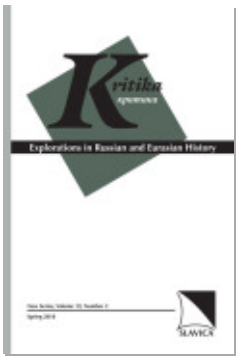
Diplomacy, Ceremonial, and Culture in Early Modern Russia

Damien Tricoire



Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History, Volume 19, Number 2, Spring 2018, pp. 445-453 (Review)

Published by Slavica Publishers
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/kri.2018.0023*

Diplomacy, Ceremonial, and Culture in Early Modern Russia

Damien Tricoire

Jan Hennings, *Russia and Courtly Europe: Ritual and Culture of Diplomacy, 1648–1725*. 310 pp. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. ISBN-13 978-1107050594. $99.99.

Christian Steppan, *Akteure am fremden Hof: Politische Kommunikation und Repräsentation kaiserlicher Gesandter im Jahrzehnt des Wandels am russischen Hof (1720–1730)* (Actors at a Foreign Court: Political Communication and the Representation of Imperial Envoys in a Decade of Change at the Russian Court [1720–30]). 546 pp. Göttingen: V&R unipress, 2016. ISBN-13 978-3847104339. €65.00.

Recently, diplomatic history has undergone a profound renewal thanks to four approaches.[1] First, historians have explored the history of agents of foreign policy. Diplomats are not considered mere executors of state policy anymore but agents in their own right. Scholars analyze their strategies, careers, and (patronage) networks.[2] Historians now also take into consideration the importance of subaltern and informal actors: interpreters, secretaries, women,

[1] In this review, I do not distinguish between "diplomacy" and "foreign relations," although some scholars consider "diplomacy" an anachronistic term because it suggests "international" relations between states. See Christian Windler, "En guise de conclusion: Quelques jalons pour une nouvelle histoire des relations extérieures et de la diplomatie," in *Le diplomate en question (XVe–XVIIIe siècles)*, ed. Eva Pibiri and Guillaume Poisson (Lausanne: Université de Lausanne, 2010), 245–57.

[2] Hillard von Thiessen, *Diplomatie und Patronage: Die spanisch-römischen Beziehungen in akteurszentrierter Perspektive* (Epfendorf: Bibliotheca-Academica-Verlag, 2010); Christian Windler and von Thiessen, eds., *Akteure der Außenbeziehungen: Netzwerke und Interkulturalität im historischen Wandel* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2010); Windler and von Thiessen, eds., *Nähe in der Ferne: Personale Verflechtungen in den Außenbeziehungen der Frühen Neuzeit* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2005).

or churchmen.[3] Second, diplomacy draws the attention of scholars interested in the perception of cultural difference and the shaping of identities. Processes of "othering" are being explored, even if many scholars maintain that the perception of the "Other" was usually not as monolithic as Edward Said suggested in his *Orientalism*.[4] Third, diplomacy is now studied as a set of transcultural practices. According to this stream of scholarship, diplomacy was less a product of existing cultural patterns than a transcultural framework shaped by actors of different cultures. Usually, conflicts were not the product of intercultural misunderstanding but rather a sign that agents of foreign policy shared a common symbolic system.[5] Fourth, the study of rituals and ceremonials in early modern times, which has been especially intensive in the German historical literature and has greatly contributed to the renewal of political history in recent decades, has also contributed to the renewal of diplomatic history.[6] It is now widely accepted that ceremonial was not a matter of secondary importance but constitutive of the hierarchies between princes.

Jan Hennings's *Russia and Courtly Europe* and, to a lesser extent, Christian Steppan's *Akteure am fremden Hof* make contributions to this fourth stream of scholarship. They offer insights into the way rituals shaped politics in the 17th and 18th centuries by integrating Russia further into European diplomatic history. In addition, Hennings's book deepens our knowledge on the history of diplomacy as a transcultural practice, and Steppan's gives some insights into the agency of diplomats.

Both monographs focus on Russian-European diplomatic contacts in early modern times. However, they are very different in character. Steppan's

[3] Corina Bastian, *Verhandeln in Briefen: Frauen in der höfischen Diplomatie des frühen 18. Jahrhunderts* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2013); Bastian, Eva Kathrin Dade, Hillard von Thiessen, and Christian Windler, eds., *Das Geschlecht der Diplomatie: Geschlechterrollen in den Außenbeziehungen vom Spätmittelalter bis zum 20. Jahrhundert* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2014); Heinz Schilling, *Konfessionalisierung und Staatsinteressen: Internationale Beziehungen 1559–1660* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2006), 100–19.

[4] Christian Windler, *La diplomatie comme expérience de l'autre: Consuls français au Maghreb (1700–1840)* (Geneva: Droz, 2012). For Said, see Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1976).

[5] Peter Burschel and Christine Vogel, eds., *Die Audienz: Ritualisierter Kulturkontakt in der Frühen Neuzeit* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2014); Christina Brauner, *Kompanien, Könige und Caboceers: Interkulturelle Diplomatie an der Gold- und Sklavenküste im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2015). See also my explorations of French-Malagassy contacts in *Der koloniale Traum* (forthcoming with Böhlau). On transculturality, see Antje Flüchter's publications, including Flüchter and Jivanta Schöttli, eds., *The Dynamics of Transculturality: Concepts and Institutions in Motion* (Cham: Springer, 2015).

[6] See, e.g., Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger, *Des Kaisers alte Kleider: Verfassungsgeschichte und Symbolsprache des Alten Reichs* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2013).

focus is much narrower than Hennings's: it explores the history of the Viennese envoys and ambassadors in Petersburg in one decade only, whereas Hennings presents case studies of diplomatic contacts in Moscow, London, Paris, and Vienna from 1645 to 1717. Steppan's book, an only marginally revised version of his PhD dissertation, barely presents general analyses and theses about European and Russian diplomacy. It offers instead a "thick description" of diplomatic events in the relations between the imperial courts of Vienna and St. Petersburg during the 1720s. By contrast, *Russia and Courtly Europe* offers a broader not only temporal and spatial, but also thematic and theoretical perspective. Hennings studies the discourse on Russia of scholars specializing in ceremonial questions and analyzes how Russian diplomacy was organized (Steppan does neither). Above all, Hennings asks questions of critical importance for Russian history: to what extent was Muscovite Russia part of the European state system? How far can we speak of a Russian cultural otherness, and did this otherness influence relations between emperors? Hennings's central thesis is that Muscovite diplomacy was not as foreign as scholarship generally argues.

Steppan's *Akteure am fremden Hof* aims to consider envoys as agents of international politics and explore the conditions that shaped their actions and communication strategies. It closely follows the reports of imperial diplomats and adds information from other diplomatic reports, descriptions of ceremonies, and the Vienna court newspaper. The result is a classical study of diplomacy enriched by an analysis of symbolic communication. The central hypothesis of *Akteure am fremden Hof* is that ceremonial questions played a critical role in international relations, a point that has been verified many times in modern scholarship. In particular, it shows that the dispute about the rank of the tsar after Peter I's claim to imperial dignity (1721) made an alliance between Vienna and Petersburg impossible in the early 1720s—a fact that has not gone unnoticed in the older historical literature. Such an alliance was forged in 1726 only after a compromise had been found in the conflict about the new imperial title.

Steppan's study has three parts. The first is a long introduction describing the general conditions of diplomacy and presenting theoretical discussions that are only loosely related to the empirical work that follows. Some assertions are rather vague or unconvincing. For example, Steppan claims that the semantic of gifts has barely changed during the past 300 years (21). A more serious issue is that in describing the conflict resulting from Peter I's new imperial title, Steppan tends to exoticize Muscovite Russia. To be sure, he notes that diplomats across Europe paid great attention to titles and often

argued about them, but at the same time he suggests that "Russian diplomatic agents" had a different "character" from Western ones: they displayed a special "stubbornness and rawness" that shocked West Europeans (86). Such an opposition between Muscovite and European culture, which in part perpetuates the discourse on alleged Russian barbarism, is precisely the point of view that Hennings opposes.

In the second and third part of his book, Steppan describes the diplomatic events of the 1720s in detail. He repeatedly compares diplomatic and ceremonial practice with the advice contained in books for diplomats. The study stays close to primary sources; only rarely does the author relate his own findings to the rich research on symbolic communication or to the cultural history of diplomacy. This sometimes gives the impression that he is reinventing the wheel: the author makes claims that are well known in historical scholarship: for example, when he asserts time and again that ceremonial was not trivial or that diplomatic reports do not present objective descriptions of events.

Another problem is connected to Steppan's critique of the cultural history of diplomacy. According to him, this historiographical stream neglects the "personal component" of diplomacy. In Steppan's eyes, the personal relationship of the ambassador with the ruler and his entourage was decisive for the outcome of diplomatic negotiations. In determining if a diplomat had good personal relations to the Russian court, Steppan points to the rhetoric of friendship.[7] However, one should take into consideration that "friendship" did not mean the same thing in the early 18th century that it does today. Speaking of "friendship" was a way of expressing political loyalty more than personal attachment.[8] Moreover, Steppan's exploration of diplomats' agency does not include detailed analyses of their personal and family strategies and networks. Closer attention to the findings of cultural and social history and the literature on patronage would have given the author further insights.[9] In the end, the methodology used in *Akteure am fremden Hof* does not depart markedly from the old diplomatic history, which is not the case with Hennings's book.

Despite such shortcomings, Steppan's study is useful in its description of communication strategies employed by imperial diplomats in St. Petersburg.

[7] See, e.g., the summary of Ambassador Wratislaw's story on 458–66.

[8] Christian Kühner, *Politische Freundschaft bei Hofe: Repräsentation und Praxis einer sozialen Beziehung im französischen Adel des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Göttingen: V&R unipress, 2013).

[9] See, e.g., Thiessen, *Diplomatie und Patronage;* and Andreas Pečar, *Die Ökonomie der Ehre: Der höfische Adel am Kaiserhof Karls VI. (1711–1740)* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2003).

Steppan expands an underdeveloped field in scholarship about Russia. His focus on the years 1725–30 highlights new empirical data, because this period of severe instability in the Russian leadership is less known than Peter's reign. In particular, Steppan explores the strategies that made it possible to renew diplomatic relations between Vienna and Petersburg despite the dispute over the new Russian imperial title. The imperial title would be omitted in letters or mumbled by envoys (289–91). Steppan also rectifies some assessments that are common in the historical literature. For example, he shows that ambassadors did not create a secret council to influence the outcome of the dispute over Peter's succession in 1725–26 (366). For these reasons, scholars wanting to learn more about diplomatic negotiations and ceremonies in those years will read *Akteure am fremden Hof* with interest.

Hennings's *Russia and Courtly Europe* makes a fundamental contribution to the history of diplomacy. It reacts to the exoticization of Russian diplomacy in scholarship. Far too often, historians have explained conflicts involving ceremonies between West European and Russian diplomats by citing Russia's alleged otherness: conflicts were perceived as the expression of a Muscovite culture obsessed with ceremonies (6–8). Hennings does not look at West European–Russian diplomatic encounters as experiences of cultural otherness. In tune with the scholarship that views diplomacy as a transcultural communication framework, he holds that "conflicts and failure were the sign of participation in a common cultural practice" (249). It was because West European and Russian diplomats shared a common language that they were able to argue over precedence. For example, a conflict over who should dismount first—like the one the English ambassador in Moscow and the Russian *pristav* had in 1663 (145)—could only arise because both sides were aware that this point was of critical importance to the assertion of hierarchy. However, Hennings does not claim that diplomatic ceremonial practice was uniform across Europe. He shows that Russian diplomacy was peculiar in several ways. Hennings thus decides to take a "middle path" (252) between the claim that Russia was different and the assertion that it was alike. At the same time, Hennings insists, ceremonial was diverse throughout "Western" Europe, so that the concept of a dichotomy between Europe and Russia appears highly problematic. Diplomatic ceremonial was also constantly changing, as a consequence of negotiations; it did not result from national traditions.

Russia and Courtly Europe has five chapters. The first two chapters analyze the discursive and institutional structures in which Russian-European diplomatic encounters took place, whereas chapters 3 to 5 present case studies ranging from 1648 to 1725. Hennings found his sources by exploring

the diplomatic archives in Russia, Austria, France, and Great Britain. They consist of printed and unprinted descriptions of ceremonies as well as contemporary scholarly publications about ceremonies (*Zeremonialwissenschaft*).

The first chapter argues that both diplomats and scholars specializing in ceremonial questions considered the Muscovite tsar an integral part of the society of Christian princes, although many of their contemporaries, inspired directly or indirectly by Herberstein's and Olearius's texts on Moscow, framed their description of Russia within the discourse of "barbarism." Moreover, in the long run Herberstein and Olearius also influenced the historical literature, creating the impression of a radical Russian otherness (35–44). Chapter 2 examines the peculiarities of Russian diplomatic practices. These stemmed from the fact that Muscovite bureaucrats wrote exceptionally detailed instructions for diplomats, allowing them only marginal deviations. These instructions from the Foreign Office (Posol´skii prikaz) were based on very detailed reports by former Muscovite ambassadors (*stateinye spiski*). It may thus be true that Muscovite diplomacy was more rigid than that of Western countries. Another peculiarity was that the Muscovite distinction among three classes of diplomats (*posly*, *poslanniki*, *gontsy*) did not correspond to the European distinction between ambassadors and envoys. Whereas in Europe only ambassadors fully represented the sovereign and had to be received with the *honores regii*, all three Muscovite ranks truly represented the tsar. The distinction was rather about the rank of the envoy and the corresponding honor the tsar conferred on foreign princes. European diplomats were also received quite differently in Moscow. In particular, they were constantly guarded and not free to move around the city.

Chapters 3–5 present diverse cases showing that diplomatic incidents and conflicts over ceremonies were very common between Russian and West European diplomats. However, such conflicts did not result from a specific Russian culture but rather from common concerns and a common symbolic language. First, Hennings examines English-Muscovite relations in the wake of the English Revolution. The instauration of the Commonwealth meant a degradation of England's status and Tsar Aleksei took the occasion to expel the English merchants from Moscow. By this gesture, Aleksei demonstrated his solidarity with the English monarchy. However, the restoration of the monarchy in England did not bring about better relations. To be sure, the Russian embassy of 1662/63 was received with special honors in London. But the English embassy to Moscow led by Lord Carlisle in 1663/64 was overshadowed by conflicts about ceremonial. When Carlisle came to Moscow, he had to delay his solemn entry because not all the preparations to receive him

had been made. Although this was probably not deliberate on the Russian side, Carlisle thought his master's prestige was threatened and demanded full reparation through the "blood of the criminals," a demand that the Muscovites refused. This conflict did not result from alleged Russian cultural otherness, however, but from contingencies. The example shows how dependent diplomacy was on chance and how real the impact of accidental circumstances could be.

Because incidents could always provoke major conflicts, it was highly unusual for rulers to travel to foreign countries (except during military campaigns). The only way it could be done was to travel incognito. In this case, people treated the sovereign as if they did not know who he was. In the second case study, Hennings explores such a scenario: Peter I's incognito stay in Vienna in 1698. Hennings shows that, in their interactions with the tsar, the Viennese court used three different communication frameworks with different semiotics and functions. First, costumed *divertissements* enabled the emperor and the tsar to meet without ceremony because both played theatrical roles. Second, incognito meetings between sovereigns had the function of strengthening ties between monarchs. Peter and Leopold met once in 1698. Contrary to costumed *divertissements*, incognito meetings followed strict ceremonial rules, but the absence of the public enabled a symmetry of gestures and thus a symbolic equality between rulers. However, even incognito meetings did not permit a discussion of European politics. This goal could be reached only thanks to a third communication framework, negotiations between diplomats. Negotiations were free of ceremonial practice because they took place in the greatest secrecy. Such concealment was necessary because a public exchange of divergent views would have threatened the status of, and the friendship between, the sovereigns.

In what follows, Hennings examines the history of Peter's visit to Paris in 1717. Peter was traveling incognito again, but this does not mean that his stay in France was devoid of ceremony. The reception of the tsar was a puzzle for the masters of ceremonies, who had to pay the greatest respect to Peter without being able to grant him the *honores regii*. This example shows that it was not possible to free oneself from protocol, but that at the same time the presence of a sovereign traveling incognito could be handled with great flexibility.

The last chapter explores the changes in ceremonial practice in Russia under Peter I. Hennings makes nuanced statements. He acknowledges that major changes did take place. For example, the Russians adopted the distinction between ambassadors and envoys; they collected foreign writings about ceremonies more systematically and relied less exclusively on the *stateinye spiski*

of former ambassadors as a source of information. Muscovite diplomatic ceremonial was less self-referential than a few decades previously. However, the Foreign Office did not chasnge its practices suddenly and radically, and the resulting ceremonies were more a mix of the old and the new than a pure adoption of "European" norms.

Hennings also deconstructs the myth according to which Peter rejected ceremony (202–3). For example, Peter took advantage of the arrest of his ambassador, Count Andrei Matveev, in London by English bailiffs in 1708 (Matveev had large debts) to ask for symbolic rseparations and stage the glory resulting from his recent victory at Poltava. Hennings also offers insight into the history of the birth of diplomatic immunity. He shows that the law passed in 1708 by the British Parliament guaranteeing such immunity—celebrated in legal history as a major achievement in the creation of modern statehood—was originally conceived as an instrument designed to placate the Russian tsar during the Matveev affair.

Finally, Hennings interprets Peter's new imperial title as a strictly ceremonial matter. According to him, the title was based not on a new conception of the empire but only on the desire for a ceremonial treatment above that of kings. Because this treatment was not granted, Hennings considers the adoption of the new title as only semisuccessful. However, studies by Yuri Slezkine, Michael Khodarkovsky, and Ricarda Vulpius show that a completely new conception of the Russian Empire did emerge under Peter I. This empire identified with both the Roman Empire and the modern European colonial empires. This creation of a Russian empire went hand in hand with a wholly new policy toward "barbarian" and "savage" peoples. Indigenous (non-Orthodox) people were not treated as "foreigners" anymore, but—as in the Roman, the French, and the Spanish empires—as imperial subjects who should be civilized.[10] Therefore, we cannot avoid asking whether there was a link between the new imperial title and these new imperial claims and policies. The imperial title may not have been only a ceremonial matter.

The tighter integration of Muscovite Russia into European history is more than welcome. But certainly a broader perspective would add further

[10] Yuri Slezkine, *Arctic Mirrors: Russia and the Small Peoples of the North* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994); Michael Khodarkovsky, *Russia's Steppe Frontier: The Making of a Colonial Empire, 1500–1800* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002); Rikarda Vul´pius [Ricarda Vulpius], "Vesternizatsiia Rossii i formirovanie rossiiskoi tsivilizatorskoi missii v XVIII veke," in *Imperium inter pares: Rol´ transferov v istorii rossiiskoi imperii, 1700–1917*, ed. Martin Aust, Vulpius, and Aleksei Miller (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2010), 14–41; Vulpius, "Strategies of Civilizing Non-Russian Subjects in the Eighteenth Century," in *Enlightened Colonialism: Civilization Narratives and Imperial Politics in the Age of Reason*, ed. Damien Tricoire (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

insights. Muscovite Russia had intensive diplomatic contacts not only with its Western neighbors but also with the steppe peoples. *Russia and Courtly Europe* does not undertake to compare Russian diplomatic relations with the West and with the "East" (rather, the South). It would also be fruitful to compare more precisely the diplomatic relations of Russia with Western powers with the findings of scholarship on transculturality. But this may be too much for one book. In conclusion, I would like to stress that the argument of *Russia and Courtly Europe* is very convincing. Hennings has written a monograph rich in new insights. It is a great example of how the study of symbolic communication can renew diplomatic history.

Martin-Luther-Universität
Philosophische Fakultät I
Institut für Geschichte
06099 Halle, Germany
damien.tricoire@geschichte.uni-halle.de