JOHN T. ALEXANDER

Medical Developments in Petrine Russia*  

Except for German scholarship, non-Russian historiography has neglected the development of medicine and public health in Petrine Russia. Neither the standard textbooks in English nor the more focused surveys even mention the subject. James Cracraft touches upon the Church’s role in such matters, but only in passing. Similarly brief is Roderick McGrew’s background treatment. If the general histories of medicine do not ignore Russia entirely, they contain but fleeting, sometimes misleading, references. Worse still, the two surveys of Russian medical history in English are both antiquated and inadequate. Yet medicine and public health have long interested Russian historians. Thanks to D. M. Rossiiskii’s splendid bibliography and more recent surveys of the literature, Russian scholarship and sources are readily accessible. This essay utilizes mainly Russian materials to reexamine the main lines of medical development during the reign of Peter the Great (1689-1725). Attention will focus upon four areas: Peter’s personal role in medical affairs, medical personnel, medical institutions (especially education), and events of medical significance, particularly epidemics. My perspective is that of a social historian rather than a specialist in medical history proper. In discussing Peter the Great and his medical co-workers I seek to follow the dictum that, “in order to preserve these people alive in history, and not as mummies,

*An earlier version of this paper was prepared for a tercentenary conference on “Peter the Great and His Legacy,” which Professor Richard Hellie and his colleagues at the University of Chicago sponsored on November 17-18, 1972. For research support I am indebted to the National Library of Medicine (NIH grant LM 01664), the American Philosophical Society, the International Research and Exchanges Board, and to both the General Research Fund and the sabbatical leave program of the University of Kansas. I have also benefited from the criticism of my colleagues Jerry Stannard and Robert Hudson.


one must present them not only as mentors, not only as drinking companions.”5 Thus, medical developments may frame a tercentenary avenue leading to a reacquaintance with the “Tsar-Transformer” in one of his lesser known roles, amidst unfamiliar company.

I

Peter’s personal fascination with medical matters is generally known. Less appreciated, however, is his broader impact on medicine, for he may justly be termed “the Father of Russian medicine.”6 Although tsars since Ivan III had employed foreign physicians, Peter became the only Muscovite sovereign to learn the rudiments of medicine and surgery, to observe medical procedures firsthand, and to frequent medical institutions at home and abroad.7 Probably his early interest in medicine evolved from visits to Moscow’s Foreign Settlement, where several foreign-trained physicians lived. One of them, the surgeon Johann Ternont—in Russian guise, Ivan Eremeev—proved just the sort of well-traveled adventurer, yarnspinner, and jolly drinker the youthful tsar welcomed into his entourage.8 Born in Friesland, Ternont had entered Russian service under Tsar Aleksei as surgeon on Muscovy’s first seagoing vessel, the Orel. He was wounded in Astrakhan’ during Razin’s revolt, fled to the Caucasus, and wandered in Persia and India before returning to Muscovy in 1675.9 With three other foreign surgeons and two Russian apprentices, Ternont accompanied Peter on the famous “Grand Embassy” to western Europe in 1697-98.10

While in the Netherlands the tsar and his colleagues lightened their shipbuilding apprenticeship with visits to Dr. Fredrik Ruysch’s anatomical museum, hospitals, botanical gardens, insane asylums, foundling homes, and medical lectures at the University of Leyden. Ruysch’s artfully preserved and displayed exhibits amazed the visiting Muscovites, who rewarded him with a half-dozen sables. Peter preserved a lifelong affection for Ruysch, whom he dubbed “mein alter Lehrer,” and in 1717 purchased his

6. Gantt, Russian Medicine, p. 49.
7. For balanced surveys of pre-Petrine medical developments, see Inna Liubimeno, “Vra- chenoe i lekarstvennoe delo v Moskovskom gosudarstve,” Russkii istoricheskii zhurnal, bk. 3-4 (1917), pp. 1-36, and M. I. Lakhthin, Meditsina i vrachi v Moskovskom gosudarstve v do-Petrovskoi Rusi (Moscow, 1907), Uchenyia zapiski imperatorskago Moskovskago universiteta, meditsinskago fakul’teta, fasc. 10.
8. Patrick Gordon, the Scottish mercenary, mentioned dining on April 30, 1693, with Peter “and all our company” at Ternont’s where they “drank too much.” Quoted by M. M. Bogoslovskii, Petr I, Materialy dlia biografii, 5 vols. (Leningrad, 1940-48), I, 153.