



**Matthew P. Romaniello.** *Enterprising Empires: Russia and Britain in Eighteenth-Century Eurasia.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. 304 pp. \$99.99, cloth, ISBN 978-1-108-49757-2.

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**Published on** H-Russia (March, 2020)

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The eighteenth century was a century of opportunities that saw the revival of old hopes and new aspirations, ambitious projects, and unexpected turns; it was a century of negotiations. Matthew P. Romaniello examines more than one hundred years of Russian and British trade relations from the perspective of negotiating agents: British merchants, explorers, contractors of the Russian government, and adventurers (often all in one person). He explores how entangled the economy, diplomacy, and discovery were, and examines the interests of companies, states, and individuals in eighteenth-century Eurasia. Romaniello distances himself from studying trade data: export and import flows between the two countries have already been examined extensively—for example, by Herbert Kaplan in *Russian Overseas Commerce with Great Britain during the reign of Catherine II* (1995). Instead, the author uses a large corpus of narratives, including journals, accounts, memoirs, pamphlets circulating in London to support companies' legal and political cases, and a variety of correspondence: by merchants in Russia, consuls, representatives of the Russia Company in London, Board of Trade and Plantations, Russian Collegiums, and courtiers. Romaniello bases his research on published and unpublished texts, from the National Archives in London and Edinburgh,

the Russian State Archive of Ancient Acts (RGADA), and several American and Spanish collections. Some of the narrators are well known, such as John Bell, a Scottish doctor and traveler who visited Persia and China, and Charles Whitworths (see Janet M. Hartley, *Charles Whitworth: Diplomat in the Age of Peter the Great* [2002]), but have not been properly examined before Romaniello's book. Among them are John Elton, blamed by the author for the collapse of the prospects of reexporting Persian silk through Russia; Katherine Harris, a sister of the British ambassador to Catherine's Court; Peter Dobell, an American merchant in the service of the Russian-American company; and many others.

The main line of the book is to examine how the rhetoric of these intermediaries mirrored changes in the political, economic, and diplomatic climate in Europe and, later in the century, in the Atlantic and the Pacific. Romaniello also seeks to understand to what extent, in their turn, the personal experiences of these extremely entangled individuals altered the discourses in Russia and Britain, catalyzing changes of opinion at court, on the streets of the city, in state agencies, and in trading companies' offices. As Romaniello argues, "trade data reveal one version of economic reality,

but the rhetoric does a far better job in explaining the ways in which individuals understood the global market and their role in it, also influencing how diplomats interpreted these events” (p. 258).

The study encompasses a lengthy period: mostly from the second half of the seventeenth century, when Russian mercantilism began to crystalize, to the end of the Continental System in the 1810s. The five chapters are arranged chronologically, with their content logically centered on main contact points of certain decades. Romaniello persuasively demonstrates how significant the evolution of the interests of the two countries was over the course of the century, as their economies progressed and imperial networks expanded, with some remaining relevant for most of the period, such as the perennial—and fruitless—attempts of the Russia Company to exploit Russia’s Eurasian position to gain access to the commodities imported by the East India Company and the Levant Company.

The presentation of the material in the book is pellucid and ample. Romaniello has managed—through careful attention to personalities and the rhetoric of their negotiations—to address most of the issues not only of the Russian Baltic trade but also, as he stresses, of the equally significant southern (through Astrakhan) and eastern flows of goods. Building on Erika Monahan’s *The Merchants of Siberia: Trade in Early Modern Eurasia* (2016), Romaniello’s book is a pioneering piece of research investigating the movement of commodities, people, and information in the Asian part of Russia, emphasizing the importance of transits through Siberia from China, India, and Central Asia and the concept of the Eurasian “Silk Road.”

One of Romaniello’s conclusions is that it is Russia that for most of this period remained the dominant player in economic relations with the West, especially with its main trade partner, Britain. This was not only explained by the fact that the latter was heavily dependent on Baltic supplies of ship-building commodities until the ear-

ly nineteenth century. Romaniello argues that eastern and southern trade, on the one hand, and trade with the West, on the other, balanced the country’s trading prospects and helped to maintain and develop the self-sustained economy of an actively expanding empire. Therefore, Romaniello maintains, the paradigm of Russia’s backwardness and ineffective management of trade in the eighteenth century should be revised and transferred to a later period.

In a broader perspective, Romaniello has managed to fit the businesses of the British in Russia into a global context. Interests in Russian exports not only were bringing the two countries together, helping to avoid direct conflicts for most of this period, but also improved the fortunes of the Russia Company in Britain. In the history of merchant trading companies in the eighteenth century, the role of the Russia Company, unfairly, remains the least studied. Only the earlier presence of the English merchants in Russia has been properly examined by T. S. Willan in *The Early History of the Russia Company 1553-1603* (1956). In the eighteenth century, the company’s profits fluctuated, but the significance of the company and its influence probably deserve reassessment—as also recently argued by Michael Wagner, who examined the company’s connections with the court, the navy, the Board of Trade and Plantations, and the Bank of England (*The English Chartered Trading Companies, 1688–1763: Guns, Money and Lawyers* [2018]). Some additional parallels with other British companies’ commercial activities and the behavior of the British in local communities would not be superfluous, especially in comparison with the East India Company in India and the Levant Company—another regulated company, with a structure comparable to the Russian Company (as noted in James Mather, *Pashas: Traders and Travellers in the Islamic World* [2013]). But the author’s goal is not to describe the life of the Britons in Russia but to see the connections between the two

countries through the prism of the rhetoric of negotiations, which he does more than convincingly.

The approach chosen by Romaniello implies selectiveness, and this predetermines a few nuances of the study. Major stumbling blocks for Anglo-Russian relations in the eighteenth century—such as the prospects of Iranian silk re-exports—receive appropriate attention here. Yet some topics are better examined than others, such as the prospects for the tobacco trade at the beginning of the century, French plans to grow tobacco in Ukraine in the middle of the century, or the beginning of Russian tobacco exports to Europe in the days of the American Revolutionary War. The author himself confesses that in reality enormous efforts often brought modest results. At the same time, some events of the eighteenth century are not mentioned at all, including Pugachev's revolt, which must have adversely affected trade on the most important southern and eastern routes studied by the author—the Volga River and transits to Siberia over the Urals.

In some cases, a feeling arises that Romaniello relies a little bit too trustfully on the personal opinions of the narrators. For example, the prospects of Russian trade and navigation in the Caspian are largely evaluated from Elton's writings, a very dubious source. Adding, if not state correspondence or official statistics, at least a few other opinions from contemporaries would offer readers a more reliable and balanced vision of many trade and geographical problems discussed—as “history of rhetoric” often offers a subjective view. But these are the nuances of the approach chosen by Romaniello: it is not possible to study all events and all actors in one book.

A third criticism is more general but also rooted in the author's focus on narratives and his selectiveness. Romaniello frequently tends to explain through foreign external factors not only the temporary twists and ups and downs in trade relations but even major Russian economic developments. Perhaps sometimes that was the case. But

often additional information about state policies, programs implemented, and intrinsic economic processes would help to produce a more balanced assessment. Such was the case of the rise of Russian trade and economy in the early Catherinian period, which is explained by the elimination of piracy in European waters to a far larger extent than by state policies from the mid-1750s to the 1760s: the removal of internal customs, the loosening of mercantilist policies, and the abolition of many monopolies.

To conclude, this book is certainly one of the most important contributions to the study of the role of eighteenth-century Russia in the context of Eurasian transits, a topic discussed in recent years but that remains largely underdeveloped. The interesting approach takes the reader through a variety of diverse contact points between the British and the Russians: from Iran to Arkhangelsk, from Riga to Alaska, tracing all major trade disputes between Russian and British interests over a period of nearly 150 years. The focus on interrogations and the rhetoric of actors—many of whom were truly integrated, as Romaniello vividly shows, in a complex interweaving of the economic and diplomatic exploration of interests of the two nations (sometimes even more than two)—brings the author to very interesting conclusions, not only a global reassessment of Russia's place in the relations between the two countries in the eighteenth century but also on all the territorial and economic storylines covered in the book. What also expands the value of the work is that the author shows how all these patterns of strategies of expansion, cooperation, and negotiation attempted by the Russians and the British in the eighteenth century to a large extent predetermined the fortunes of the two countries, their relations, conflicts, economic developments, and new geopolitical roles in the nineteenth century.

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**Citation:** Mikhail Belan. Review of Romaniello, Matthew P. *Enterprising Empires: Russia and Britain in Eighteenth-Century Eurasia*. H-Russia, H-Net Reviews. March, 2020.

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