



Foreword to “Adam Smith and His Russian Admirers of the Eighteenth Century”

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The humane intelligence of British liberalism found a fountainhead in Adam Smith, winning admirers in country after country. Ten countries are treated in the splendid *Adam Smith Across Nations: Translations and Receptions of The Wealth of Nations*, edited by Cheng-chung Lai (2000). One is Russia, discussed by several papers, the first originally appearing in 1937 and now reproduced again here.

The 1937 paper introduces us to Adam Smith’s early Russian admirers. It was written by Michael P. (Mikhail Pavlovich) Alekseev, who, by the time of his passing in 1981, was “recognized as the most eminent living Russian specialist on comparative literature” (Edgerton 1982, 200). Alekseev’s text radiates his own admiration for Smith and his Russian liberal progeny, which makes one wonder how Alekseev rose to scholarly eminence all the while in Soviet Russia.

In the eighteenth century, for many countries, Smith’s political economy was being received years prior to *The Wealth of Nations*, in Glasgow classrooms, by first-hand auditors from abroad. Among the Glasgow students who became enamored of Smith were two from Russia, Semyon Efimovich Desnitsky (1740–1789) and Ivan Andreevich Tretyakov (1735–1776). They must have heard Smith’s course in jurisprudence, including the lectures on domestic policy recently reproduced in this journal ([link](#)), as well as courses by John Millar. Alekseev tells how they imported Smith into Russia and advanced his thinking. Also told of are the Russian Smithians N. S. Mordinov (1754–1845), Ekaterina Romanovna Dashkova (1744–1810), Alexander Romanovich Vorontsov (1741–1805), Semyon Romanovich Vorontsov (1744–1832), Christian von Schlözer (1774–1831), Heinrich Friedrich von Storch (1766–1835), M. A. Balugiansky (1769–1847), Nikolay Turgenev (1789–1871), and the great author Alexander Pushkin (1799–1837). Alekseev writes: “After the war of 1812 Adam Smith became extremely popular among the liberal

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youth of Russia who were organizing secret circles. In endowing the hero of his novel *Eugene Onegin* with a taste for economic problems and by making him read Adam Smith, Pushkin merely reproduced the actual feature of the time, the writer himself having had the same taste.”

Alekseev’s essay originally appeared as an appendix in Scott (1937, 424–431) and was reproduced in Lai (2000, 239–247). We have preserved the original text without changes, except for moving one clearly misplaced quotation mark, and we have constructed the references section. Sometimes Alekseev’s transliteration or spellings (of names, publications, etc.) are different from spellings commonly seen today, and in the references section as well as above we have opted to use the latter. Immediately below we provide several topical references in English. Brief biographical information about Alekseev appears following his essay.

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Adam Smith and His Russian Admirers of the Eighteenth Century¹

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[LINK TO ABSTRACT](#)

The once widely prevalent view advanced by Alexey Vesselovsky that the study of Adam Smith's teachings "had been delayed in Russia by a period of over 40 years"² may be regarded at present as having been finally renounced. Though the first Russian translation of the *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, made by N. Poltkovsky,³ was not published until 1802–1806 (in 4 parts) in Petersburg, a fairly large circle of Russian readers had been well acquainted with the ideas contained in this famous book for a long time past; moreover, the first signs of Russian "Smithianism" had even preceded by several years the publication of the English original of this work.

In the sixties of the eighteenth century the custom of sending young men abroad to get their university education became widely prevalent in Russia. At the time cases of Russians being sent to England or Scotland were not infrequent. For instance, in 1761 two Russian students, Simon Jefimovich Desnitsky and Ivan Andreevich Tretiakov, were sent to Glasgow University by order of the Curator of the Moscow University, Prince I. I. Shuvalov. Both of them, having taken their degree in philosophy and law at the Glasgow University, returned to Moscow

1. This paper originally appeared as an appendix (pp. 424–431) in William Robert Scott, *Adam Smith as Student and Professor* (Glasgow: Jackson, Son, and Co., 1937). It was also reproduced (pp. 239–247) in Cheng-chung Lai (ed.), *Adam Smith Across Nations: Translations and Receptions of The Wealth of Nations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

2. A. Vesselovsky, *Western Influences in Modern Russian Literature*, Moscow, 1916, pp. 174–5. It is of interest to note that the same writer in mentioning in this book the name of an original Russian philosopher of the early eighteenth century, *i.e.* Ivan Pososhkov (1670–1726), and his peculiar views on a people's welfare and economic reforms, states that the work of the latter writer, *A Book on Scantiness and Wealth*, even at that early date "foretold the theories of Adam Smith" (*ibid.*, p. 44).

3. V. S. Sopikov, *An Essay on Russian Bibliography*, St. Petersburg, 1904, iii, N. 4511. The translator of this work received 5000 roubles from the Russian Government for its publication. See A. N. Pypin, "The Relations of Bentham with Russia," *Westnic Evropy*, February, 1869.

and played a prominent part in the history of Russian legislative science.⁴ Indeed, precisely these two people should be regarded as the first promoters of Adam Smith's teachings from the Russian University Chair. However, both these Russian students had enjoyed the benefit of Adam Smith's guidance but for a relatively short time, having arrived in Glasgow in 1761, while in January 1764 A. Smith left Glasgow on his way to France. And yet the lectures delivered by A. Smith and attended by them could not fail to leave an impress on them. The less gifted of the two students, Tretiakov, returned to Moscow, having completed his course of studies at Glasgow University and taken his LL.D. degree on the presentation of his dissertation "Disputatio Juridica de in jus vocando" (Glasgow, 1767). The very next year he was appointed professor at the Moscow University where he began delivering his course of lectures. However, his pedagogical career was short-lived, lasting only to 1776. In the year 1779 he died at a relatively early age.⁵ His literary works were likewise small in number; the only literary inheritance he left us consists of three inaugurals delivered by him on Speech Days of the Moscow University. One of these is of particular interest to us, for it is clearly based on the lectures read by Adam Smith. The inaugural in question was delivered by Tretiakov on the Speech Day of the Moscow University held on 30th June, 1772, and bore the following title: "Discussion on the Causes of Abundance and the Slowly Progressing Enrichment of States, Both Among Ancient and Modern Peoples."⁶ It is of interest to note that *The Wealth of Nations* was first published four years later (1776) and yet in the above-mentioned speech Tretiakov had not merely laid down in brief the essential theses of Smith's treatise but in some cases had used the same illustrating examples as are given by Smith. Such were, for instance, the examples which served to confirm the theory of the division of labour.⁷ This similarity should, of course, be attributed to the fact that Tretiakov had carefully followed the ideas advanced by Smith in the course of lecturing at Glasgow University and that his teacher had then been engaged in working out the separate parts of his future work. Indeed, Adam Smith is known to have expounded the essential theses of his economical teachings in his lectures on Jurisprudence read as early as in the fifties

4. Both matriculated under Anderson, Professor of Natural Philosophy, in 1761. Desnitsky graduated M.A. in 1765 and LL.D. (by examination) in 1767. Tretiakov obtained the same degrees in the same years; cf. above, p. 158 note 3.

5. For references to I. A. Tretiakov see *Biographical Dictionary of Professors and Teachers at the Imp. Moscow University*, Moscow, 1855, ii, pp. 505–507.

6. See *Speeches Delivered at the Official Meetings of the Imperial Moscow University by the Russian Professors thereof, Containing Their Short Curricula Vitae*. Published by the Association of the Lovers of Russian Letters, Moscow, 1819.

7. For instance, Tretiakov writes: "If a watchmaker or the manufacturer of the most trifling article, such as a needle, were to produce by himself everything necessary for the completion of these objects or the like of them, he would hardly be able to manufacture one watch a year or one needle a day"—cf. above, p. 328.

of the eighteenth century.⁸ Unfortunately, Tretiakov has not left us any literary evidence of his sympathies with Adam Smith's ideas. In the year that *The Wealth of Nations* was first published Tretiakov resigned from his post at the Moscow University and never published anything during the last three years of his life, while all his papers have failed to reach us.

Tretiakov's friend and fellow student of the Glasgow University, S. J. Desnitsky, was a more important personality. The range of problems he was interested in was considerably wider; he took up the study of problems connected with the origin of statecraft, the history of the development of marriage and of family relations, of property and, lastly, the problem of capital punishment from the point of view of criminal law. "All these are not the problems whose scientific study is indissolubly connected with the name of Adam Smith," his biographer states. "In the choice of the subjects of his investigation Desnitsky was apparently entirely independent. But the lines along which he worked out these problems had been undoubtedly borrowed by him from Adam Smith."⁹ And indeed, it can be shown that Desnitsky was extremely susceptible to the new ideas which had been revealed to him by Adam Smith's lectures. Desnitsky's works constantly reveal obvious traces of the influence of his Scotch professor. However, there is no reason to believe that these were merely clever interpretations of the ideas he had heard advanced in the lecture room of Glasgow University, as was the case with his friend and companion, Tretiakov. In Desnitsky we have a mature and original thinker whose literary talent and vast knowledge made him one of the most influential professors of the Moscow University in the late eighteenth century and provided him a Chair in the Russian Academy (1783).¹⁰

On his return to Russia in 1767, after he had taken his degree at the University of Glasgow, Desnitsky was appointed in 1768 to the Chair of Roman Law and Russian Jurisprudence at the Moscow University, a post which he held for twenty years. In 1787 he retired, and in 1789 he died, thus preceding Adam Smith by a year.

In one of his inaugurals, delivered on a Speech Day of the Moscow University, Desnitsky developed the idea that the power of some people over others was based on (1) their superiority in bodily qualities (such as corpulency, plumpness), (2) their superiority in mental qualities (cunning, shrewdness, sagacity), (3) their

8. Zeyss, *Adam Smith und der Eigennutz*, 1889, S. 14–16. The student's notes on the "Lectures on Justice, Police, Revenue and Arms, delivered at the University of Glasgow by Adam Smith," published by Professor Cannan (Oxford, 1896), give us a clear idea of the extensiveness of the course which was likewise attended by the above-mentioned Russian students. Unfortunately, their own notes on these lectures are not available and are supposed to have been destroyed with their other papers in the Moscow conflagration of 1812—cf. *Economic Journal*, September 1935, pp. 427–38.

9. N. M. Korkunov, *The History of the Philosophy of Law*, St. Petersburg, 1898, p. 295.

10. M. I. Sukhomlinov, *The History of the Russian Academy*, Issue V, St. Petersburg, 1880, pp. 3–8. See also *The Russian Biographical Dictionary*, St. Petersburg, 1905, pp. 331–5.

superiority in riches and the abundance of all things. “But what mostly endows a man with honour, dignity and superiority,” states Desnitsky, “is his superior riches and abundance. This has been so extraordinarily well expounded by the judicious author of a new moral philosophy, Mr. Smith, that it no longer requires any description.”¹¹ In yet another place Desnitsky mentions “Mr. Smith who has published his moral philosophy to the delight of the scientific world.” Generally speaking, Desnitsky repeatedly quotes Smith in his literary works, always mentioning him with the greatest respect. Desnitsky’s paper, published in Moscow in 1781, under the heading “Legal Discussion on the Possession of Property under Various Conditions of Community” seems to coincide more closely than any of his other works with the outlook of Adam Smith and to be imbued with a spirit of Anglophilia so characteristic of Desnitsky. His knowledge of Smith’s ideas can also be seen from the critical notes supplemented to his Russian translations of the works of Blackstone (*Commentaries on British Laws*, 3 volumes, Moscow, 1780–82) and of Thomas Bowden (*A Guidebook on Husbandry*, Moscow, 1780). Many of Desnitsky’s other works also contain lyrical passages imbued with the spirit of his Anglophil tendencies. (For quotations, see M. Sukhomlinov, *op. cit.*, pp. 5–6.) Desnitsky is known to have once said that “the heroes of classical antiquity seem pale and petty if compared with the genius of the men who have been bred by England.” His preface to the Russian translation of Bowden’s works is truly a laudable discourse, written in blank verse in praise of Britain “which is great in her undertakings, successful in her achievements, formidable in her battles, glorious in her victories....”

During the same years that the two Russian pupils of Adam Smith were propagating their teacher’s ideas from the Chair of the Moscow University there were yet other people in Russia who had developed independently an interest in his teachings. Many of them were able even then to become familiar with the famous treatise in the original. In 1774 N. S. Mordvinov (1754–1845), a future admiral of the Russian Fleet and one of the most prominent personalities among the Russian high officials of the time, was sent to England with the view of completing his education in marine sciences. He spent three years in England and in the course of that time seemed to have developed a profound admiration for Britain’s literature, science and government institutions. To quote his biographer: “Adam Smith’s treatise *The Wealth of Nations* was published while Mordvinov was in England, impressing him for life, so that even in his later views he generally appears to have been an ardent adherent of Smith’s teachings.”¹² This statement seems fully con-

11. He was also indebted to the lectures of John Millar, Professor of Law—*cf. Observations concerning Distinction of Ranks in Society*, 1771.

12. V. S. Iconnikov, *Count N. S. Mordvinov*, St. Petersburg, 1873, pp. 4–5. See also A. M. Gnjevushev, “The

firmed by facts; beginning with the seventies of the eighteenth century Mordvinov always continued an ardent admirer of Adam Smith, as well as a tireless promoter of his ideas in Russia. His infatuation with Smith's teachings never weakened as he grew more advanced in years, and even seemed to increase. In his letter addressed to J. Bentham's brother and dating from 1806, Mordvinov calls Smith "one of the greatest geniuses" among those "who have done most towards benefiting mankind" and ranks him together with Bacon and Newton.¹³ The influence of the treatise *The Wealth of Nations* is clearly seen in many of the pages of Mordvinov's *Discussion on the Benefits which may follow from the Institution of Private Banks in Governments* (St. Petersburg, 1811). Smith's name is also frequently quoted in the numerous notes, considerations and suggestions which Mordvinov used to hand in to the Russian Government in the course of his long-lasting and incessant activity.¹⁴

Another Russian traveller, Princess E. R. Dashkova (1744–1810) visited England and Scotland a few years later than Count N. S. Mordvinov. Princess Dashkova stayed in Edinburgh from 1776 to 1779, hardly ever leaving the city, for her son was studying at the University there. Later she always spoke of that period as the merriest time of her life—she frequented there among people she liked, and often entertained at her place the best teachers of Edinburgh University. In her *Mémoires*, Princess Dashkova casually mentions that "l'immortel Robertson, Blair, Smith et Ferguson venaient dîner et passer journée chez moi deux fois par semaine."¹⁵ Unfortunately, we lack any other information concerning these meetings. On the other hand, it is a well-known fact how keen an interest in Smith was felt by another family of Russian aristocrats, the Princes Vorontsov, who were famous in the late eighteenth century for their Anglophil sympathies. The eldest of the brothers, Alexander Romanovich Vorontsov (1741–1805) developed a strong attachment to everything English in spite of his having stayed in England but for a short time. Later, when living at his country seat in Russia, Alexander Vorontsov never lost his interest in Britain, keeping in close touch with English literature through the agency of his brother, Simon Vorontsov (1744–1832), who for twenty consecutive years (1785–1806) held the post of Russian Ambassador in London and supplied his brother's excellent library with the most important literary works published in England and France. Late in 1786 Simon Vorontsov enclosed among the other books he was sending to his brother the recent edition of *The Wealth of Nations*, begging him to make note of all the chapters and passages which might

Political and Economic Ideas of Count N. S. Mordvinov," *The University Review*, Kiev, 1907, N 2, pp. 6–7, 13, 19, 50–52.

13. *The Europe Herald* (Vestnik Evropy), February 1869, p. 816.

14. See *The Archives of the Counts Mordvinov*, published in ten volumes by V. A. Bilbasov.

15. Princesse Dashkova, *Mémoires*. Quotations have been taken from the best edition, reproducing the original manuscript (written in French)—*Archives des Princes Woronzow*, xxi (Moscow, 1881, p. 171).

contain ideas contrary to his own views. The letter which Alexander Romanovich wrote in answer to his brother's request has never reached us, but it is reasonable to assume that he, too, was greatly impressed by Adam Smith's work; at all events he is known to have sent several years later *The Wealth of Nations*—together with Condorcet's *Commentaries*—to Alexander Radistchev (1749–1802), a famous Russian publicist of the time, who was then in exile in Siberia.¹⁶ With respect to Simon Romanovich Vorontsov it may be stated that his admiration of Adam Smith has been repeatedly proved. In his letters Simon Romanovich constantly mentioned Smith's "immortel ouvrage"; thus, in writing to Prince Chartoryisky, who was one of the high officials in the earlier years of Emperor Alexander the First's reign, Vorontsov said, "In the science of commerce Adam Smith has laid foundations which are as indisputable as those laid by Euclid in geometry";¹⁷ while in a letter to Emperor Alexander (1801) Vorontsov calls Smith "l'auteur le plus classique qui ait jamais existé sur le commerce, les manufactures, les finances des états."¹⁸ In the Scheme he drew up for the institution of a Diplomatic College which was to be under the auspices of the Russian Foreign Office (1802), Simon Romanovich wrote that in the seventh or the eighth year of studies "on leur ferait lire en original le traité d'Adam Smith sur la richesse des nations."¹⁹ Having learnt from the newspaper that a new tariff was being worked out in St. Petersburg, Vorontsov suggested that the Emperor should order those engaged in the working out of the new law "to read and re-read A. Smith's book on the wealth of nations so as to know it by heart."²⁰ In one of his letters Simon Romanovich writes of "principes aussi sûrs que lumineux de l'immortel Adam Smith que le comte Roumanzew croit avoir été réfutés sans savoir et pouvoir nommer quand, par qui et comment."²¹ Lastly, from his letter to Prince A. B. Kurakin—which bears no date but apparently refers to 1798—we learn of Simon Romanovich having personally known and met Adam Smith. "This view was held in the last years of his life by the world-famous Adam Smith, whom I used to know," says Vorontsov in some chance connection and then adds, "and the now famous Arthur Young is of the same opinion."²²

Such were the Russian admirers of Smith in the eighteenth century. For many

16. V. N. Alexandrenko, *Russian Diplomatic Agents in London in the XVIII Century*, Warsaw 1897, i, pp. 387–388.

17. V. Alexandrenko, *op. cit.*, pp. 391–92.

18. *Archives de Pr. Woronzow*, x, p. 303. In another letter to the Emperor (dated 18th May, 1801), Vorontsov wrote: "Les gens instruits dans les matières de finances et de commerce, savaient depuis longtemps, mais Adam Smith l'a prouvé indisputablement dans son immortel ouvrage sur la richesse des nations que le commerce ne se fait qu'avec des capitaux, qu'il demande liberté et sûreté," etc. (*Arch.*, x, p. 360).

19. *Arch.*, xv, p. 438.

20. *Arch.*, x, p. 88.

21. *Arch.*, x, p. 179.

22. *Arch.*, xxx, p. 490.

reasons the teachings of the great Scotch philosopher failed to become known to larger circles at the time; most of his admirers were people who knew English, who felt an interest in England's intellectual life or had visited the country. However, before long *The Wealth of Nations* found its way to the writing desk of every government official and spread a strong influence over the wider circles of readers. The new interest in political sciences and national economy which became particularly keen within the first two decades of the nineteenth century was to a great extent due to the spreading of Adam Smith's teachings. Following the publication of the Russian translation of *The Wealth of Nations* the number of Russian "Smithianists" showed a rapid increase. Smith's teachings were propagated both from University Chairs and by the press.

After the death of S. Desnitsky the popularization of Smith's ideas was taken up at the Moscow University by Christian Schlözer (1774–1831), who, having completed his education in Göttingen, returned to Russia in 1796 and was first appointed professor at Dorpat and later to the newly instituted chair of political economy at the Moscow University, a post which he held for twenty-five years (1801–1826). Christian Schlözer was also the author of *The Elementary Foundations of State Economy* (1805, 2nd Ed., 1821), a book which was simultaneously published in Russian (Moscow) and in French and German (Riga), and was completely imbued with Adam Smith's ideas.²³

At the same period (from 1789 on) the post of teacher at the cadet corps (military training school) in Petersburg was held by another Russian of German extraction, Heinrich Storch (1766–1835), who was elected as a member of the Petersburg Academy of Sciences in 1796 and soon after appointed teacher of political economy to the Grand Dukes Nicholas (the future Emperor Nicholas I) and Michael. As a philosopher and economist Storch at once declared himself to be an ardent adherent of Adam Smith. The lectures he delivered to the Grand Dukes were the foundation of his comprehensive work *Cours d'économie politique ou exposition des principes qui déterminent la prospérité des nations* (1819).²⁴ The book served to popularize the teachings of Adam Smith and gave rise to some polemics between the writer and J. B. Say.

The Russian translation of Storch's course could not be published at once for considerations of censorship, and therefore the work first appeared in French. However, extracts from Adam Smith's treatise, together with passages from the works of Ferguson and Bentham, were allowed to appear at the time in the official

23. *Biographical Dictionary of Professors and Teachers at the Moscow University*, Moscow, 1855, ii, p. 628.

24. In spite of the fact that many pages of Storch's course almost literally repeat certain passages of Adam Smith's treatise, the St. Petersburg economist should not be denied a certain originality in the working out of economical doctrines or in his independent criticism of some of the theses advanced by Smith, as, for instance, the definition of productive labour, the question of thriftiness, etc.

organ *The St. Petersburg Journal*, which was issued by the Foreign Office. Another Petersburg periodical, *The Journal of Statistics* (1808, v. ii, part 2) was also allowed to publish the work of yet another Russian “Smithianist,” G. Baludiansky, *On the Distribution and the Turnover of Wealth*, which actually repeated some of the ideas laid forth in *The Wealth of Nations*.²⁵ After the war of 1812 Adam Smith became extremely popular among the liberal youth of Russia who were organizing secret circles. In endowing the hero of his novel *Eugene Onegin* with a taste for economic problems and by making him read Adam Smith, Pushkin merely reproduced the actual feature of the time, the writer himself having had the same taste. In the Lyceum the great Russian poet studied political economy with Professor Kunitsin, who taught him the essential theses advanced by Adam Smith. The study of Smith’s work greatly influenced the outlook of N. I. Turgenev and this influence made itself clearly felt in his book, *An Essay on the Theory of Taxes* (1818, 2nd Ed., 1819). Pushkin knew N. Turgenev personally, and, of course, must have read his book. The period from 1818 to 1825 being the time when Adam Smith’s popularity in Russia was at its highest caused Pushkin to make Eugene Onegin “a profound economist,” arguing on the subject as to “why a state needs no gold when it has the natural product.”²⁶ In another decade, at the time of governmental reaction, Adam Smith’s popularity in Russia was considerably shaken. In one of his uncompleted stories (*Extracts from a Novel in Letters*, 1831) Pushkin jestingly mentions that in 1818 everyone in the Petersburg high society tried to look thoughtful and to discuss gravely Adam Smith—“at the time the severity of regulations and political economy were in vogue; we arrived at balls wearing our swords; we thought it unfit to dance and had no time to spare on ladies. . . . All this has changed. French quadrille has now taken the place of Adam Smith.”

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About the Author



Mikhail Pavlovich Alekseev (1896–1981) was, at the time of his passing, “generally recognized as the most eminent living Russian specialist on comparative literature” (Edgerton 1982, 200), working primarily in comparisons with English, French, and Spanish literature. “In Russian literature, Alekseev’s name is especially prominent in scholarship on Pushkin and Turgenev” (ibid.). He was born and first educated in Kiev, then Odessa, “completing his thesis on Addison and Steele” (Boss 1984, 394), then taught at Irkutsk, and then Leningrad University, where he re-

remained for the rest of his life. Major published coauthored works included *History of English Literature* (1945) and *History of West-European Literatures* (1947). “After the Twentieth Party Congress, thanks to Khrushchev’s de-Stalinization campaign, ... in 1956 Alekseev was allowed to set up a group under the auspices of the Institute of Russian Literature” of the Soviet Academy of Sciences (Boss 1984, 395). William Edgerton (1982, 201) wrote: “Mikhail Pavlovich’s human warmth and generosity of spirit will long be remembered by grateful students now scattered all over the world and by literary scholars at home and abroad whose work he encouraged in innumerable ways.”

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