

---

H-France Review Vol. 22 (January 2022), No. 10

Adam Coker, *Russia's French Connection: A History of the Lasting French Imprint on Russian Culture*. New York and London: Routledge, 2020. ix + 360 pp. Figures, tables, appendices, and index. £120.00. (hb). ISBN 978-0-367-81992-7; £33.29. (eb). ISBN 978-1-003-01123-1.

Review by Derek Offord, University of Bristol.

Adam Coker's monograph is a welcome addition to the now extensive literature on Russia's long-standing cultural relationship with France.<sup>[1]</sup> The beginnings of the Franco-Russian relationship may be traced back to the early eighteenth century, when Peter I (Peter the Great, who reigned as sole ruler from 1696 to 1725) began to modernize the backward state he had inherited by Europeanizing its armed forces, administration, nobility, and cultural practices, thereby preparing the ground for Russia's transformation into a major European power. Coker approaches his investigation of this relationship from two angles.

Firstly, he conceives of his work as a "book on Russian culture" (p. 130), as his sub-title suggests. He traces the historical trajectory of the Franco-Russian cultural relationship over the 300 years of its existence, concentrating heavily on the period of most intense contact. This was the period that spanned the reign of the German-born empress Catherine II (Catherine the Great, who ruled from 1762 to 1796) and the reign of her grandson Alexander I (1801-1825), during which Russia was invaded, in 1812, by Napoleon's *Grande Armée*. It was also the heyday of the Russian nobility, who gained self-esteem through their engagement with French culture and their sense of belonging to a European corporation.

Secondly, Coker has produced a linguistic history, or more specifically a history of Russian lexical borrowing from French, although his title does not draw attention to this fact. He sees his examination of loanwords—which is perhaps his principal achievement—as a means of providing "a measure of historical objectivity to the study of French influence on Russian cultural identity" (p. 6). The intended effect of his lexical analysis is to link Russia's present-day culture to major Franco-Russian encounters during the reigns of Catherine and Alexander I, namely French immigration to Russia, both before and after the French Revolution that began in 1789, and the experience of Russians in the course of the Napoleonic Wars, especially in the period 1813-1814. It was at the time of those encounters, he argues, that Russian lexical borrowing reached its peak. After the Napoleonic Wars, borrowing continued steadily, but at a lower level, up until 1917, at which point a lesser peak can be observed that is attributable, Coker thinks, to the inspirational effect of the French Revolution on Russia's own political thinkers.

Having outlined his subject in an introductory chapter, Coker devotes the second of his five chapters to Russian dictionaries, which are among the most important of his many primary sources. He systematically consults nine dictionaries which record the words in use in Russian at various stages from the age of Peter the Great to the early twenty-first century. This set of sources includes the pioneering *Dictionary of the Russian Academy* (1789-1794), which was published towards the end of the reign of Catherine II, dictionaries recording the language of Pushkin and Dostoevsky, and the second edition (1880-1882) of the famous *Explanatory Dictionary* compiled by Vladimir Dal'. For evidence of the Russian lexicon in the post-revolutionary period, he resorts to Dmitrii Ushakov's explanatory dictionary (1935-1940), published in the Stalinist era, the third edition (1953) of Sergei Ozhegov's post-war dictionary, which was initially conceived as a one-volume abridgement of Ushakov's pre-war volumes, and an early twenty-first-century dictionary compiled by Sergei Kuznetsov (2007).

In chapter three, Coker turns to waves of French immigration to Russia, using official documents such as laws, administrative correspondence, and immigration case files to gain an understanding of when, how, and why French men and women came to Russia, what they did for a living, and how they interacted with Russians. He hopes in this way to establish a correlation between the occupations of French people residing in the country and the types of French words entering the Russian language. Many French immigrants arrived in the 1760s and 1770s, when Catherine was encouraging foreigners to come to work in Russia, and they found employment as doctors, merchants, soldiers, teachers, governesses, cooks, bakers, confectioners, valets, maids, hairdressers, seamstresses, shoemakers, bookbinders, goldsmiths, engravers, upholsterers, and so forth. Some immigrants of this first wave were disreputable adventurers and they inspired satirical representations of the French by members of Russia's burgeoning literary community, who had begun to deplore the habit of aping foreigners. Then came those who were fleeing from the French Revolution. These later refugees were more likely to be nobles fearing for their lives in France than *vauriens* hoping to take advantage of Russian ignorance and gullibility.

In chapter four, Coker explores movement in the opposite direction, using the plentiful accounts of Russian army officers whose military service took them to France in 1813-1814, when the Russian army was participating in the European counter-attack against Napoleon after his retreat from Russia. With the command of the French language and the familiarity with French manners and culture that they had acquired from French tutors and governesses during their childhood, these noblemen now underwent a prolonged first-hand encounter with France itself. This experience, Coker explains, could be disconcerting, for Russian officers found themselves in a milieu where "their elite language was the common one" (p. 82). In other words, the cultural marker that indicated their special status in Russia was also the property of cooks and laundresses, not just of high-ranking officers and officials, gentlemen farmers, and society hostesses.

In chapter five, finally, Coker seeks "a more holistic overview of French cultural influences" (p. 11) in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Russia. To this end, he samples Russian periodical publications (the newspaper *Sankt-Peterburgskie vedomosti* [The St Petersburg Gazette] and about ten literary journals, many of them short-lived) which appeared over the period from the eve of the French Revolution to the death of Alexander I in 1825. By looking at advertisements published in periodicals, he affirms the continuing vitality of the Russian market for the services and products of French entrepreneurs resident in Russia even after the Napoleonic Wars. This closing chapter provides insight into Russians' own perceptions of their

cultural encounter with France and demonstrates the entrenchment of ethnic stereotypes which would play a role in the establishment of Russians' sense of their own identity. Criticism of French mores and character went together with a growing sense of Russian moral superiority.

*Russia's French Connection* is generously endowed with figures and tables (fifteen of them, located mainly in chapter two). It also has three appendices which follow its five chapters and conclusion. The first explains the author's "methodology of lexical analysis" (with some recapitulation of matters raised in the first two chapters). The second is a table, 150 pages long, of the French loanwords (many still used, others discarded) that the author has identified in the Russian language. The third is a list of occupations reported by French subjects resident in St Petersburg in 1793 when, following the Jacobins' execution of Louis XVI in Paris, those subjects were required by Catherine, under pain of deportation, to swear an oath of allegiance to the French crown and repudiate the revolution. Unfortunately, though, the book lacks a bibliography. Its two-page index, moreover, is perfunctory and extremely selective: the titles of periodicals sampled, the names of many of the Russian writers mentioned, and most of the scholars cited in the text, for instance, are missing.

Exposure of the full extent of the French cultural influence on Russia that Coker sets out to demonstrate is somewhat hindered by the fact that the hard linguistic evidence of this influence that he adduces is confined to the reception of loanwords. He does not consider calques, for example, or the extension of the meaning of existing Russian words, such as *svet* ("world"), in the light of usage in French, in which *monde* also denotes "society". Nor does he consider phraseological borrowings, such as *igrat' rol'* (in imitation of *jouer un rôle*, "to play a part"), which also abounded in Russian literature from the early nineteenth century (a subject well explored by May Smith in a monograph of 2006).[2]

The Russian loanwords from French that Coker catalogues in his second appendix belong, he thinks, to six broad categories, showing us in which domains the effects of French influence were mainly felt. A large proportion of loanwords (44% of the total Coker identifies) relate to "culture" in a capacious sense of the word. They concern the visual arts (*akvarel', fon, peizazh* are examples), the performing arts (*aktior, p'esa, spektakl'*), music (*kontsert, melodiia, uvertiura*), literature (*ballada, roman, zhannr*), and fashion (*moda*). Many words denoting articles of clothing (*bluza, kostium, shal'*), fabrics (*fanel'*), cuisine (*bul'on, ragu, zhele* ["jelly"]), and drinks (*bordo, kon'iak, shampanskoe*) belong in this category too. Many others have to do with social events (*bal, banket, maskarad*), etiquette (*etiket*), and the norms of the polite society that was coming into being when Russian Gallomania was at its height. The second largest category, making up 23% of all the French loanwords imported into Russian, consists of official terminology, broadly defined by the author as words relating to government structures and procedures (*dekret, departament*), bureaucracy (*biurokrat, reziume*), and diplomacy (*attashe, diplomat*). Economic and financial terms (*kapital, tarif*) also find a place in this category, along with legal terms (*garantirovat', kontrakt*) and many military words (*ataka, patrol', saljut*) or words which were originally used in a military sense but now have broader meaning (*ekipazh, eskort, pudra*). A third category, under the general heading "technology" and amounting to over 18% of the total number of French loanwords, includes terms in the domains of astronomy (*meteor, planeta, zenit*), biology (*al'batros, zhasmin, zhiraf*), chemistry (*azot, gaz, mineral*), and medicine (*gripp, karantin, man'iak*). Next comes a smaller category including words that relate to town planning and urban infrastructure (for instance, *bul'var, shosse, trotuar*) and buildings, including residential accommodation and furnishing (*etazh, koridor, mebel'*). The fifth category, containing just 4% of the total, comprises terms that fall

within the domains of political and social thought (*burzhuaziia, revoliutsiia, roialist*). Finally, there is a small set of terms that relate specifically to France or its history or culture (*iakobinets* ('Jacobin'), *marsel'ezha*). There are, of course, many other loanwords that cannot be easily classified (for instance, *adres, forma, kharakter, kompaniia, manera*) and yet others that seem to be widespread Europeanisms (*deputat, parlament*) rather than specifically French terms.

*Russia's French Connection* has several merits. Coker uses a large quantity and wide variety of primary sources and is alive both to the usefulness and shortcomings of each sort of source. When he has merely sampled material of which there is a huge quantity, such as the periodical press, he tells us how he has gone about the task. By comparison with previous scholars who have studied lexical borrowing, he offers much historical-cultural and socio-linguistic contextualization and commentary. He also makes determined attempts to quantify his findings. Of the 2,983 Russian borrowings from French that he has identified on the basis of his examination of the nine dictionaries he has used, for example, 1,883 words, according to the most recent dictionary he has studied, were still to be found in the early twenty-first-century Russian lexicon. Whereas only 173 French loanwords were recorded in the *Dictionary of the Russian Academy* compiled in the 1790s, he tells us, there were well over 500 such words in Russian by the time Pushkin died in 1837, and a further 497 entered the language in the course of Dostoevsky's literary career, of which 387 were still used in 2007. Again, of the 5,000 words most frequently used in Russian during the period 1950-2007, 278, or 5.6%, are of French origin.

All the same, a few reservations about Coker's book are in order. Many of the Russian borrowings from French that remain in the modern language, being associated with a social stratum that did not survive the October Revolution and with the culture of that stratum, are dated and may have little currency in today's Russian world. We may therefore question whether the impact of French culture on Russian life and identity has been of quite such "lasting" importance or was so "massive" (p. 22) as the author tends to claim. Equally, we may wonder whether "the Franco-Russian cultural bond" was "uniquely important" (p. 3; my italics), even in the eighteenth century, as readers of this book are asked to believe. German technological, pedagogical, masonic, literary, and linguistic influence was already making itself felt during the eighteenth century, and by the mid-nineteenth century German philosophical influence on the Russian intelligentsia was profound. Nor did relative lack of proficiency in English among the Russian elite (at least until the second half of the nineteenth century) preclude extensive Anglo-Russian contacts and indeed Anglophilia among the noble estate. As Coker acknowledges, moreover, English loanwords "would overshadow French borrowings in Russian" (p. 31) when the pace of Russian modernization and industrialization increased in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries and they abound in late Soviet and post-Soviet Russian.

It is also noticeable that Coker has taken no account of many works of scholarship that have a bearing on subjects central to his book. No mention is made, for example, of Nikolai Epishkin's historical dictionary of Gallicisms in Russian.<sup>[3]</sup> Some relevant scholarship, it is true, may have been published too recently for Coker to have been able to make use of it. Informative book chapters by Olga Vassilieva-Codognot on the French language of fashion in early nineteenth-century Russia and by Sergei and Iuliia Klimenko on the influence of French on Russian architectural terminology (both published in 2015) may fall into this category.<sup>[4]</sup> The same can no doubt be said of a volume published by Vladislav Rjéoutski and Dmitrii Guzevich in 2019 which contains over 700 articles on foreign specialists who worked in Russia in the Petrine age.<sup>[5]</sup> It is harder, though, to justify the absence of reference to the substantial corpus of work

published by Rjéoutski and others on the French community in eighteenth-century Russia (as opposed to Rjéoutski's unpublished dissertation of 2003, which Coker does cite). The most serious omission, given the place accorded to French immigration to Russia in Coker's book, is the two-volume biographical dictionary of French (and other francophone) immigrants which Rjéoutski compiled with Anne Mézin (2011)—a work that runs to more than 1,400 pages and the first volume of which has an introduction of some 150 pages on the history of this French diaspora.[6]

These reservations aside, this volume will prove a useful resource for English speakers on the history of French cultural influence on Russia and especially on the substantial element of the Russian lexicon that derives from Russian encounters, since the early eighteenth century, with the continental power at Europe's opposite extremity.

#### NOTES

[1] The pioneering work on this relationship was written over a century ago: see Émile Haumont, *La Culture française en Russie (1700-1900)* (Paris: Hachette, 1910).

[2] May Smith, *The Influence of French on Eighteenth-Century Literary Russian: Semantic and Phraseological Calques* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2006).

[3] Nikolai I. Epishkin, *Istoricheskii slovar' gallitsizmov russkogo iazyka* (Moscow: ETC, 2010).

[4] See Olga Vassilieva-Codognet, "The French Language of Fashion in Early-Nineteenth-Century Russia," in *French and Russian in Imperial Russia. Vol. 2: Language Attitudes and Identity*, Derek Offord, Lara Ryazanova-Clarke, Vladislav Rjéoutski and Gesine Argent eds. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), pp. 156-178; Sergei Klimenko and Iuliia Klimenko, "The Role of French in the Formation of Professional Architectural Terminology in Eighteenth-Century Russia," in *French and Russian in Imperial Russia. Vol. 1: Language Use among the Russian Elite*, Derek Offord, Lara Ryazanova-Clarke, Vladislav Rjéoutski and Gesine Argent eds. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), pp. 209-227.

[5] V. S. Rzhetskii [Rjéoutski] and D. Iu. Guzevich eds., *Inostrannye spetsialisty v Rossii v epokhu Petra velikogo: Biograficheskii slovar' vykhodtsev iz Frantsii, Vallonii, frankoiazychnykh Shveitsarii i Savoii 1682-1727* (Moscow: Lomonosov, 2019).

[6] Anne Mézin and Vladislav Rjéoutski eds., *Les Français en Russie au siècle des Lumières: Dictionnaire des Français, Suisses, Wallons et autres francophones en Russie de Pierre le Grand à Paul 1er*, 2 vols. (Ferney-Voltaire: Centre international d'étude du XVIIIe siècle, 2011).

Derek Offord  
University of Bristol  
[Derek.Offord@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:Derek.Offord@bristol.ac.uk)

Copyright © 2022 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for

---

French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172