

Article

Russia and Siberia: The search for a way to China in the early 17th century

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Although Russians actually faced China as a neighbor for the first time at the end of 17th century, some vague information about it began to penetrate into Russia since the 13th century, when some Russian princes, at the request of the Mongol khans, made long trips to the capital of the Mongol Empire, the city of Karakorum. It was there, far to the East, that the Russian princes learned that beyond the Mongolian steppes there was a country that, like Russia, had also been conquered by the Mongols, and, like Russia, was vast in territory. Every time when the Russian delegation went to pay its tribute visit to the Great Khan, they had to cross at first the Western part of the territory of the Jochi Ulus¹⁾, later called the Golden Horde²⁾, and finally it became

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- 1) *Jochi Ulus* is the territory allocated by Genghis Khan to his eldest son. After Jochi's death, Genghis Khan divided it between Jochi's sons, Batu and Orda. As a result, the White Horde (or Golden Horde) states were later formed in the western part (from the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers in the east to the Danube in the west) and the Blue Horde in the eastern part (the main part of present-day Kazakhstan from the Syr Darya river basin in the west to the Irtysh basin in the east). Having joined the fragments of the Golden Horde to the Moscow Kingdom, Tsar Ivan the Terrible, thereby, became the ruler of the former Golden (White) Hordes. That is why in the Asian states the Russian Tsar was called the "White Tsar."
- 2) *The Golden Horde* is the original meaning of the word "horde" - "yurt" (a yurt is a portable frame dwelling with felt covering for Turkic and Mongolian nomads), "Khan's ceremonial yurt". From this meaning, a new one has grown - "the headquarters", "the

fixed in the minds of Russian people that China was located beyond the Mongol possessions, beyond the vast steppes.

A few centuries later, when the Moscow Principality began to gain strength, and the Golden Horde weakened and split into several khanates, Russian merchants became able to have a more active trade through the territory of those khanates, establishing relations with merchants from Central Asia, who regularly offered them, among other things, some goods from distant China. Thus, the idea that China is located somewhere beyond the Mongolian lands, beyond the Central Asian states, has become entrenched.

Exotic Chinese goods were of great interest to Russian merchants and the sovereign's treasury, as they had a high value and were actively used for trade with Europe. As Russian territorial possessions under Tsar Ivan the Terrible increased, the accession to the Russian state of the Volga region, opened up direct routes for Russian merchants to the eastern countries. After Yermak's campaign and the founding of the Russian city of Tobolsk, trade relations that previously existed between the Siberian Khanate and Central Asia were also widened and facilitated by Bukhara merchants who became regulars there³⁾. Through them, Chinese goods began to arrive in the Russian state, although in

residence of the Khan, the ruler". The golden color of the Khan's yurt (horde) is the prerogative of the emperor, the supreme ruler of the Mongols. After the death of Genghis Khan and the collapse of the Mongol Empire, the rulers of the separated parts began to create their own Khan's stakes, similar to the imperial one. Such a stake appeared in the ruler of the Golden Horde (the Western part of the Jochi Ulus, allocated to his eldest son, Khan Baty, by the decision of Genghis Khan), Khan Uzbek (1313-1341). In Russian chronicles, the term "Horde" in relation to the Jochi Ulus began to be used from the end of the 13th century. The name "Golden Horde" in Russian sources appears only in the second half of the 16th century, when the state itself had long ceased to exist, and its parts became part of the Moscow Kingdom.

3) When Genghis Khan distributed the uluses among his four eldest sons, he purposely, in order to maintain constant communication between them, allocated property to each of them in the possessions of another son. As a result, Batu Khan had lands in the Chinese province of Shanxi, possessions in Iran, Georgia and Armenia. A third of the population of the city of Bukhara was registered for Batu. Thus, trade relations between the Golden Horde and Bukhara were traditional and very long-standing, and after the Siberian Khanate became part of the Russian state, they were soon restored.

limited quantities.

However, the first attempt by the Russian government to independently explore the routes to Mongolia and China was made only in 1608 by decree of Tsar Vassily Shuisky. Before that, two *Kniazeces*⁴⁾ of the *Yenisei Kirghiz*⁵⁾ arrived in Tomsk, and reported that the state of *Altyn Khans*⁶⁾ was located behind their lands, which was a month away. And behind him, three months away, is the Chinese state. Having received a letter of appropriate content from Moscow, Tomsk Voivode Vassily Volynsky sent a group of *Cossacks*⁷⁾ led by Ivan Belogolov in search of *Altyn Khan* and the Chinese state. This expedition before it ended in vain: under the onslaught of the *Oirats*⁸⁾, *Altyn*

4) *Kniazec* ("little prince") - this is how the Russians called the chiefs and other leaders of the aboriginal clan groups, distinguishing them from the bulk of their people.

5) *The Yenisei Kyrgyz* are the Turkic population of the steppes of the present Krasnoyarsk Territory. In the 17th century, small ethnic groups of their neighbors — the Turkic, Selkup and Keto-speaking population of the steppe and forest-steppe — subjugated themselves. They themselves were in a subordinate (vassal) position with the Western Mongolian *Altyn Khans*, then with the *Dzungars*. In 1703, they were taken away by the *Dzungars* to the area of Lake Issyk-Kul. Later, some of them returned to their former place. Currently, their descendants are one of the constituent parts of the *Khakas*.

6) *Altyn Khan* means "golden khan" in the Turkic-Mongolian languages. The Western Mongolian state formation, which existed from the end of the 16th to the middle of the 17th century, ended its existence after being conquered by another, more powerful Western Mongolian state - the *Dzungarian Khanate*. In Russian documentation, *Altyn Khans* are often called "*Altyn Tsar*"

7) *Cossack* is a free, independent person, an adventurer, a vagabond (from the Turkic languages). By the end of the 16th century in the lower reaches of the rivers of Eastern Europe, a number of what might be considered as certain military brotherhoods developed, whose representatives lived by robbing neighboring territories and trading ships passing along the rivers. The Russian government sought to use these free military groups to defend its borders and periodically recruited *Cossacks* as an armed force. As a result, some of the *Cossacks* who retained their independence from the state remained free, and those who entered the service became servicemen and received a salary from the sovereign (monetary, grain and salt).

8) *The Oirats* are the name of the western group of Mongols of the Middle Ages, mentions of which have been known since the 13th century. They became part of the Mongol Empire and their subsequent history was closely connected with its formation and conquests. After the collapse of the Mongol Empire in the 14-17th centuries, the *Oirats* created the union of the *Oirat Khanate* (*Derben-Oirat*), and in the late 16th to early 17th centuries,

Khan migrated to distant places and it was impossible to get to him at that time.

This activity of the Russian authorities to find out the ways to China was due to the fact that since the end of the 16th century the English government had been actively trying to influence Moscow in order to obtain permission to organize an English expedition to search for a road to China through Siberia. Initially, the British navigators tried to go East on their own along the Northern Sea Route, but unsuccessfully. In 1553, by decree of King Edward VI, an expedition of the London "Moscow Company" headed by Hugh Willoughby set off in this direction. The expedition managed to reach only the Novaya Zemlya archipelago.

Following the British, the Dutch also made an attempt to pass along the Northern Sea Route to the East. In 1594-1597, Willem Barents made three expeditions for this purpose. He managed to explore the western coast of Novaya Zemlya and circumnavigate it from the north, spending the winter on the east coast of the North Island.

It is quite obvious that the straits around the island of Vaigach, lying between the Novaya Zemlya archipelago and the Yugorsky Peninsula, were not known to foreigners, and Russian navigators did not seek to share with them important information concerning the lot and seasonal movement of drifting ice. It is probably no coincidence that on Gerard Mercator's map, the part of the coast of the Northern Ocean known in Western Europe ends with the western coast of Novaya Zemlya.

Nevertheless, according to the same Mercator map, it is obvious that in Western Europe by the end of the 16th century there were representations (albeit rather distorted) about what the Russian possessions in Siberia were like all the way to the Ob River. And the failure of the naval expeditions intensified the attempts British diplomacy sought permission from the Moscow

the tribes of the Oirats living in Dzungaria and neighboring regions divided: one part migrated to the southeast to the area of Lake Kukunor (Qinghai Province, China) and formed the Khoshut Khanate, another in the same place made up the main population of the Dzungarian Khanate, and the third moved to European territories and created the Kalmyk Khanate in the lower reaches of the Volga River.

government to organize an overland expedition to the upper reaches of the Ob River. In Moscow and London, the issue of the road to China and East India through the new Russian possessions began to be discussed more and more often. Thus, the Moscow Kingdom turned out to be a possible gateway for Western European merchants to Northeast Asia and the Far East. Russians, however, did not yet have accurate information about the vast territories of Siberia and Mongolia that lay between the eastern borders of the Russian state and the Chinese Ming Empire at that time, neither representatives of the Western powers nor the Russians themselves.

The lack of clear knowledge gave rise to the misconception that China is located somewhere near the origins of the Ob and the road there seemed shorter than it actually was. The Ob River began to appear on European maps as early as the middle of the 16th century. But Baron Sigismund von Herberstein connected it with China. He visited the Moscow Principality twice: in 1517 and in 1526. For the second time - as part of the embassy of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. The result of Herberstein's nine-month stay in the Moscow Principality was the book *Rerum Moscoviticarum Commentarii* published in 1549 in Latin⁹⁾.

This book was based on a diplomatic report on Russia, which was compiled by Herberstein following the results of his second embassy. Herberstein, as his work shows, not only asked many Russian people in detail about the history and the then state of Russia, but also got acquainted with Russian literature himself, so that his work contains retellings and translations of a number of ancient Russian works. In addition, Herberstein used the chronicles and the Novgorod *Yugorsky Dorozhnik*¹⁰⁾ to describe the way to the North of the Urals and Trans-Urals and to the Ob River. On the map attached to his work, the Ob River is depicted flowing out of a lake called China.

With such information, the British and Dutch sought to convince the Russian government to allow them to pass through Siberia to China and India.

9) *Notes on Moscow Affairs*, in Russian literature is usually referred to as *Notes on Muscovy*.

10) The chronicle materials compiled by merchants of Novgorod the Great on the ways to Yugra (Yugra parish in the North of the Urals) and the Ob are called the *Yugra Road Builder*.

Englishman John Merrick was doing this in Moscow¹¹⁾, personally trying to convince Tsar Vassily Shuisky of the need to send an expedition to China, and the Dutchman Isaac Le Maire¹²⁾.

But Moscow resolutely rejected such harassment as incompatible with the interests of Russian trade in the East and, as a result, the governor of Tobolsk was instructed to send a trade and intelligence mission aimed at finding out the way from Siberian cities to China and to find out how rich and great the Chinese state was.

Apparently, the Russian government managed to keep the fact of Ivan Belogolov's shipment and the information he brought about China a secret from the British. But the Dutchman Isaac Massa somehow managed to get some information about this event. In a letter he soon sent to the Dutch ruler, Prince Maurice of Orange, he pointedly hinted that at the behest of the Moscow tsars, trips to China and Mongolia were undertaken.

Russian authorities, not allowing foreigners to trade in Siberia and organize the search for ways to the East, were guided not only by concern for the protection of the interests of Russian merchants, but also took into account the defenselessness of Siberian possessions before the armed onslaught of Europeans. Considering that the British and Dutch were extremely enterprising nations, had rich experience in sea voyages and the development of new lands, and the English and Dutch merchant and military fleets were the best in the world, Siberia could well become English or Dutch colonies, like

11) John Merrick (a.k.a Sir John Meyrick, 1559-1638) was in 1584-1600, first a representative of the English Moscow company, then its partner. In 1600, Merrick accompanied the Russian embassy to London. In 1602-1604, he delivered letters from Queen Elizabeth and James I to Tsar Boris Godunov in Moscow. In 1605 he sought trade privileges for his company from False Dmitry, and in 1606 — with Tsar Vassily Shuisky. In 1611, Merrick left for England, and in 1615, elevated to nobility by James I and appointed privy chamberlain, he returned to Russia as an ambassador.

12) It is known that in 1608 the Dutch merchant Isaac Le Maire, like John Merrick, tried to organize a search for the northeast sea route. With such a proposal, he turned, in particular, to another Dutch merchant, geographer and traveler Isaac Massa, who lived in Moscow from 1601 to 1609 and is the author of the work (in Russian translation) *Brief News about Muscovy at the Beginning of the 17th Century*.

North America, India, Indonesia, and so on¹³⁾. Therefore, the attempts of the British and Dutch to go to Siberia along the coasts of the Northern Ocean were a very disturbing fact for both the Moscow authorities and the Siberian administration.

Prince Ivan Kurakin¹⁴⁾, appointed Voivode¹⁵⁾ of Tobolsk in 1615, wrote to Moscow that the government should in no case allow foreigners to travel

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- 13) Russian government's similar fears were well-founded: in 1914, historian Inna Lyubimenko discovered documents in British archives from which it follows that in 1612 England planned to seize lands and establish its protectorate in the Russian North, in Mangazeya and in neighboring territories, i.e. at a time when Russian lands were suffering from internal strife (during the so-called "Time of Troubles" — see also note 25) and from the Polish-Swedish intervention, the enterprising British were ready to seize territories rich in natural resources from Russia. Later, in 1940, Professor V. Virginsky wrote about these plans of the British elite. Apparently, the plans of the British government were disrupted by the fact that the Russian militia led by Prince Dmitry Pozharsky managed to defeat the Poles and liberate Moscow. And the election of Mikhail Romanov as tsar in 1613 allowed him to stabilize the internal political situation in the Russian state. All this required the British to take a more cautious approach to implementing their plans to move East through Russia.
- 14) The Kurakin Princes are one of the branches of the descendants of the Lithuanian Prince Gediminas, who joined the service of the Moscow rulers in the late 14th and early 15th centuries. Prince Ivan Kurakin had been an active participant in the court and diplomatic life of the Moscow Kingdom and various military campaigns since 1591. From 1605 he was a member of the Boyar Duma. Since 1608, as a military commander, he actively and successfully participated in military operations against the Poles, breaking up their detachments in various territories of the western part of the Russian state, including near Moscow. In 1613, he took part in the election of Mikhail Romanov to the kingdom. In 1615, Prince Kurakin led negotiations with the English ambassador John Merrick on the conclusion of a Russian-Swedish treaty, where the British were invited to mediate, and was well aware of the machinations of English diplomacy. In 1615–1620, Kurakin was the governor of Tobolsk. Knowing the interests of the British in Russia, he was very wary of British proposals for joint expeditions to the east through the Russian possessions.
- 15) *Voivode* – a military leader, senior in the army, appointed from among the representatives of the nobility. In the 16th century to the first half of the 18th century, in the Russian state – an official who manages the administrative territory. The city of Tobolsk, built 18 km from the city of Isker, the former capital of the Siberian Khanate, inherited the status of the main city of Siberia and representatives of the aristocracy were appointed by the Tobolsk *voivodes*.

to Mangazeya¹⁶⁾ by sea, either independently or accompanied by Russian navigators, so that they could not obtain the necessary information about the route along the coast. Well aware of the entrepreneurial spirit of the British, Voivode Kurakin believed that Russian people should also be prohibited from using this path. The Moscow authorities listened to the opinion of an experienced diplomat and administrator, and in 1619, by decree of Tsar Mikhail Fedorovich, traveling to Mangazeya by sea was prohibited, at least officially.

At the same time, Prince Ivan Kurakin himself continued to search for a way to China in the same year 1615. He again sent a small embassy to Altyn Khan, headed by Ataman¹⁷⁾ Vassily Tyumenets and Cossack Ivan Petrov. The main task assigned to Tyumenets was to try again to find out the way to distant and mysterious China. As a result of this embassy, diplomatic contacts were established with Altyn Khan in 1616. In addition, Tyumenets managed to find out that the borders of China were quite achievable for expeditions of Russian military personnel. Already in 1618, the first attempt was made to reach the Chinese state itself and establish diplomatic relations with it.

It should be noted that this expedition was organized, firstly, as a result of the desire of the Moscow government to prevent transit trade of Europeans with the countries of the East and, in particular, with China, through the territory of the Russian state and, secondly, to get ahead of them in this. The attempt of British diplomacy to put pressure on the tsarist government was the direct reason that accelerated the organization of such a trip.

The Siberian authorities skillfully used the diplomatic relations that had begun to form with the strong Western Mongolian state of Altyn Khans to establish relations with the so-far inaccessible Chinese state. After the embassy in 1616 to the Altyn Khan of Ataman Vassily Tyumenets, together

16) *Mangazeya* was a Russian city beyond the Arctic Circle, built in 1601 by a detachment of military men led by voivodes Prince Miron Shakhovsky and Danila Khripunov. For several decades, Mangazeya was the largest center of the fur trade. According to historians, during 1630-1637, about half a million sable skins were exported from Mangazeya.

17) *Ataman* - the elected leader of the free Cossacks (see above, note 7). Those who were accepted for public service in the 16th-17th centuries sometimes became appointed as a commander of the unit.

with him in Tomsk in November 1616, a reply embassy from this Mongolian ruler arrived, which was sent to Moscow.

On the way, in Tobolsk, in March 1617 Vassily Tyumenets informed Voivode Prince Kurakin in detail about the information he received about China and about the way to China. He said that the journey from Altyn Khan's headquarters to the Chinese state on horseback takes one month. Similar information was given by the ambassadors of the Mongol ruler: it took six weeks to get to China on a quiet horse, and four weeks in a hurry. They also reported that the city in which the emperor's headquarters was located was brick, and in the middle of the city there was a large river along which large ships sail. When asked by Voivode Kurakin whether Altyn Khan would provide Russian representatives with escorts to the Chinese state, the Mongolian envoys answered in the affirmative: Altyn Khan would provide them with escorts and carts to the Chinese state. Later, Ataman Tyumenets and the ambassadors of Altyn Khan repeated their testimony in Moscow in an Embassy order.

In March 1617, John Merrick returned to Moscow after the conclusion of the Stolbovsky Treaty¹⁸⁾. He was amazed to meet the ambassadors of Altyn Khan

18) The peace treaty concluded between Russia and Sweden. Negotiations began in January 1616, after the cessation of hostilities between the countries. The Englishman John Merrick and the Dutch ambassadors acted as intermediaries. But two months later, due to deep disagreements between the parties, the negotiations were terminated. In December 1616, on the initiative of the Swedish side, they resumed in the village of Stolbovo, near Tikhvin, 44 km from modern Novaya Ladoga. This time, John Merrick acted as a mediator in the negotiations. On February 27, 1617, a peace treaty was signed, called the Stolbovsky Peace Treaty. Veliky Novgorod and the main part of the Novgorod land, captured during the Years of Troubles, were returned to the Moscow state. The Swedish Kingdom was given the northwestern part of Novgorod land from the Narva River (the modern border of Russia and Estonia) to Lake Ladoga, including the entire Neva River. Moscow has pledged to pay 20,000 silver rubles (980 kg of silver) to the Swedish Crown. Moscow refused to claim Livonia and Karelia land. The right of free trade for merchants of the two sides was approved. But Swedish merchants were not allowed to travel with goods through the Moscow state to Persia, Turkey and Crimea, and Moscow merchants were not allowed to travel through Sweden to Western European countries. The Stolbovsky Peace completely cut off Russia from the Baltic Sea, which allowed King Gustavus Adolphus to consider the treaty a major victory for the Swedish army and diplomacy. The Moscow authorities were also pleased

at the royal dinner. Realizing that the Russians' search for ways to the East was not unsuccessful, Merrick asked the royal entourage about the Mongols (where they lived and what goods they had) and again tried to get permission for the British to organize an expedition through Siberia. The Tsar's government had to fulfill the promise made to Merrick in 1615¹⁹⁾ and began negotiations on this issue. The activity of British diplomacy was fueled by all the new information obtained by the agents of the Moscow company about the possibility of trading with the peoples of the East in the upper reaches of the Ob River.

It is known that an anonymous correspondent, possibly Merrick himself, reported to London in 1615-1616 that the Russians did not know the localities beyond the Ob, nor how far it extended to the south. But they, the Russians, assume that the Ob goes very far south, because many different peoples descend this river to trade in the Siberian cities of Surgut or Tobolsk. The British were especially interested in the fact that merchants from Bukhara came to these Russian cities and traded there in large quantities. For example, only in Surgut in 1611, at the state customs, an amount of sixteen thousand rubles was received for goods bought and sold this year. In addition, according to information received by the British, merchants from China and from the country of Altyn Tsar (Altyn Khan) traded in Surgut. This information can be considered quite reliable, since at the specified time Chinese goods were indeed imported by Central Asian merchants-intermediaries to the markets of Siberian cities.

John Merrick repeated his request, made back in 1615, that the Russian Tsar allow the subjects of King James to search for passage near the river

with the conclusion of peace, albeit on difficult terms. Moscow, having secured the rear, was able to continue the war with Poland unhindered for the return of the occupied Russian territories to the reserve on the western borders. The Moscow authorities highly appreciated the participation of the mediator, John Meric, in the negotiations. He was presented with valuable furs, a gold chain, precious stones and oriental fabrics.

- 19) The Russian government was forced to promise later to discuss with the British the possibility of finding a way to the East through Siberia, apparently in 1615, when Prince I. Kurakin elevated D. Merrick to the role of mediator in the Russian-Swedish negotiations.

Ob or along the river itself to East India and to the Chinese state. Moreover, according to the diplomat, the British merchants were ready to take on all sorts of losses, including the costs of all kinds of supplies and the construction of ships. Russians would join them to find this way, and as a result of the opportunities for trade, both the Russian sovereign and the trading people would make a big profit.

Boyars²⁰⁾ Fyodor Sheremetyev²¹⁾ and Prince Dmitry Pozharsky²²⁾, who were present at this conversation, reacted unenthusiastically to Merrick's proposal and tried to scare him with the difficulties associated with passing through the Ob River. They tried to explain to the British ambassador that the distance from Moscow to Siberia was very significant - to the first Siberian cities, as they explained to John Merrick, it took six months to get from Moscow in winter, and in summer there was absolutely no passage to

20) *Boyars* - since the 15th century in the Russian state, the highest ranks of noble people. The first ranks of the Boyar Duma held the main administrative, judicial and military positions, headed state institutions, were voivodes. The title was abolished by Peter I in the early 18th century in connection with the liquidation of the Boyar Duma and the process of the reorganization of the nobility.

21) Boyar Fyodor Sheremetyev was a representative of the family of the old Moscow boyars, a prominent statesman, an active participant in the events of the Time of Troubles, and a supporter of the Romanovs. He actively contributed to the election of Mikhail Fedorovich to the kingdom and headed the embassy of the Zemsky Sobor to Kostroma, which managed to persuade Mikhail to accept the royal crown on March 14, 1613. He participated in all the important events of the reign of Mikhail Fedorovich, in the first years of whose reign, in 1613-1619, and then in the last, in 1633-1646, he was at the head of the Moscow government and was a constant participant in the adoption of important, decisive issues of the then internal and foreign policy of the Russian Kingdom.

22) Boyar Prince Dmitry Pozharsky was also distinguished Voivode, Russian national hero, military and political figure, head of the Second People's Militia, which liberated Moscow from the Polish-Lithuanian invaders in 1612. He was a representative of the subsidiary branch of the princes Starodubsky, the younger branch of the Vladimir-Suzdal princes, from Rurik House. At the Zemsky Sobor, he proposed to elect a tsar from among the applicants of royal origin — from the relatives of the last Rurikovich — Fedor Ivanovich, the son of Ivan the Terrible. During the anointing ceremony of the elected sovereign Mikhail Fedorovich, Prince Pozharsky held the symbol of the monarch's state power called *derzhava*.

the waterway through swamps and mud. From the first Siberian cities to the transition the way was also long and difficult. At the same time, people living in Siberia did not know where the Ob River begins and where it flows. In addition, the places there are very cold, the warm season lasts only two months, and ice always runs along the Ob, so no ships can pass through it.

F. Sheremetyev and D. Pozharsky also tried to dissuade Merrick from the benefits of trade with China, saying that the Chinese state is small and not rich, so there is no need to look for a way to it. The boyars made it clear to the British ambassador that the Moscow authorities wanted to reconnoiter the routes to China themselves first: the Tsar will give the Siberian voivodes a decree to find out where the river flows, the volume and what vessels can be used on it, where the Chinese state is located, and how rich it is and whether it makes sense to look for ways to it. As a result of this reconnaissance, organized by the sovereign's decree, a map will be prepared. Only after that did representatives of the Russian government consider it possible to continue negotiations with the British on the topic of finding ways to China. Moreover, obviously having information about the preparation of an expedition to China by the Tobolsk Voivode, Prince Kurakin, F. Sheremetyev told Merrick that the sovereign's people had already been sent from Siberia to China for reconnaissance.

Then Merrick tried to find out about the ambassadors of Altyn Khan he had seen and about their state. Using information gleaned from the interrogatory speeches of Vassily Tyumenets, boyar Sheremetyev outlined the location of this state in some detail and listed the goods in circulation in the Mongolian lands. It is obvious that the Russian boyars at this moment had much more accurate geographical knowledge than Merrick, and they specifically emphasized that the path from Altyn Khau to the Chinese state was very difficult, lay through dry sands and took more than a month. Thus, the idea of searching for a way to China along the Ob River was questioned.

But Russian diplomats did not reject the possibility of reaching the East Indian Territory. They asked Merrick in which direction the British would go down the river if they got permission, which sea they would follow next, what goods they would take to India, and where they would build ships.

Bitterly acknowledging that the British had been unsuccessfully searching

for short-range routes to the Chinese state and Eastern India for many years and already spent more than 100 thousand rubles on this (according to Russian calculations), Merrick stressed that if the Tsar allowed them to organize the search for these routes through Siberia, they would take all the costs on their own account, and they have already planned to build small vessels on the Ob River. Since it was not yet known which of their goods would be in demand in these countries, they intended to send a small amount of cloth and some other goods.

On June 27, 1617, the Boyar Duma, after hearing a report on negotiations with Merrick, made a decision: to convince the English ambassador in every possible way that this problem could not be solved without the advice of the entire state. To fully clarify the issue, the boyars decided to ask Moscow merchants whether to allow English merchants to pass through the territory of the Russian state to Persia and whether to allow them to seek a way to the Chinese state along the Ob River, and whether there would be a loss to the Moscow government in state duties and Russian merchants.

The next day, a group of famous Moscow merchants who traded through Arkhangelsk with the British and through Astrakhan with Persia was invited to the Boyar Duma to question them. When asked about the passage of the British to Persia, the merchants replied that the British were not interested in the road to Persia, but in finding a way to India. As for the road to China along the Ob River, the merchants said that they knew nothing about the Chinese state, had heard little about it, and had not been to Siberian cities and had not traded there. They do not know the way to the Chinese state and have no idea about the possibilities of trade with it. But they have heard that the British have been looking for a way there for a long time. After such a conclusion, the Boyar Duma again decided to dissuade the British ambassador from organizing a search for a way to China.

Negotiations between Boyar Sheremetyev, Prince Pozharsky and John Merrick were reflected in the order of the Embassy Order dated July 1, 1617 to the Russian ambassadors S. Volynsky and M. Pozdeev, who were going to England. Their answers to the supposed questions about China and the search for a road along the Ob River almost verbatim repeat the information that had already been communicated to Merrick. The Russian ambassadors had to

confirm the refusal of the tsarist government to grant the British the right to participate in these expeditions.

On July 9, negotiations with Merrick resumed. The Russian side not only verbally conveyed to the British ambassador the negative response of its government to his request, but also handed over a letter on this occasion. As a result, Merrick managed to achieve only the promise of the Moscow authorities to send a Russian expedition in search of a road to China along the Ob River. But it is quite clear that the Russians hoped to reach China earlier, going through the territory of Altyn Khan.

Realizing the real possibility of reaching China through the lands of Altyn Khan, voivode Ivan Kurakin began already in April 1617 to prepare a new expedition in Tobolsk, this time directly to China. During this time, Kurakin was informed about the negotiations with Merrick. In 1618, when the embassy of Altyn Khan was returning from Moscow, two Cossacks, Ivan Petlin and Andrei Madov, were sent to Tomsk to accompany him and, thereby, to render "honor" with the Mongols. In addition to accompanying the ambassadors of Altyn Khan to his headquarters, the Cossacks were entrusted with another, the same mission: If possible, they had to find out the way from Altyn Khan's place of residence to China. The Cossacks managed to find out this path, which turned out to be incredibly difficult, and follow it all the way to China. It must be assumed that this path lay not only through the steppe, but also through the Gobi Desert, as I. Petlin himself later reported to Moscow that they walked from Altyn Khan to the Chinese state for five weeks, suffering hunger and various needs on the way.

Petlin's embassy left Tomsk on May 9, 1618, and on September 1 it reached Beijing, where it stayed for four days. According to a centuries-old tradition, the Chinese government perceived the arrival of the first embassy from the Russian state not as from an equal state, but as from one who sent tribute to the Beijing court. However, since the Cossacks did not have any "tribute" with them, they did not get an audience with Emperor Zhu Yijun, but received a letter drawn up on his behalf, allowing Russians to come with embassies and trade in China.

Later in Moscow, Ivan Petlin and Andrey Madov provided a written report on their trip, including a description of the way to China through Mongolia, a

narrative about China and neighboring countries, the results of inquiries about the great Ob River, a drawing of the Chinese state and a letter from Emperor Taibun Tsar²³⁾. In Moscow, the Russian State Archive of Ancient Acts preserved their petition²⁴⁾ for the issuance of salaries for accompanying the ambassadors of Altyn Khan and for collecting information about the Chinese state.

It is quite obvious that Petlin received a written or oral order, the content of which was influenced to a certain extent by the negotiations in Moscow. It served as a scheme for the Tomsk Cossacks' report on the trip. The main provisions of the order were obviously formulated in a letter to Voivode Ivan Kurakin from the Embassy Order or the Order of the Kazan Palace, which authorized the departure of the expedition to China.

The letter (the message of the Chinese emperor), brought by I. Petlin to Moscow, remained unread for a long time (56 years) due to the fact that there was no person in Moscow who knew Chinese. And the government of Tsar Mikhail Fedorovich showed some caution in developing ties with distant China at a time when the Russian state, ravaged by long Years of Troubles²⁵⁾, had not yet gained enough strength and funds to expand trade with the East.

Therefore, the results of I. Petlin's mission to Beijing, which seemed to pave the way from Russia to China, turned out to be unclaimed for several decades. Thus, early Russian-Chinese relations did not become regular, since at that time they were stimulated by external factors rather than internal necessity. And the strengthening of the Russian state, the need to solve foreign policy problems on the western borders and the successful suppression of attempts by the Dutch and British to move east along the northern sea route allowed the Moscow government to postpone the development of relations with China for

23) *Taibun Tsar* - this is how Ivan Petlin referred to the Chinese emperor Zhu Yijun in his description. It is very likely that this is how he heard his title "great ruler" in Chinese.

24) A petition is a type of document of a supplicating nature that existed in Russia until the second half of the XVIII century.

25) *Years of Troubles* is a period in the history of Russia from 1598 to 1613 (there are other versions of periodization that bring the chronology of the Troubles to 1618), marked by natural disasters, the civil war, the Russo-Polish and Russian-Swedish wars, and the most severe state-political and socio-economic crisis (Also see notes 13, 18.)

later.

Russian explorers discovered the route from Europe to China through Siberia and Mongolia and established direct relations between the Russian state and the Ming Empire. That was, without doubts, an achievement of pan-European significance.

The Moscow government's adamant desire to establish contacts with its distant eastern neighbors on its own is also explained by the fact that this raised the prestige of the Russian state in the international arena. It is not surprising that the Russian ambassador to Sweden, Prince Fyodor Baryatinsky, in an interview with the Swedish Chancellor Johann Schmidt on April 26, 1618, hastened to inform him that the Russians had already reached the Chinese state.

The Russian expedition to China was thus sent due to the desire of the Moscow government to prevent transit trade of foreigners with the countries of the East, in particular with China, through the territory of the Russian state. To a certain extent, the reason that accelerated the organization of the trip was the pressure of British diplomacy on the Tsarist government. Russian-Mongolian relations successfully developed, which provided a real opportunity for Russians to travel through Western Mongolia to the borders of the Ming Empire.

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