

Foreign doctors



for Russian Tsars

Here is an interesting historical fact: Russian monarchs frequently trusted foreigners with their health. Why? Foreign doctors were thought to be more skilled, and the fact that they didn't speak Russian well meant that they couldn't take part in palace intrigues!

Old Russian chronicles point to the fact that as far back as the 10th century, grand prince of Kiev Vladimir the Great, who Christianized the Kievan Rus, had a Cuman doctor (Cumans were a Turkic nomadic people) named Ivanets Smer. He learned medicine during a trip to Bukhara and the Armenian city of Ani, located in the foothills of Mount Ararat. Even back then, it was a tradition for princes to have personal foreign doctors. The Greek philosopher Agapit, for example, was Prince Vladimir II Monomakh's personal doctor. After the center of power moved to Moscow, attitudes toward foreign doctors remained the same. Chronicles from the 14th century serve as evidence of the fact that Dmitry Donskoy, winner of the Battle of Kulikov, had graduates from the best universities of Europe and the Byzantine Empire as doctors.

Between the Blade and Chopping Block

Nonetheless, until Ivan III of Russia ascended the throne, foreign doctors were still relatively rare occurrences. Real pilgrimages of foreign doctors to Russia started during the reign of Ivan III of Russia. The establishment of professional medicine in Russia owes a lot to foreign doctors. This is undoubtedly related to the expansion of Russia's foreign relations. Ivan III's marriage to the Greek Princess Sophia Palaeologus prompted, among other interactions, the arrival of many foreign doctors in Moscow.

Obviously, different types of doctors came to Moscow. Not all of them became famous. An example is the tragic fate of Anton Nemchin, who came to Moscow in 1485. At first, the tsar was happy with the doctor. However, Anton Nemchin was then asked to cure the Tartar prince Karakuch, from prince Daniar's suite in Moscow. Unfortunately, the doctor was unable to cure him, and the terminally ill prince died in the doctor's arms. As punishment, Anton Nemich was executed on the Moscow River. Leon Zhidonov's life also ended tragically under Ivan III. The Venetian doctor tried to cure Ivan III's son, who was suffering from rheumatism. To ease the heir's pain, Leon burned the prince's legs with hot glass containers and gave him medicinal herbs to drink, but it was no use. The doctor essentially signed his own death sentence, bragging to the tsar: "I will definitely

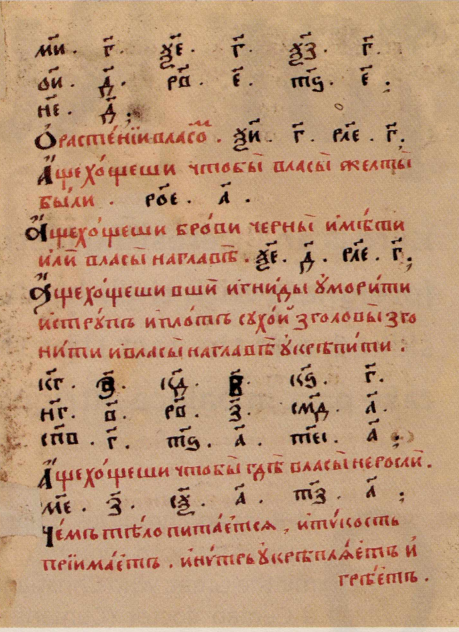
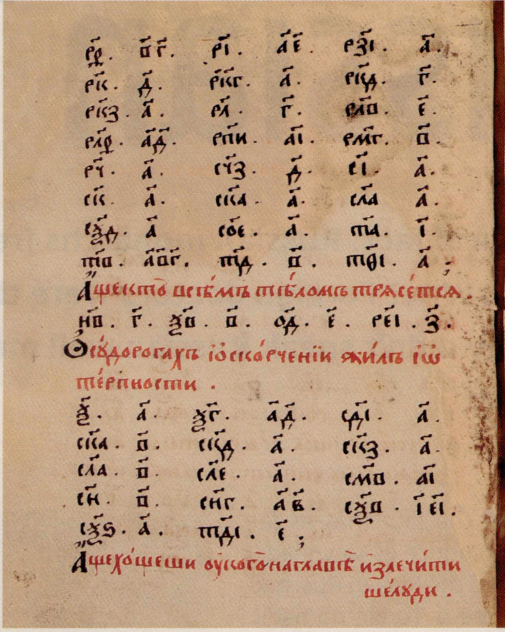
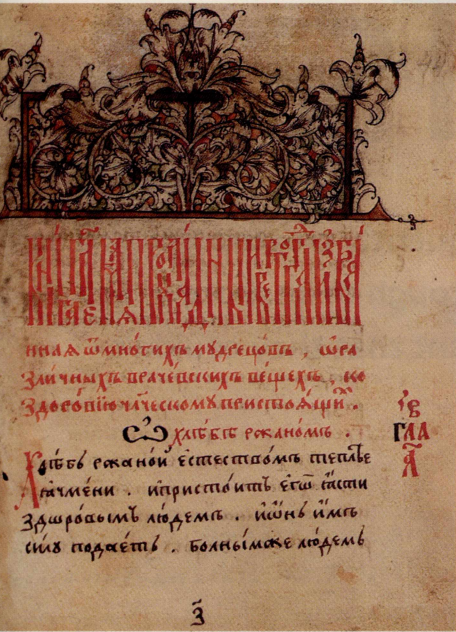


cure your son, and if I don't you can execute me." The treatment didn't work, the heir died and the tsar ordered Zhidonov's execution forty days later.

It may seem like this kind of cruelty would discourage doctors from coming to Russia, but it didn't! Foreign doctors continued to arrive in our country. At the same time, it would also be unfair to say that the majority of court physicians during Ivan III's reign met a tragic end. Nicolo Lyubatsenze, a medic who arrived in Moscow in 1518 from Lübeck, left a big mark on the history of the Middle Ages. He is the author of the translation and Russian edition of one of the most popular medical texts of that time, "Vertograd", which contained recommendations for looking after sick people, lists of medicinal herbs and medical recipes.

Ivan the Terrible's Punishment

The English physician Elisha Bomeley, who served Ivan the Terrible's court, also acquired a bad reputation. He studied medical sciences in Cambridge, but was more successful in the art of



making poisons. Historians claim that Bomeley could prepare poisons that would kill a person precisely at the time the tsar wanted them to die – not a second earlier, not a second later. Thanks to his talent, Bomeley became particularly popular with the tsar, becoming his doctor and advisor. He constantly pointed to supposed conspiracies against the tsar and often started rumors for his own benefit. When he was finally exposed, the proof of his guilt stated that Bomeley took part in a conspiracy against Russia for the benefit of Poland and Sweden, pointing to his personal ties to the King of Poland, Stephen Báthory. Shocked by Bomeley's treachery, Ivan the Terrible issued an order to subject the physician to torture. Afterward, Bomeley was thrown in prison, which is where he died.

Doctor or Diplomat

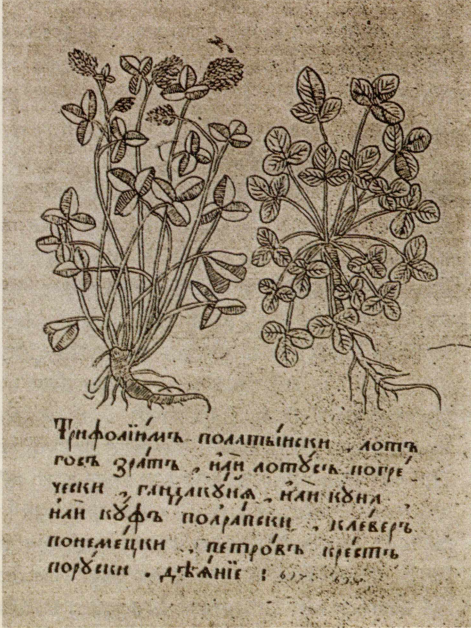
Boris Godunov, who ascended the throne after Ivan the Terrible, thought so highly of English physicians that he wrote a touching letter to the Queen of England in which he claimed that English physicians who want to come to Russia could count on a warm reception, good treatment, and plenty of time off. This was the first official document that gave foreign doctors the right to return home without having to obtain permission from the Russian tsar first.

Historians claim that Boris Godunov welcomed six personal doctors from Europe in the year 1600 alone. Each of them had a monthly allowance that consisted of unlimited supplies of bread,

60 cartloads of firewood, a barrel of beer, a bottle of vodka, daily dishes from the royal kitchens, and five horses from the royal stables. The annual salary of a court doctor was about 200 rubles (the price of two medium-size villages with peasants).

The Romanovs: reforms in medicine

In spite of the fact that Russian tsars frequently sought help from European doctors, this kind of medical aid was not accessible for regular people (even the wealthy elite) until the Romanovs came to power. It was only after Michael I of Russia ascended the throne that the Apothecary Order (the equivalent of the present-day Ministry of Health) was permitted to invite foreign doctors for the purpose of educating Russian physicians



in the art of healing. Soon, professional doctors that specialized in areas listed in the Apothecary Order of 1644, were invited to visit the country. Back then, there was an entire team of professional doctors looking after the tsar's health: 3 doctors, 2 pharmacists, 1 ophthalmologist, 2 alchemist, 3 physician-surgeons, Junior surgeons, bloodletting experts, bone setters, and people who prepared syrups, ointments, plasters, etc.).

But even inviting European doctors wasn't good enough protection against charlatans. A tragic case happened during the rule of Michael I's son, Alexis of Russia. A terrible misfortune struck Moscow at the time – an epidemic of the plague. Nobody knew how to find a cure, but a rumor was started that the best remedy for the plague was a powder made from rhino horns.

Incidentally, the rumor was started at the same time that a foreign merchant who was selling this exact item happened to be in town. Overjoyed, Alexis of Russia immediately issued an order for a doctor to examine the horns on offer. The doctor understood that there was an opportunity to make money, and convinced the tsar that the rhino horn powder was extremely useful. The tsar allocated a lot of money for the purchase, buying two large horns for ten thousand rubles, and a smaller horn for one thousand.

Peter the Great: privileges for doctors

The most surprising thing is that, in spite of their expertise, foreign doctors were still inherently servants, belonging to the lowest ranks of the royal court. It was only during Peter the Great's rule that the title of "Leib-Medicus" was introduced to the "Table of Ranks." In the 18th century, doctors were the equivalent of collegiate counselor or a colonel in the army in terms of rank. In 1833, they became part of the Emperor's official entourage.

Court physicians were awarded with estates, medals and were sometimes assigned the high rank of privy councilor if they were accomplished enough. During Peter the Great's reign, the Apothecary Order was headed up by the tsar's foreign doctor Robert Erksin for the first time in Russian history. He took part in establishing a Military Charter by skillfully describing the duties of regimental doctors and was assigned the title of a state councilor in 1716, thus heading up the Medical Chancellery. He also possessed a great deal of encyclopedic knowledge. His library held over 4,000 books and in his spare time he corresponded with Leibniz about the possibility of inventing a perpetual motion machine.

A Doctor's Conspiracy

At the same time, it would be naïve to assume that enemies did not attempt to use the Russian affinity for foreign doctors for their own gain. After the death of Peter the Great, there were a number of palace conspiracies, many of which included Elizabeth of Russia's personal doctor, the German-French surgeon

Jean de L'Estocq. He repeatedly urged Elizabeth to take power into her own hands, but she always refused.

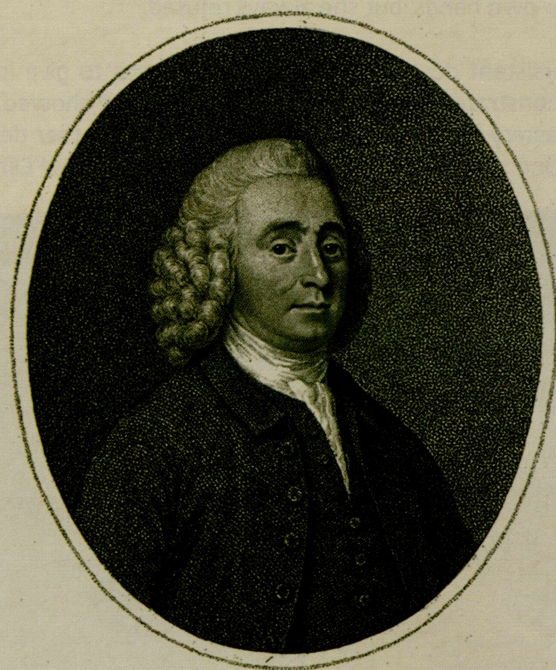
The persistent doctor finally got the princess to give in after he demonstrated two playing cards to her. One showed her in a monastery with her hair cut short, while the other depicted her sitting on a throne. The visual aids finally moved Elizabeth



to organize a coup, after which the doctor was given the title of "Leib-Medicus" and a salary of 7,000 rubles per year. Several years later, L'Estocq was one of the courtiers who chose Sophie Friederike Auguste von Anhalt-Zerbst-Dornburg, the future Catherine the Great of Russia, to wed Peter III.

A Greedy Physician

During the reign of Catherine the Great, there were several court physicians favored by the Empress. For many years, Catherine referred to Dr. Boerhaave as the man who saved her life. In 1744, Catherine refused to leave the house because her face was covered in acne. Not a single doctor could help her, but Boerhaave advised her to blot her face with a drop of talc oil diluted in water. The prescription helped. Another court physician, however, was remembered by the Empress for his greed. Dr. Rogerson frequently prescribed bloodletting for the old woman, charging 2,000 rubles in gold for each session. The doctor considered bloodletting to be the best cure for everything



BARON DIMSDALE

that ailed her, and would prescribe it for even the most minor issues. His greed eventually angered Catherine the Great, and she drove him from the court.

At the same time, Catherine the Great started a real revolution in Russian medical practice. During the smallpox epidemic of 1768, the empress hired the English doctor Thomas Dimsdale to give her a vaccination against the illness, thus making a personal case in favor of vaccinations. This was a fairly brave move on her part. Back then, many members of the church and even famous doctors were strongly against vaccinations. Nonetheless, the personal example Catherine set seemed to do the trick. About 6,000 people were vaccinated, and the Senate sent Catherine the Great a message congratulating her on opting for the vaccination. She maintained that she agreed to the procedure exclusively to save the lives of others.

Nicholas II – an innovator in medicine

The trend of keeping foreign doctors continued all the way up to the beginning of the 20th century. In spite of the fact that E.S. Botkin was the official court physician for Nicholas II, there were also a lot of foreign doctors who were part of the court as well. One of them was the talented court obstetrician Dr. Dmitry Ott. He helped the queen give birth to four daughters and a son. Thanks to the efforts of this man, St. Petersburg had the best clinic for pregnant women in all of Russia. The clinic had all of the best, most up-to-date equipment and everything was made with consideration for the patients. All of the sharp furniture edges were rounded and

the clinic played classical music on special gramophones that were located in every room of the hospital.

Protected by Russian Experts

After the October revolution, the country was surrounded by enemies and the heads of the USSR no longer extended invitations to foreign doctors. The only thing Soviet party leaders could afford was to travel abroad for treatment. A special Bolshevik Party monetary fund was created for this purpose, which was managed by the Central Committee. Trotsky, Kamenev, Bukharin, Ordzhonikidze, Rykov and Molotov all received treatment abroad.

Moreover, personal decisions to receive treatment abroad were approved on the basis of recommendations by the Medical Commission of the Central Committee and were accompanied by secret protocols. As a rule, Soviet leaders received medical treatment at home. Nonetheless, it is widely-known that Brezhnev and those who were close to him received dental treatment from German dentists. Russia's first president Boris Yeltsin also sought help from foreign doctors. Today, Russian specialists look after the health of our country's politicians and public figures. The President of the Russian Federation issued a decree to establish the Head Medical Office of the Administrative Department of the President of the Russian Federation. It is a unique complex of modern medical institutions that provides medical support for the Administration of the Russian President, the Government of the Russian Federation, the Federal Assembly chambers, and the Constitutional, Supreme and Arbitration Courts. ■



Dr. Dmitry Ott