a significant 'Prussian' party, and for all his criticism of Catherine's impetuous policy, he was quite unable to restrain her during the Dissident affair in 1766-68 (something that emerges from pp. 178-9).

A thematic chapter on diplomacy follows. It includes an evocative account of the dismal life of those accredited to Berlin, and argues convincingly that Russia only adopted the norms of European diplomacy under Catherine the Great.

Chapter 6 covers the breakdown of the post-war stability in 1766-68. This was weakened by the disruptive policies of Choiseul, but rather more damage was done by the fundamentally incompatible policies pursued by Catherine and Stanisław in Poland. On p. 174, Scott calls Stanisław 'youthful and inexperienced'. Although aged only 32 at his accession, he was, by the standards of Polish monarchs (most of whom were foreigners), exceptionally well-practised in the workings of the political system. What he lacked was experience of international politics – and so did his uncles, who had been at least equally naïve in calling on Russian assistance in 1762-64. Moreover, it has been conclusively proved by Zofia Zielińska that Catherine and Panin were at no point willing to contemplate a limitation of the requirement of unanimity in the Polish Sejm – the infamous liberum veto – still less its removal. They were not prompted by Prussia (cf. p. 175). Whatever individual ambassadors in Warsaw came to think, Russian opposition to any significant

amelioration of the Polish constitution remained a constant throughout the eighteenth century, and contrary signals were deliberate disinformation sent out from St Petersburg. They were repeated selectively by Soloviev a century later.[\(2\)](#)

Chapter 7 presents a detailed analysis of the crisis that mounted as Austria and Prussia grew ever more alarmed by escalating Russian ambitions on and around the Black Sea and which was resolved by the First Partition of Poland in 1772. Scott explains the impasse that prevented the conclusion of peace in 1770-71, despite the Austro-Prussian rapprochement. Kaunitz pursued a warlike policy by signing a short-lived treaty with the Porte, but he was undermined by Maria Theresa, enabling Russia to call Austria's bluff. The relatively brief account of the negotiations that led to the first partition of Poland stresses the role played by Prince Henry of Prussia in convincing his brother to press Catherine to agree to the dismemberment. Unfortunately, no new Russian sources are used to cast fresh light upon her crucial decision at some point early in 1771 to support annexations by all three powers, a policy she had earlier rejected. This account is instead based almost entirely upon Frederick's *Politische Correspondenz*. As the author readily acknowledges, a full study of the first partition based on manuscript material is still urgently required. However, he does make the valuable point that whereas Frederick hoped that Polish territory would moderate Catherine's appetite for gains from the Ottoman Empire, she counted on Austrian and Prussian gains weakening their opposition to her expansionist war aims (p. 215).

Chapter 8 takes the story from 1772 to 1775. The Russian empire experienced severe military, economic, social and financial stress in the early 1770s, and Sweden succeeded where Poland had failed in slipping the noose. Nevertheless, Catherine's nerve held just as it would in 1787-92. Finally, there is an illuminating discussion of the significance of Austria's unscrupulous annexation of Bukovina in 1775.

The conclusion draws out implications for the subsequent history of Europe of Russia's advance. All the other powers had grounds for anxiety, including Prussia. By the mid-1770s, with Austro-Russian rapprochement proceeding and the Northern System crumbling, Frederick was justifiably gloomy. With Europe divided into two spheres, the combined might of Austria and Russia might isolate Prussia, and perhaps even eliminate her from the ranks of the great powers altogether. Scott emphasises that 'Russia's dominance was predicated on France's continuing weakness' (p. 256). The conclusion might however have reiterated the point made on p. 15 that 'the [Russian] empire's feet of clay were seldom glimpsed further west?.'

The Rise of the Eastern Powers is a notable contribution to our understanding of the history of modern Europe, and a model work of international history.

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Notes

1. See Andrzej Sulima Kamiński, *Republic vs Autocracy: Poland-Lithuania and Russia, 1686-1697* (Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute; Cambridge, MA, 1993) for a comparative study of Russian and Polish diplomacy.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. See Zofia Zielińska, 'Początek rosyjskiej niechęci Czartoryskich i "słabość" Stanisława Augusta? ['The beginning of the Czartoryskis' fall from Russian favour and the 'weakness' of Stanisław August]', in *Trudne stulecia. Studia z dziejów XVII i XVIII wieku ofiarowane Profesorowi Jerzemu Michalskiemu* (Semper; Warsaw, 1994), and 'Rosja wobec planów reform ustrojowych niezrealizowanej konfederacji Czartoryskich z lat 1762-1763? ['Russia and the the plans for constitutional reform of the unrealised Czartoryski confederacy of 1762-1763'] and 'Przegrana walka o głosowanie większościowe. Stanisław August od października do grudnia 1766 roku? ['The lost battle for majority voting: Stanisław August from October to December 1766']', both in Z. Zielińska, *Studia z dziejów stosunków polsko-rosyjskich w XVIII wieku* (Warsaw, 2001). All these works are based upon unpublished Russian sources.[Back to \(2\)](#)

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