

Daniel C. Waugh, “The new volume of the *kuranty*.” Published on H-Early Slavic, April 5, 2018 (<https://networks.h-net.org/node/3076/discussions/1614479/new-volume-kuranty>).

Vesti-Kuranty 1671-1672 gg. Podgotovka tekstov, issledovaniia, kommentarii, ukazateli I. Maier, S. M. Shamina, A. V. Kuznetsovoi, I. A. Kornilaevoi i V. B. Krys’ko pri uchastii E. V. Amanovoi. Pod redaktsiei V. B. Krys’ko i Ingrid Maier. Moskva: Azbukovnik, 2017. 806 pp. ISBN 978-5-91172-150-3.

A little background to the subsequent comments is in order here. I have had nothing to do with the publication of this extraordinary volume, but my involvement with its subject goes back nearly half a century, and I am currently in the process of finishing work on a book about foreign news in Muscovy, co-authored with Ingrid Maier, one of the editors of the book here under review. The series of which this is a continuation began back in the early 1970s, a project of historical linguists. At that time, having worked on some of the files of the Russian translations/summaries of foreign news (a.k.a. “*kuranty*”), I reviewed the first volume at some length, pointing out ways in which the editing principles might best be re-thought and greater attention paid to analysis of some of the manuscripts prior to publication of the texts. Among other things, I emphasized how important it would be to locate and publish simultaneously the foreign sources for the Russian translations. My review was duly acknowledged in one or another of the subsequent volumes but its recommendations ignored by the then editorial team. Among the first historical linguists to make serious use of what the Russians had been publishing were Roland Schibli and Ingrid Maier, both of whom undertook close examination of the ways in which the Russian translators had treated their foreign texts. Maier began to extend what little had been done to identify the foreign sources.

The management of the *kuranty* project changed hands as Vol. 6 was in preparation. It was too late for the new editors to address some of the concerns about how best to order the texts, but they did provide some compensatory guidance (in particular, the contributions by Stepan Shamin, who now plays a critical role in exploring the archival sources). Most importantly, Ingrid Maier joined the editorial team—her linguistic ability and access to library and archival collections across Europe made it possible for the first time to include a large collection of the source texts for the Russian translations and situate the Russian acquisition of foreign news squarely in the context of the evolution of news media in pre-modern Europe. In Vol. 6, the editorial standards for the publication of the texts and their sources, the extensive commentaries by Maier on the relationship between the two, and the careful attention to indexing raised the whole project to a new level. With the new volume under review here (Vol. 7 in the series), the editorial team has been able fully to shape the publication according to the best principles and no longer is constrained by the Nachlass of the earlier editorial decisions.

The choice and ordering of the Russian texts is a significant issue. In part because of major lacunae in the archival files containing translations of foreign news, earlier volumes had been rather arbitrary in what they included. This was not necessarily a bad thing, as one finds in those volumes a lot about the various means by which private individuals, rather than any coherent

government policy, supplied the Kremlin with news. Ideally both for the historian and for students of the Russian language, the ability to date precisely the receipt and translation of any given text would be significant. In publishing the texts though, the earlier editors arranged them by the date of the latest news item they contained, rather than attempt to order them chronologically by the date in which individual “packets” may have been received. In the process, they sometimes confused which news items belonged to which packet. Given the fact that the documents for the most part were recorded in scrolls, which later archivists then separated into their individual sheets, the correct ordering of the sheets often had been jumbled, a fact which the editors ignored.

With the establishment of the Muscovite foreign post in the mid-1660s, regular acquisition of foreign news became possible, with agents (usually the foreign postmasters) contracted to send with each mail (bi-weekly, soon weekly) a collection of news reports, some in manuscript form but for the most part print copies of foreign newspapers. Generally the headings on the translations from this material indicate when it was received and by which post (that from Riga or that from Vilna), thus identifying precisely the packet and its date but not the actual source of the news (that is, if a published newspaper, its name, place of publication and date of issue).

The nature of the transmission of the news, the way in which it then was processed in Moscow (translation followed almost immediately on receipt), and the particular features of archival preservation have all made it possible to order the texts in the new volume of the kuranty by packet, although with the significant qualification that there are significant gaps in what surely was an unbroken sequence, due to the fact that there have been many losses of the original archival files. Furthermore, it is important to understand that what we get here is far from the full record of foreign news received in Moscow. In the given volume, large as it is, the editors have confined themselves to the kuranty for two years, a partial collection if still a significant and representative one. These are the texts contained in RGADA f. 155, op. 1 (and a few that escaped the chancery environment and are now in BAN 32.14.11, No. 1). Moreover, while the introduction contains a clear indication of the full extent of each of the archival files, not all of the texts in any given binder have been included, a number being separate news letters or translations from pamphlets which cannot be firmly connected with any specific packet of news that had arrived in the post. A few of the more significant translations of individual pamphlets have been published and analyzed in separate articles, and a set of appended texts in this volume include a few other translations specifically from printed news sources.

As we have already learned from the earlier volumes in the series, not surprisingly the particular foreign policy concerns of the Muscovite government usually determined what items of foreign news would be deemed of greatest interest. True, especially in the first half of the 17th century, it can be difficult to understand why some news reports were translated, especially if they dealt with apparently obscure events in some distant place that had no possible connection with Muscovy. However, as the volume and regularity of news acquisition increased, the translators working in the Ambassadorial Office (*Posol'skii prikaz*) in Moscow had to be very selective. For any given packet of news received, they might choose only a very few datelined reports and then translate or summarize only a part of them. Increasingly, summary, rather than precise

translation, seems to have become the norm. They might combine information from more than one source under a single datelined heading. And, importantly, since the resulting translations/summaries were to be read to or by the Tsar and a few of his close advisers, the translators might add explanatory material such as the identification of geographical locations or the names of individuals who, in the original reports, were mentioned only by an indefinite pronoun.

We can appreciate this treatment of the sources now thanks to Ingrid Maier's painstaking work of trying to identify the foreign originals, a task that is challenging in part because, just as the Muscovite translation files are often very incomplete, so also are the files of the Western newspapers that served as the sources. Even in the numerous instances where the unique copy of, say, a German newspaper, may be that still preserved in the archive in Moscow and where the translators marked passages they had selected for translation, one cannot always be absolutely certain about the source for what ended up in any given datelined news report that constituted part of the *kuranty*. For this reason, Maier's commentaries for each of the texts she has identified as the most likely source make for fascinating reading, as she is able to point out what was or was not selected, indicate the degree of precision (or lack thereof) in rendering the source into Russian, and also make plausible suggestions as to why something in the Russian text is not also in the original. Her command of German, Dutch, Polish, French and Latin enables her to tell us what a particular passage might literally mean, even if that is not the way the Russian translator rendered it. There is a lot here then to inform us about the abilities and knowledge of the Russian translators working under considerable time pressure to churn out news summaries almost immediately upon receipt of the latest post. In some exceptional cases, the translators for individual packets are named—specifically Leontii Gross, Andrei Vinius, and Ivan Tiashkogorskii. Amongst the most capable and best informed of the Muscovite translators, even they might make mistakes, probably due to haste, though in a good many cases, the copyists who produced the clean version of the draft translations may have been responsible for errors.

In looking over the landscape of Muscovite translations in the 17th century, we often come across cases where the results surely would have been almost incomprehensible to Russian readers, if the translator too slavishly followed foreign syntax, failed to find a good Russian equivalent for a foreign word, or the like. Yet what is particularly impressive from Maier's evidence is how the translators of the *kuranty* often were able to produce a more readable rendering of the news by simplifying contorted syntax contained in the original, adding necessary identifications or explanations, and so on. In fact, the foreign originals often were badly written and badly edited and probably would have challenged all but the best informed readers of the German, Dutch (and, rarely, Latin). Furthermore, there are sometimes differences in detail in different copies of a newspaper of a given date, a reflection perhaps of the printers using more than one press. A testimony to the depth of Maier's research is the fact that she has, where they exist, been able to compare copies now located in Moscow, Bremen, Harlem, or London. Such comparison sometimes elucidates why a date in one version of the same news report differs from that in another version.

There is much here for the historical linguist, the value of this new volume enhanced by the fact that the editors now have included in the texts all the accents and diacriticals found in the original manuscripts, something that had not been attempted in the earlier volumes (see I. A. Kornilaeva's essay in the introduction explaining this). The several indexes include ones for all the appellative vocabulary, personal, geographical and other proper names. I am aware from personal correspondence how painstaking the work has been to ensure their accuracy.

As a historian, I cannot attempt a full assessment of the value of the publication for its primary audience. However, I would like to look briefly beyond what we have here to consider how the material relates to the question, long posed, but never really adequately answered, about how well informed Muscovites were about the world beyond their borders.

If we really wish to answer that question, we need to look at much more than the kuranty. Arguably, the kuranty themselves may turn out to be less significant than what I (among others) have always tended to assume they were. The full record of what the Muscovite government really knew in the 17th century—and we are talking here in the first instance about a few decision-makers and their circles, since foreign news was generally considered at state secret—can be established only by combing all the diplomatic files, where many of the news reports and translations still are to be found, and by examining all the reports transmitted by officials who ran intelligence networks or otherwise had access to reports about foreign places. Such material is to be found in many archival files, starting with the huge collection of the *Razriadnyi prikaz*. It has never been the task of the editors of the kuranty to include all such material, nor should it have been: the work could occupy a whole generation of scholars. As it is, with the series now into the last third of the 17th century, the demands of producing each volume, even within a clearly articulated set of limits, threaten to overwhelm the ability of the editors see the series to its logical end of ca. 1700.

What we have here then is a rather selective view of what foreign news may have been deemed of interest, even if we cannot always explain why certain things attracted the attention of the translators and others did not. Was some information ignored, because the makers of Muscovite foreign policy already knew it from other and perhaps more reliable and current sources? Did the translators sometimes “censor” material they thought might offend the Tsar? Why keep translating tidbits indicating Stepan Razin's rebellion continued, when he had already been executed and the rebellion suppressed? Why would a series of advertisements for new publications in the Netherlands have been translated? Did obvious mistakes in translation make a difference for the presumed consumers of the kuranty? While she does not address all the possible questions, Maier's comments offer much food for thought here about not only the way in which news was obtained but the way in which it was filtered and epitomized. Maier's selections are for individual news items (within which she has marked sections that were definitely omitted), not for each newspaper in its entirety, even though she often gives us some sense of what else was in the original source. For a full picture, we would, of course, need to see the entirety of each newspaper, where we have but a tantalizing sampling of the select pages reproduced in the rather darkly printed photographs appended in the book.

In a world where we are now being confronted with accusations about “fake news” and where we cannot always be sure who is providing information and how reliable it may be, the issues of how well (or ill-) informed are our political leaders continue to be as pressing as surely they must have been for decision-making in 17th-century Muscovy. We might all gain some perspective by taking a close look at the kuranty, what they contain, how they were produced. Maybe eventually it will be possible to demonstrate whether their production really had an impact. At very least, their history expands our understanding of the significant changes in Russian engagement with the world which accelerated in the 17th century.