

## Reports of Foreign Writers and Travellers on 16th-Century Pskov and Russia

On the threshold of modern times, in the first half of the sixteenth century, Pskov, which in 1510 became part of the single Moscow state, was, as it were, rediscovered by the Western world<sup>1</sup>.

After the abolition in 1494 of the German Gostiny Dvor (row of shops) in Novgorod, an expanding flow of foreign goods streamed to the town on the Velikaya River. Pskov (the local German Gostiny Dvor was not closed down) was becoming a major seat of international trade in Eastern Europe, and in this respect it took for some time the place of Novgorod. The Baltic German and Lithuanian merchants brought to Pskov metals, textiles, salt, herring and wines, getting in exchange wax, grain leather, as well as such new goods as flax, hemp and fat. From the town on the Velikaya River the merchant routes spread out to Riga, Vilna, Dorpat, Narva, Revel, Danzig and Lübeck. Pskov also maintained contacts with many Russian and Byelorussian towns. In the course of the sixteenth century Pskov's local and transit trade was developing at such a pace that it became a most important factor in the economic life of the countries of the Baltic region.

Despite the wars and the difficulties in the relations between Russia and the Baltic and Scandinavian states, the interest shown by foreigners in Pskov with its prospering economy, a vast and abundant market and a rich agricultural area was steadily growing. Through the town on the Velikaya passed one of the main land routes to Moscow which linked the capital with Dorpat, Riga and more distant places. In Pskov, besides the merchants, there was a growing number of foreign embassies, hired craftsmen, technicians and servicemen.

The town on the Velikaya was the first large Russian centre on the way inland. Its very appearance impressed the visitors. In the first half of the sixteenth century it attained the maximum size for medieval towns, occupying, according to my calculations, an area of 230 hectares. It comprised four large independently fortified districts (the Kremlin, Sredni Gorod, Okolni Gorod and Zapskovie<sup>2</sup>). As regards the extension and the strength of fortifications, Pskov at that time held the lead in the country. With respect to the length of the stone walls (about 7 km) which embraced its territory, it practically had no match among Russian fortresses up to the last quarter of the sixteenth century.

The first regular reports of foreign writers about Pskov and its environs date from the first half and the middle of the sixteenth century. As a rule, the authors themselves did not visit the town, their writings being based on the accounts of eye-witnesses, ambassadors' messages and even on the stories of prisoners of war. Among the writers who dealt with Pskov were such noted scientists, diplomats and ecclesiastics as Mathew Mechovsky, Albert Campenese, Paul Iovii, Johann Fabr, Sigizmund Herberstein, Sebastian Münster, Rafael Barberini, Jakob Ulfeldt and others. Often, not being familiar with each other's works, they with a striking

unanimity, created in their writings a majestic portrait of Pskov, on the whole objective and favourable.

Pskov was called a remarkable town, the only one in Russia which was divided into fortified parts. It was described as filled with the good things of life, full of light, of festive appearance with its white belfries and temples. According to my estimates, the number of church and monastery buildings in the town was about 100–110, but to the eye-witnesses they seemed to be four times as many. The amiable disposition and cordiality of the townsfolk were noted. Those, indeed, were superficial impressions, but behind them were the realities which reflected the economic well-being of the local population.

The development of the town in the course of the first half of the sixteenth century was summed up by Paul Oderborn, the Protestant minister well-versed in Russian affairs, in his pamphlet »The life of the Great Moscow sovereign Ivan Vasilievich» (1584). Oderborn writes that »the town (Pskov-A.K.) was famous for the splendour of its buildings, its vast population, abundance of wealth and fertility of soils; it was surrounded by impregnable walls and fortified with towers, the appearance of the town was very beautiful. Merchants from Persia, Tartary, Sarmatia (meaning Muscovy-A.K.), Livonia, Germany, Britain and many other countries were visiting it as it was quite famous for its market» (Pauli Oderbornii, 1841, p. 248).

There are comprehensive descriptions of Pskov at the time of its siege in 1581–1852 by the Polish and Lithuanian army under the command of King-Stephen Bathory. Those reports are an important source of information supplementing Russian records. Pskov of that time was compared with large Polish and Italian cities and Danzig. »We admire Pskov, – wrote a participant in the siege the Polish Roman-Catholic priest Jan Piotrovski. God, what a large town like Paris. Help us, God, to overcome it» (Dnevnik, 1882, p. 92).

The enthusiastic remarks about the town peculiar to the writings of the first half of the sixteenth century now gave way to business-like records of military character. They dealt with the defence of the town, the fortitude and courage of the townspeople, the assaults and skirmishes, the armaments and fortifications. The latter deserve special mention.

The literary works, diaries and dispatches of the contemporaries – Daniel Hermann, Laurence Müller, Jan Piotrovski, Antonio Posservino and Rheingold Heidenstein contain, among other information, reports of the erection in Pskov, right next to the stone walls, of timber earth-filled walls – »tarases» (from the French »terrace» – an earth bank), and of additional new towers, sometimes referred to as »bastei».

The emergency fortification of the stone fortress with earth and timber did not signify a return to pre-gunpowder fortification, it was rather a peculiar form of bastion engineering. Not infrequently the earth-filled tarases withstood, better than stone walls, the breaching force of cannon balls which, without breaking the timber framework, stuck in their earth filling (Kirpichnikov, 1979, p. 476). Such obstacles were also built to fill gaps in the stone walls. The citizens of Pskov erected under enemy fire a timber duplicate of the stone fortress, a blockhouse, according to Western authors. In the course of military preparations the defenders of the town mastered extensively the efficient method of strengthening permanent work, recently introduced in Europe.

The above-mentioned bastei, the towers open at the top and semicircular in groundplan, also proved to be useful in Pskov in 1581–1582. True, those structures differed from classic bastei, being three-tiered gate towers of a peculiar shape with a

passage Г-shaped in groundplan (zakhaby). Platforms for cannon built inside the walls (raskaty) were also a modification of bastei.

Thus, in the light of foreign reports on the siege of 1581–1582 Pskov appears to have been a place where, in a distinctive manner, use was made of innovations in European military engineering. It should be pointed out that the timely fortification of Pskov helped its defenders to stand the siege whose outcome was to decide the fate of the northern territories of Russia.

In 1580–1590 Pskov was recovering its economic and trade position impaired during the Russo-Polish War. Dating to that time are the first special fairly detailed descriptions of the town made by the German travellers Samuel Kiechel and Johann David Wunderer. The former visited Pskov in 1586 and the latter in 1590. Extracts from their writings dealing with Russia and Pskov have now been translated for the first time from German into Russian. They contain many unfamiliar details concerning life in Pskov, the daily round and the customs of its inhabitants, the sight of the town and its environs. Many of those details are not to be encountered in the Russian sources. Below are some of the instances.

Of considerable ethnographic interest is the eye-witness account of S. Kiechel of the funeral customs of Pskov citizens. He was surprised by burials in large pits covered with a wooden roof, which were filled with earth only after several thousand dead bodies had been laid there. Curiosity led the German traveller to one of such pits and he even gave a tip to have the door opened and went down to look round with difficulty, as he writes, in the half-dark. The site of common graves described by Kiechel can be unmistakably recognized as the still existent cemetery in Zavelichie near the church of Wives the Peace-makers «na skudelnitsakh».

Skudelnitsa (a burial ground for suicides), according to ethnographic evidence, consisted of a shed with a pit for burying the dead. The opinion has been expressed in the literature that such burial grounds were intended for suicides, robbers, thieves, drunkards, victims of diseases, famine and frost, in a word, for those to be buried without a funeral service. In fact, however, and Kiechel is unambiguous about it, buried in the common graves were also all indigent and poor people» who had no money to pay for church funeral services and burial» (Haszler, 1866, s. 117).

Taking a walk on a floating bridge spanning the Velikaya River, Kiechel saw a funeral procession with a priest at the head. It was summer, but the corpse was carried on a sledge. The German traveller thus witnessed the international custom of taking a dead body to the cemetery on a sledge, lasting from distant Indo-European antiquity and unrecorded, as regards Pskov, in any other source. In Ugrian Russia and in the Vologda region, as well as with the southern Slavs the custom survived until the nineteenth century. The chronicle of 1015 first reports of the custom in connection with the funeral of Prince Vladimir Svyatoslavich. The bodies of some Russian princes and tsars were taken to the resting place in that manner both in winter and in summer. In Pskov the sledge carried the coffin of a commoner. This fact relating to the ways of the townsfolk in the sixteenth century is not taken account of in historical literature. Apparently, the ancient heathen custom was observed in medieval Russia without social restrictions and was more common than we have so far supposed.

I cannot help mentioning, in conclusion, J. D. Wunderer's intriguing report stating that in the environs of Pskov he saw «two idols of yore put up by priests who worshipped them, namely Uslad, whose stone image holds a cross in his hand, and Khors, who stands on a serpent with a sword in one hand and lightning (literally, ray of fire) in the other» (J. D. Wunderer, 1812, s. 203). This report was distrusted or

altogether ignored by historians. That attitude was partly due to the fact that Wunderer called the nameless images he saw by the names of heathen Slav deities which he borrowed from S. Herberstein's work »Notes on Muscovite Affairs» (first edition 1549).

Nevertheless Wunderer's report, in my opinion, deserves consideration. As a rule, it was quoted only in excerpts. The German traveller, however, writes that the images were near the field camp of Stephen Bathory whose army, as mentioned above, besieged Pskov in 1581–1582. By coincidence, it was precisely in the vicinity of Bathory's camp (its site has now been established) near the Promezhitsa (a tributary of the Velikaya) that a damaged stone idol was found late in the nineteenth century which can be compared to one of Wunderer's descriptions. It appears to be the sun god, Dazhbog or Khors, whose attribute – a cross – can be partly distinguished on the idol that has been found near the Promezhitsa. The description of the other image, that has not yet been found, the one with a sword and lightning, seems to identify it as Perun.

Without going into details of the search undertaken in connection with the 1590 report, I would suggest that Wunderer described an ancient heathen sanctuary long abandoned by the sixteenth century. This conclusion offers new prospects for studying the paganism of ancient Slavs. Incidentally, Wunderer's travel notes contain quite a few other trustworthy and verifiable impressions of Pskov.

Of course, not only actual facts were described by foreigners when they wrote about Russia. In their writings sometimes, truth and good will are side by side with falsehood and animosity. These mostly valuable, but occasionally intricate, sources require careful study. Of particular interest is trustworthy information which enriches the history of Russian culture by some important new evidence and discoveries. As for the foreign reports on Pskov (partially quoted here), irrespective of their evaluation, they are indicative of the great interest in Russia, attractive, formidable and sometimes enigmatic for contemporaries, in its people, customs and towns. Pskov, a major European city, was for the Russians a kind of outlet to Europe. A fruitful exchange of technological and cultural achievements between the West and the East was carried on there. The concrete ways in which such mutual enrichment was taking place is the subject of further investigations.

<sup>1</sup> The present communication being a summary of the author's more comprehensive work »Foreign writers and travellers about 16th–17th-century Pskov and Russia», detailed footnotes are unnecessary.

<sup>2</sup> Another small fortified part of the town, viz. Dovmontov Gorod, lying between the Kremlin and Sredni Gorod, is also included.

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