The value of foreign accounts for the writing of Russian history has long been recognized. Vasilii Kliuchevskii, the eminent and influential historian of the late imperial period, devoted an entire work to Tales of Foreigners about the Muscovite State. Kliuchevskii’s predecessors, Karamzin and Solov’ev, made extensive use of foreign sources as well. Foreign accounts do have a number of drawbacks, all the same. Many of them are essentially travel narratives and do not provide a systematic description of Russia; nor are they always based on a thorough understanding of Russian life. The account translated here does not have these shortcomings, despite its brevity. It offers a description of Russia’s geography, economy, mode of government, and military capabilities, with some indications of daily life particularly of the court. It is apparently the earliest comprehensive description of Russia ever compiled.

This account is in a sense foreign, but it is not a traveller’s description, strictly speaking. It is based on information provided by an ambassador in the service of the Grand Prince of Muscovy, sent to the Duke of Milan in 1486. By birth this particular ambassador was Greek, one of the many who entered Russian service after the marriage in 1472 of the Russian Grand Prince Ivan III to Sophia Paleologue, niece of the last emperor of Byzantium. The text names the ambassador George Percamota, which is almost certainly a garbled version of George Trakhaniot, a member of a Greek family resident in Russia from the early 1470s and active at court and in diplomatic missions.
bearer of information has thus had around fifteen years' familiarity with Muscovy and its court.

In the role of a representative of the Grand Prince, Trakhaniot would be concerned to present Russia in the most favorable light, emphasizing its size, wealth, military capabilities, and recent conquests. Trakhaniot was probably concerned as well with depicting Russia as a desirable place to work for the Italian engineers, architects, and craftmen whom Ivan III was recruiting. The description presented is a favorable one, but it is based on knowledge of actual conditions in Russia.

In reading this account, it is important to remember how it was compiled. Trakhaniot was interviewed by someone at the Milanese court and his responses were recorded by a secretary. Trakhaniot, who had lived in Italy, probably knew Italian fairly well, so problems of language were not great. Nevertheless, the garbling of Trakhaniot's own name indicates some difficulty in accurate recording or transmission of information. The organization of the account probably depends on the secretary who produced the final version, or on Trakhaniot's interlocutor. The aim was to produce a fairly comprehensive account of Russia, and the famous Venetian ambassadorial *relazioni* may have served as a model.

While the present account would not circulate widely, it does indicate what an informed European might want to know about Russia in the late fifteenth century, and as well how an official representing the Russian state would want it to be understood and appreciated. As indicated below, the account apparently was meant to be used for reference in the ducal chancery.

Two other early accounts of Russia were also based on information from Russian embassies abroad. In 1525, Paolo Giovio (Paulus Jovius) produced a very influential account of Russia, based on information he received from Dmitrii Gerasimov, a secretary in Russian service and ambassador to Pope Clement VII. Giovio's account was used by Herberstein and was the major published account of Russia until the appearance of Herberstein's work in 1549. Compared to Trakhaniot's account, Giovio tells us much more about geography and trade goods, discusses religion more thoroughly, touches on the state of women, the royal family and other topics. However, on military matters and social and political organization, Trakhaniot provides information which Giovio does not.

