

## **Russia and Courtly Europe: Ritual and the Culture of Diplomacy, 1648-1725**

**Review Number:** 2092

**Publish date:** Thursday, 20 April, 2017

**Author:** Jan Hennings

**ISBN:** 9781107050594

**Date of Publication:** 2016

**Price:** £64.99

**Pages:** 297pp.

**Publisher:** Cambridge University Press

**Publisher url:** <http://www.cambridge.org/catalogue/catalogue.asp?isbn=9781107050594>

**Place of Publication:** Cambridge

**Reviewer:** Tatyana A. Zhukova

Complementing the growing academic interest in pre-modern diplomatic ceremonial, Jan Hennings' *Russia and Courtly Europe* explores the relationship between Russia and Europe beyond the traditional portrayal of political incompatibility and clash of cultures from the Peace of Westphalia (1648) until the end of Peter I's reign in 1725. The monograph examines Russia's place in the wider, transcultural developments in early modern diplomacy through the prism of direct diplomatic encounters, ceremonial conflicts and quarrels, and records of ritual and ceremony. Its objective is to demonstrate that in the context of diplomatic ritual and ceremony the question of who belonged to the society of princes extended beyond the modern ideas of Europe as a geographically defied and unified cultural sphere. Broadly, it considers how dynastic competition and notions of honour and prestige impeded or expedited the standardisation of diplomatic rules and procedures beyond national boundaries.

Russia's place in the international order of the states-systems, prevalent in diplomatic forms following the Peace of Westphalia, and its integration into the European precedence system is addressed in chapter one. Departing from the ethnographical uncertainties of travel literature and its anxiety of whether Russia was civilised or barbarous, Hennings examines scholarly and legal texts on the hierarchy of sovereigns and notes that these demonstrate clear tendencies to rank the Russian tsar among powerful European rulers. Balthasar Sigismund von Stosch's *Von dem Praecedentz-Oder Vorder-Recht* (1677), for instance, places the Holy Roman Emperor as the first secular ruler to follow the Pope, followed (albeit surprisingly) by the Russian tsar (or the Muscovite Emperor as termed by Stosch). Stosch justifies Russian precedence over other European kings by emphasising the tsar's vast wealth, lands and authority. Hennings also notes that an absence of the Ottoman Sultan or the emperor of China from Stosch's list aligns the Russian tsar with European sovereigns as opposed to 'other' rulers. In contrast, Zacharias Zwanzig's *Theatrum Praecedentiae* (1706) interpreted the title of 'tsar' as a denoting a king rather than an emperor, and Zwanzig asserted that Russian rulers came to believe their title surpassed the status of other rulers even though 'all European kings had been in ancient possession of royal dignity long before Moscow rose to imperial status' (p. 52). The Russian tsar, however, was still accorded a place within Zwanzig's princely society and ranked among the crowned heads and sovereigns of Europe. The texts further imply that magnificence and ritualism were part of the same continuum for both Europe and Russia. Thus, as an outlying Christian ruler, the Russian Tsar

was integrated into the heritage notion of Christian commonwealth, whilst negative images of Russia and its incivility did not permeate into tracts of sovereign hierarchy. Towards the end of the chapter Hennings encourages the reader to consider the benefits of examining face-to-face encounters in contrast to plain notions of Russian barbarity prevalent in travel writings; he urges historians to return to the beginnings of international relations as an academic discipline and study precedence quarrels and ceremonial conflicts.

Prior to addressing selected case studies of Russian and European diplomatic encounters, the second chapter offers a comparative overview of the administration of diplomatic procedure in Europe and Russia. The chapter focuses on the role of the *Posol'skii Prikaz* (Ambassadorial Chancellery of the Russian tsars), the *pristav*, the notions of diplomatic representation, and the purpose of the ceremonial documents produced by the machinery of diplomatic protocol. The purpose of the chapter is to illustrate that distinctions in the practical organisation of diplomatic practice and ceremony between Russia and Europe were not born out of Russian desire to remain distant from Europe but rather from Russian reliance on its archived collection of ceremonial documents and its geographical distance, which often made direct intervention from Moscow impossible and forced Russian diplomats to adhere to a more rigid diplomatic ceremonial based on precedent in contrast to their European counterparts. Moreover, despite some practical discrepancies Russian and Western European diplomatic ceremonial operated upon shared norms and symbolic rules. The similarity in the ranks of diplomatic representatives, for instance, was likely a reflection of Western developments in Russian diplomatic practice. Likewise, the Master of Ceremonies and its Russian equivalent of *pristav* shared similar duties, as did the role and function of the *Posol'skii Prikaz*. As Hennings notes, the 'resulting ceremonial difficulties about ranking and its inherent privileges cannot be explained by virtue of cultural or ideological differences' between Russian and Europe, instead they 'merely demonstrate that Russia was only beginning to participate fully in the process of standardisation' (p. 111). Change and adaptation required time before it could be merged into practice.

The subsequent two chapters are concerned with direct diplomatic encounters between Russia and Western Europe. Chapter three explores Anglo-Russian interaction in the second half of the 17th century and centres on disputes over ceremonies, the purpose of diplomatic rituals and the implications of symbolic clashes. Concentrating on five Russian and English embassies dispatched to London and Moscow, and instances of ceremonial clashes (including a stalemate between the Earl of Carlisle and the Russian *pristav* over which diplomatic representative was to alight first from his sleigh), the chapter demonstrates that it was not cultural incompatibility between Russia and England, or the personal qualities of the diplomats themselves, that led to ceremonial quarrels. Conflicts over ceremony emerged 'from mounting claims to status' and the 'unpredictability and contingency of face-to-face communication' (p. 159). For instance, in 1655 during the public audience of William Prideaux, Parliament's diplomatic representative to Moscow, the Russian tsar did not stand up while he asked about the health of Oliver Cromwell, instead the tsar moved only slightly from the throne. As Hennings points out this was a clear sign that while the Russian court was prepared to accept Prideaux as a representative of a minor power, Cromwell was not regarded by the Russians as the legitimate authority of the English state. Although the tsar's body movement might be seen as 'politically insignificant', Hennings emphasises that the gesture signified that the 'Russian court denied Cromwell the royal or sovereign honours' (p. 126), as in order for Prideaux to be recognised as an envoy of the English state, the tsar would have to stand while pronouncing the name of the Lord Protector. The English also recognised the impact of this gesture and Prideaux chose to omit this detail from his report. Diplomatic ritual thus allowed 'rulers to tolerate irreversible realities' (p. 127), but the flexibility and subtlety of diplomatic ceremony also enabled rulers to convey their protests by denying 'legitimacy of unwarranted legal assertions' (p. 127). The reception of Parliament's representative therefore did not equate to Russian recognition of the legitimacy of Cromwell's government.

Moving away from Anglo-Russian encounters, chapter four explores Peter the Great's Grand Embassy to Vienna in 1698 and his visit to Paris in 1717. Whilst chapter three addressed the issues of ceremonial conflicts within the public sphere of audiences and processions, chapter four engages with the theatricality of diplomatic dialogue in a private setting, and the ways in which ceremony and courtly sphere constrained and facilitated political communication. On both occasions Peter I travelled incognito. Whilst this concealed his

monarchical identity and resolved questions over precedence and status, it did not de-ritualise diplomatic practice as the Imperial (and later French court) was expected to arrange a befitting programme of entertainment for the tsar. On the contrary, strategies of reduced formality and encounters *sans ceremonie* increased complications of ritual procedure, which were still expected to address the issues of rank, honour and prestige whilst simultaneously retaining the tsar's disguise. Secondly, the chapter also explores diplomatic ritual within the setting of private meetings and secret negotiations. Whereas public audiences were preoccupied with concerns regarding hierarchical order and status, as well as ceremonial clashes over honour and prestige, the physical distance of face-to-face encounters and its lack of direct audience enabled rulers to symbolically acknowledge their equal status for the sake of representing a strong personal bond. In his private meeting with Leopold I Peter insisted on taking off his hat, a gesture that obliged the emperor to reciprocate. Both men were expected to wear hats to signify that neither need acknowledge the other's superior status, yet in this instance though the sign of equality 'contradicted [Leopold's] claim to precedence signified at the public ceremonies, here, in private, the competition over status was eased by symbolic parity' (p. 180). Additionally, the chapter also explores the question of how binding were negotiations that were conducted privately in contrast to those at public audiences. The chapter emphasises that early modern international politics were personal affairs between rulers rather than business conducted between national states, and alliances represented interpersonal relationships. Thus, whilst Peter I might have avoided etiquette and breached ceremonial order, precedence and its associated expectations were not inevitable; diplomatic protocol did not lose its significance because of Peter's preference for secret negotiations and incognito visits. As Hennings concludes, 'informality permitted contemporaries to balance inherited claims to ranks with coexisting concepts of state equality' (p. 201).

Within the two decades of Peter I's visit to Vienna, Russia had grown into a major military power and merged into the European system of alliances; its diplomatic practice and approach to ceremony and organisation also witnessed a period of reform and transformation. The nature of these changes and the questions of their deviation or continuation from existing pre-Petrine diplomatic practice are examined in chapter five. Hennings notes that the general consensus of Petrine diplomacy is one of radical 'cultural revolution' (p. 204) that replaced Russian precedent with a new political culture that was modelled on a Western European archetype. Hennings, however, notes that rather than initiate a radical alternation Petrine reforms were a transitional period that 'shrewdly blended' old and new elements of Russian diplomatic ritual to buttress Russia's place within the European society of princes. The creation of permanent Russian residencies abroad, for instance, facilitated changes in diplomatic reports as the *stateinyi spisok* was replaced with regular diplomatic dispatches (*reliatsii*), and there was likewise an increased interest in the import and translation of Western literature on diplomatic ritual. However, the central notions of precedence and rank persisted. Peter I might have assumed the title of 'Imperator', yet he was denied the ceremonies that manifested claims to imperial superiority and Russia was not recognised as an empire by other European courts. As Hennings notes, 'the tsar had become an emperor without clothes' (p. 246).

Through a comparative approach and extensive material drawn from British, Russian, Austrian and French archives, *Russia and Courtly Europe* traces Russia's place in early modern international relations in terms of the language used by contemporaries to describe sovereignty and power, that of honour and prestige. In contrast to assumptions about the irreconcilable differences between political cultures of Russia and Western Europe, Hennings argues that diplomatic practice evolved within a 'transcultural political space' (p. 247) of shared ceremonial norms which integrated the seemingly foreign Russian Tsar through gradual standardised codes of behaviour and communication. This does not, however, imply that there was a universalism of ceremonial norms. Hennings' examples of direct encounters demonstrate how discrepancies in practical organisation led to clashes, conflicts and diplomatic ramifications. Yet, ultimately the Tsars' commitment to ritual display was a reflection of their acknowledged place in the early modern European system of precedence.

Upon reflection *Russia and Courtly Europe* encourages the reader to think about the broader concepts of politics, foreign relations, dynastic representation, notions of status and honour, and the practicalities of early modern diplomatic ceremony and ritual. Whilst the book raises several important questions about the

nature of Russian diplomatic interactions with Western Europe, and its broader implications to the historiography of premodern diplomacy, the foremost questions that arise from Hennings' discussion are as follows. Firstly, in some ways Russia's geographical and geo-political isolation from the majority of Western European states would suggest that European rulers were able to maintain a more distant diplomatic relationship (and a more flexible diplomatic ritual) with the Russian tsar than they would have with their European neighbours. Was Leopold's treatment of Peter's visit a reflection of a distinct imperial diplomacy and ritual towards the Russians or was, for instance, the French King likely to receive similar programme of entertainment if he had decided to visit Vienna incognito? Secondly, the book makes a passing reference to the influence of Orthodoxy within pre-Petrine diplomatic ceremonial and this makes one wonder as to how significant was the influence of religion (and not just Orthodoxy) upon diplomatic ritual? Was the subject of religion set aside for practicalities of diplomacy or did differences in religion impede diplomatic ceremony? How did religion feature within the proposed notion of a transcultural political space of shared ceremonial norms? Finally, there have been some broader implications that in terms of Russian diplomatic aspirations, the Russian tsars were only interested in the acquisition of Western European technological, medical, military, scientific and cultural ideas and innovations but not Western European political ideas. Does this statement apply to Russian diplomacy discussed within the book or are there examples of Russian tsars being open to incorporate elements of European political ideas?

Ultimately, *Russia and Courtly Europe* offers a new perspective on the complex relations and direct encounters within the world of princely courts. It shows that Russia, despite its perceived cultural incompatibility, was an active participant in the broad, transcultural developments of early modern diplomacy. Russia also provides an excellent vantage point from which to study early modern diplomacy on a global scale and Hennings proposes to extend his research to Russian diplomatic entanglements with the East, including the Ottoman Empire, to 'mediate between 'European' and 'non-European' practices' (p. 254) and historiographical traditions. The research would be a welcome addition and is eagerly awaited.

The author thanks Tatyana Zhukova for her review and insightful suggestions and does not wish to respond further.

---

**Source URL:** <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/2092>

### **Links**

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/257186>