

## Book Review

**Derek Offord, Vladislav Rjéoutski and Gesine Argent. 2018. *The French Language in Russia: A Social, Political, Cultural, and Literary History* (Languages and Culture in History). Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press. ISBN 9789462982727 (hardback), 702 pp. €45.00.**

Reviewed by **Tomasz Kamusella**, School of History, University of St Andrews, St Katharine's Lodge, The Scores, St Andrews, KY16 9BA, UK, E-mail: tdk2@st-andrews.ac.uk  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3484-8352>

<https://doi.org/10.1515/jhsl-2018-0029>

The monumental monograph offers a great insight on the important subject, often mentioned in literature on the Russian Empire, but rarely described or analyzed in detail. Perhaps, for scholars who stemmed from the ranks of central and eastern Europe's country-specific nobilities-turned-national intelligentsias, the subject was so obvious that it became transparent to their eye. Many came from the Francophone noble milieu until the mid-twentieth century. Hence, from their perspective there was no need to explain themselves to themselves. Only when French did disappear as the region's main lingua franca of high-flying scholarship and social advancement in the wake of the Second World War, the comprehension of the ethnically non-French Francophone noble society began waning. However, French remained the leading idiom of (pan-) European diplomacy until the fall of communism, while the last scholars of the aforementioned vanished milieu were active in the academia until the turn of the twenty-first century, for instance, Iurii Lotman (1922–1993) in the Soviet Union (Estonia and Russia), or Paweł Hertz (1918–2001) in Poland.

This study exemplifies the rarely used possibilities of teamwork in the social sciences and shows the path for more team-written monographs, which as yet are *rarae aves*. The skills and expertise of the book's three authors complement one another, resulting in a multifaceted and in-depth survey and analysis of the subject matter at hand. This book gestated at the University of Bristol as Derek Offord's four-year project 'The History of the French Language in Russia' (2011–2015). The other two authors, Vladislav Rjéoutski (now in the German Historical Institute in Moscow) and Gesine Argent (now at the University of Edinburgh), joined this project as postdoctoral fellows. A host of other institutions and scholars from across Europe supported, contributed to or advised on the project. It is evident that it evoked much interest and fills an important gap in the store of knowledge for the interdisciplinary group of historians and sociolinguists (alongside specialists in literature and cultural studies), who investigate the eastern half of early modern Europe.

With the advantage of this reference-like tome, other scholars will now be able to build more incisive and better-evidenced arguments that should decisively transcend the oft-repeated platitudes about the Russian nobility's bilingualism or monolingualism in French. An off-the-cuff remark will not do any longer. One will need to get down to the nitty gritty workings of actual oral and written exchanges in French, including their multilingual and sociopolitical context. To a degree an aristocratic salon in a Russian city of the eighteenth or nineteenth century was not dissimilar (less electronic gadgets) from present-day gatherings of scholars or politicians from multiple member states of the European Union. The dynamic equilibrium of the EU's official (and unofficial) languages is all the time negotiated and questioned, with a reasoned (though not liked) compromise on English as the main *lingua franca*. This does not preclude that at times German or French is preferred. Irrespective of few politicians' radical appeals for removing English from its over-privileged position after (if?) Britain leaves the EU, it is bound to remain the Union's leading working language. Similarly, French was retained in its role of the sociolect of Russia's multiethnic and multilingual nobility, even after the genocidal in scale war against the Napoleonic armies of the French Empire in 1812–1815. The Russian troops entered Paris, but their noble commanders, instead of rejecting French language and culture, rather repossessed it, making it Russian, too, also by the right of conquest.

The monograph opens with Chapter 1 on the presentation of the history of early modern Russia and its westernization. Chapter 2 surveys the discussions on the choice among and the roles of English, German, French and Latin as the leading medium of westernization and education in Imperial Russia. Chapters 3 and 4 present the sociopolitical uses of French in the imperial court and among the aristocracy in the capital of St Petersburg and some other Russian cities. It appears, however, that, as Chapter 5 shows, the domain where French was employed most intensively and at the highest level in imperial Russia was, unsurprisingly, diplomacy, given that at that time this language was the universally accepted *lingua franca* of all Europe's nobility and high classes, including – with some qualifications – the Ottoman Empire. (Nevertheless, all the diplomatic documentation, even if in French, needed to be translated into Russian until 1758, when forwarded to St Petersburg [p. 286]). In the Imperial Academy of Sciences French was also given a privileged position, as a 'leading language of science and scholarship.' But in the Russian academia the earlier dominant employment of Latin and German was also preserved. Chapter 6 probes into the textuality of Russia's written French, including the playful jotting of this language in Cyrillic (p. 225). Among other things, the exercise displayed the Russian nobility's growing cultural confidence, and also symbolized the fact that Russia had successfully

joined Europe (and the West) as a main world power. But critics did not fail to point out what they saw as Russia's deficiencies, when comparing the empire to France or Britain. Russian thinkers replied with projects of more westernizing reforms, often penned in French for foreign consumption, as Chapter 7 shows. On the other hand, patriotic civil servants, including Empress Catherine herself (p. 414), counterattacked with self-serving propaganda written and published in French. One would think that the bloody conflict between Napoleonic France and Imperial Russia would end the latter country's love story with French language and culture. But Chapter 8, devoted to language attitudes, proves that replacing one language of wider communication with another or the ethnic ('national') one is never an easy matter, even if such a move is limited to a polity's narrow noble elite of about 1%. Never-ending debates and vacillation between the Scylla and Charybdis of Gallophilia and Gallophobia lasted until the 1917 Revolution. And even beyond this hard sociopolitical cesura, numerous French loans and calques remain in Russian vocabulary and syntax to this day. Curiously, despite all the revolutionary changes, Bolsheviks left this heavily Gallicized Russian largely untouched, but for a couple of inconsequential spelling changes. Unlike in the case of the Turkish language in republican Turkey (Lewis 1999), no revolutionary overhaul of Russian was ever undertaken. The monograph concludes with Chapter 9. It zooms in on the use of French in the nineteenth-century Russian literature, with the pride of place given to Lev Tolstói's oeuvre, on account of the much repeated (and to a degree correct) assertion that half of the first edition (1868–1869) of his most famous novel *War and Peace* was written in this language. But even then the author did not expect his readers to know French, which was the sociolect of the empire's tiny noble elite. In footnotes all the French-language dialogs were given in Russian translation.

The volume's extensive research basis is showcased in the bibliography of 70 pages, which accounts for 10% of the book's text. The unpublished primary sources at 20 pages and the published ones at 16 pages rewardingly constitute half of the bibliography. However, out of the 16 Russian archives penetrated, all of them are based in St Petersburg and Moscow but one, namely the provincial archive in Tver' (p. 29). Sadly, a mere three documents from the Tver' archive made it to the volume (p. 604).

Strangely, for the story, which involves huge and widely variegated spaces (in ethnic, political, religious or cultural sense), not a single map of Imperial Russia is provided. This de-historicized approach to territory and administrative divisions results in confusing anachronistic usages, for instance, 'Ukraine' in 1825 (pp. 149–150), though the intended present-day denotation for the lands from Galicia to Donbas emerged only at the turn of the twentieth century. The same is true of some place-names, referred to with its modern forms, instead of

the historical ones. Hence, in the book it is Vilnius (p. 87), though in the early nineteenth century it was rendered Wilno, and after 1840, Vil'na. On the other hand, Eylau is referred to with its German historical name (p. 110), but without giving the town's present-day Polish form, namely, Iława. Although an awareness is signaled that the monograph's 'Poland' was none other than the Commonwealth of the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL) (p. 87), the term 'Poland' is typically employed for referring to this composite monarchy, for instance, when talking about the 'partitions of Poland' (p. 91). Using the Polish-language term *Rzeczpospolita*, or its Russian counterpart *Rech' Pospolitaia* could be a good solution, or at least 'Poland-Lithuania' ought to be employed consistently (cf. Kamusella 2017).

Conceptually, it is simplistic to speak of the Russian 'nation', which appears the preferred English translation of the Russian term *narod* (p. 52). In the Russian Empire's society of estates, until 1905, only the nobility constituted the (political) nation. Hence, both this nobility and the empire were *Rossiiskii*, while the adjective *Russkii* referred to the Orthodox Slavophones (overwhelmingly serfs) from the empire's Muscovian core (cf. 53). The latter term was gradually extended to cover the Orthodox Slavic-speaking populations in St Petersburg's partition zone of Poland-Lithuania, but Belarusians and Ukrainians rejected this imposition in the twentieth century. Part and parcel of this politically motivated conceptual extension was the question of the name of the Russian language itself, which was changed from *Rossiiskii* to *Russkii* during the 1830s. I realize the authors' focus is on the ethnoconfessional and ethnolinguistic *Russkii* segment of the *Rossiiskii* nobility. But it is a clear disservice to the monograph's explanatory potential, given that Polish-Lithuanian nobles constituted two-thirds of the *Rossiiskii* nobility in 1858 (Becker 1985: 182), the share dropping slowly to 46% in 1897, when Russia's nobles amounted to 1.2 million (Lieven 2006: 230). Hence, *Russkii* nobles constituted no more than a fifth to a quarter of all the empire's nobility.

The rise of French as the estate language of the Russian (*Rossiiskii*) multiethnic nobility is indelibly connected to the earlier established use of this language as the sociolect of the Polish-Lithuanian nobility. Since the sixteenth century the *Rech' Pospolitaia* had been Muscovy's other and arch-enemy, while on the other hand, also the conduit for pre-Petrine modernization in Muscovy, channeled through the GDL's official Cyrillic-based language of Ruthenian (known as *Litovskii* 'Lithuanian' or *Volynskii* 'Volhynian' in Muscovy), and later also through Polish (cf. Garbul' 2009, Garbul' 2014). Muscovite scholars, despite the confessional dislike of the Catholic idiom of Latin identified it as the meta-language through which 'progress' arrived in Poland-Lithuania. Latin was *the* medium of the Catholic pan-European educational system for *all* (male) nobles, and on its Romance basis the working command of

French spread, too, in the function of the worldly language of refinement. Between 1772 and 1815, St Petersburg annexed four-fifths of Poland-Lithuania, alongside the majority of this commonwealth's nobles. In this manner, Russia's nobility became French-speaking overnight, thanks to the incorporation of the Polish-Lithuanian counterpart. What is more, following the 1773 suppression of the Society of Jesus, Empress Catherine chose to retain Jesuits and their Latin-medium educational system in the lands seized from Poland-Lithuania in the first partition (1772). The Jesuits were expelled from Russia only in 1820, that is, half a decade after the official restoration of the Society of Jesus in 1815. The rump Poland-Lithuania took over the Jesuit educational system in 1773, renaming it the *Komisyyja nad Edukacją Młodzi Szlacheckiej Dozór Mająca* (Commission for the Education of the Noble Youth). Polish replaced Latin as the medium of education, but the extensive teaching of French was retained. Actually, Polish-Lithuanian nobles preferred to read novels in French until the mid-nineteenth century, pointing to a stable diglossia in this sphere (Althoen 2000: 480–494). Russia took over this Polish-Lithuanian educational system and made its Polish-medium University of Wilno into the empire's largest university, which produced the majority of Russia's university graduates until the 1830s. Then this system was streamlined with the rest of the empire and Russian superseded Polish as its medium of instruction (Beauvois 2010). In the mid-1820s Adam Mickiewicz (a graduate of Wilno University) and Aleksandr Pushkin – credited with the creation of modern Polish and Russian, respectively – met and made friends during their internal exile in Odessa and Crimea. They spoke and corresponded in French, and translated each other's poems, Mickiewicz into Polish and Pushkin into Russian. Despite later political differences, Mickiewicz wrote and published a French-language obituary of Pushkin. Ironically from the perspective of today's norm of ethnolinguistic nationalism in central and eastern Europe, and quite revealingly, the first-ever document which explicitly proclaimed Polish as a polity's official language was Emperor Alexander I's French-language Constitution (1815) for Russia's (Congress) Kingdom of Poland (*Charte* 1815). The last Polish-Lithuanian monarch, Stanisław August Poniatowski (1732–1798), wrote his extensive memoirs in French, which for the first time were published in their entirety by the Russian Academy of Sciences, the first volume in 1914 in Petrograd, while volume two in 1924, already in Leningrad (Stanislas 2012). Oscar Milosz (1877–1939; a relative of Nobel laureate Czesław Miłosz) was a *Rossiiskii* nobleman of a GDL origin who successfully published his French poetry and prose in France. After the Great War he identified as a Lithuanian and represented Lithuania in the League of Nations. However, due to his poor command of Lithuanian, Milosz corresponded with his government in French, in order not to use Polish, because of the interwar enmity between Lithuania and Poland. Are this poet-cum-diplomat and the aforementioned king-philosopher part of French, Lithuanian, Polish or Russian history and culture?

Perhaps, of all of them, and certainly of the history of French language and culture in the Russian Empire.

These examples prove amply that the history of the French language in Imperial Russia cannot be successfully written and analyzed without taking into consideration the empire's Polish-Lithuanian lands and nobility. Likewise, any sound research into the history of the British Empire needs to reflect on the participation of ethnic Irishmen, Scots, or Welshmen in this imperial project. The monograph under review is a promising start. The authors covered thoroughly the rise of French as the leading tongue of the Russian imperial court and diplomacy, the sociolect of the Russian multiethnic nobility, and an increasingly preferred language of scholarship and upward social mobility. The story is steeped in a wealth of archival and printed sources. Hence, the monograph is a veritable and multifaceted social and political history of the French language in the Russian Empire. Hopefully, in the near future, other scholars will take up the rewarding challenge of probing further into different aspects of the fascinating subject of Imperial Russia's Francophonie.

## References

- Althoen, David M. 2000. *That noble quest: From true nobility to enlightened society in the polish-lithuanian commonwealth, 1550-1830*. Ann Arbor MI: University of Michigan dissertation.
- Beauvois, Daniel. 2010. *Wilno – polska stolica kulturalna zaboru rosyjskiego 1803–1832* [Wilno: The Polish cultural capital of the Russian partition zone]. Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego.
- Becker, Seymour. 1985. *Nobility and privilege in late imperial Russia*. DeKalb IL: Northern Illinois University Press.
- Charte Constitutionnelle du Royaume de Pologne. 1815. <http://unikdoc.rusarchives.ru/GRSearch/Search/Details/74833797-e050-4df9-9476-747d0a16eb79?AspxAutoDetectCookieSupport=1> (accessed 10 May 2019).
- Garbul', Liudmila. 2009. *Semanticheskie polonizmy v russkom prikaznom iazyke pervoi poloviny XVII veka*. Vilnius: Vilniaus Universiteto Leidykla.
- Garbul', Liudmila. 2014. *Leksicheskie polonizmy v russkom prikaznom iazyke pervoi poloviny XVII veka*. Vilnius: Vilniaus Universiteto Leidykla.
- Kamusella, Tomasz. 2017. *The un-Polish Poland, 1989 and the Illusion of regained historical continuity*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lewis, Geoffrey. 1999. *The Turkish language reform: A catastrophic success* (Oxford Linguistics). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lieven, Dominic. 2006. *The Cambridge history of Russia, Vol 2. Imperial Russia, 1689–1917*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Stanislas Auguste. 2012. *Mémoires*, edited by Anna Grześkowiak-Krwawicz and Dominique Triaire. Paris: Institut d'études slaves.