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Anne Kraatz, *Le commerce franco-russe. Concurrence et contrefaçons de Colbert à 1900*. Paris : Les Belles Lettres, 2006. 446pp. 25€. ISBN 2-251-44316-9.

Review by Roger Price, Aberystwyth University.

This, the first volume in a series on the *Histoire du commerce extérieur de la France*, is concerned with trade with Russia, a relationship long characterized by the import into France of raw materials and foodstuffs with low value added, and the export of luxury goods with high value added, and by a commercial balance consistently in favor of Russia. As Kraatz makes clear, Russia had initially attracted the interest of French officials and merchants as a mysterious and, it was believed, immensely rich potential source of raw materials, as a market, and possible political ally. The mercantilist approach typified by Louis XIV's minister Colbert led in 1669 to the establishment of a *Compagnie du Nord* on the model of the French East India Company, supported by the State and enjoying monopoly privileges. French merchants had to be persuaded to risk dangerous voyages into the Baltic and White seas, and to cope with the unpredictable and disruptive impact of plague and war, in competition with already well-established British and Dutch traders.

In terms of competitive advantage all manner of luxury, high status goods manufactured in France—including silk, brocades, clothing, furnishings, personal and domestic ornaments, wines and spirits, together with the produce of the French Caribbean—were in demand in Russian high society. In return, naval supplies were a vital strategic commodity; in a period characterized by catastrophic domestic harvests, in 1693, and 1709, an additional source of cereals was invaluable. The defeat of the Swedish king Charles XII and the subsequent annexation of Riga and construction of Saint Petersburg furthermore made access to Russia much easier than it had previously been through the northern port of Archangel.

The results were, however, always disappointing. French officials accused merchants of excessive timidity in comparison with their British and Dutch competitors, and in 1773 could quote the new statistics on entries to the port of Saint Petersburg which listed 326 British ships, 106 Dutch, but only 11 French (p.143). Nevertheless the preference for trade with the West Indies was probably quite sensible in terms of profitability. The impact of the trade treaty agreed upon in 1787, at much the same time as the Eden Treaty with Britain, and similarly intended to intensify commercial links, would also be largely negated by the complex and extremely disruptive political and military situation created by the Revolution. In the short term, the use by French merchants of British, Dutch and Hanseatic shipping concealed a certain volume of activity and in the longer term, the essential structure of trade remained largely unchanged. If the number of French ships entering the Baltic tended to stagnate, the trade in cereals with Odessa expanded substantially.

In any case, the return of peace led to renewed efforts by French officials to collect information and to assess potential markets. They also continued to express concern about Russian manpower and military potential. Slowly at first—and although luxuries retained a prominent place amongst French exports—the structure of trade began to change. More clearly evident from the 1860s, this trade largely reflected structural change within the two domestic economies, as well as developing political aspirations.

In the aftermath of the Crimean War, there was an influx of foreign investment in rail construction, metallurgy, and engineering and in the exploitation of mineral resources. The transport revolution associated with the construction of the rail and electric telegraph networks and falling oceanic freight rates resulted in new investment opportunities and increased volumes of trade, but within a more competitive environment and as part of a process of globalization. Moreover, the commercial balance remained unfavorable to France, largely due to cereals imports. In spite of the successful efforts of the Pereire enterprises in winning rail concessions in 1857, officials continued to condemn the lack of enterprise of French entrepreneurs. Capital exports were encouraged as a means of developing political ties, although the attempts of the Rothschild bank to use loans as a means of improving the situation of Jews in the Russian Empire failed—and indeed, from the 1880s, Kraatz detects a growing lack of interest in the Jewish question amongst French consular staff, as their own anti-Semitism became more apparent (p.262 note 8).

In the closing decades of the nineteenth century, the primary obstacles to the further expansion of French trade appeared to be Russian—in terms of revenue-raising tariff protection—and growing British and now German and American competition. The developing Russian market was also characterized by smuggling, the manufacture of counterfeit goods and the lack of protection for intellectual property. Thus, whilst French exports of luxury goods and colonial products continued to expand from the 1870s, it was their competitors who dominated Russian imports of manufactured goods whilst France focused more on the provision of loans. Although the 1890s saw major international crises resulting from overproduction in heavy industry and financial uncertainty as well as disastrous Russian harvests in 1891/2 and 1898, the enthusiasm of French investors for the high interest rates on Russian (and Turkish) loans only briefly diminished. Investors were encouraged by the apparent optimism of French banks and a mercenary financial press. Political advantages were certainly gained from this Russian dependence on the Paris capital market, although the Russian government remained reluctant to make concessions in such matters as tariff protection. Ultimately, of course, the 1917 Revolution and the repudiation of the Tsarist regime's debts would prove to be an unmitigated disaster for French investors.

Anne Kraatz has written a useful but essentially descriptive work employing some very interesting sources, but used in rather uncritical fashion. Indeed, the sources employed are both its strength and weakness. Kraatz relies essentially on diplomatic papers, and, for the nineteenth century, on consular reports from Saint Petersburg, Moscow and Odessa, supplemented by official trade statistics. Much of the text is made up of lengthy quotations from consular reports. The frequency, length and probably the quality of reporting certainly appears to improve from the early nineteenth century, particularly if one bears in mind the fact that the detailed memoir produced in 1784 by an otherwise un-identified consular official M.Le Gendre was to a considerable degree simply copied from a report written in 1728 by the equally anonymous M.Drouet (p. 147). Nevertheless, even when the policy of Russian governments is under discussion, the perspective remains entirely French. Russian language sources are not employed. Russian statistics are similarly obtained, second-hand, from French documents. There is little effort to subject these primary sources to 'deconstruction.' Only limited information is offered on consular officials, on their work and sources of information. Without really considering these problems, Kraatz also simply assumes that the trade statistics published in the nineteenth century are sufficiently accurate for her purposes.

Not only does Kraatz make few judgments about the quality of her basic sources, she further fails to supplement these sources adequately with published primary sources. Nor does she develop sufficiently her critical capacity and contextual knowledge by consulting the wide range of secondary sources on Russian history. A more analytical approach, better informed by the rich secondary literature, would have allowed Kraatz to make more effective use of the consular reports, which certainly offer insights into Russian society as well as into the mind-set of French officialdom.

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