

Report of the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association Rapport de l'assemblée annuelle de la Société historique du Canada

Report of the Annual Meeting

A Seventeenth-Century Russian Liberal: Ordyn-Nashchokin

R. P. Thaler

Volume 40, Number 1, 1961

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/300586ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/300586ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0317-0594 (print)

1712-9095 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Thaler, R. P. (1961). A Seventeenth-Century Russian Liberal: Ordyn-Nashchokin. *Report of the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association / Rapport de l'assemblée annuelle de la Société historique du Canada*, 40(1), 112–117. <https://doi.org/10.7202/300586ar>

A SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY RUSSIAN LIBERAL: ORDYN-NASHCHOKIN

R. P. THALER
Bishop's University

Afanasy Lavrent'evich Ordyn-Nashchokin has been called one of the three most enlightened statesmen in all Russian history. This was the considered judgement of Sir Bernard Pares, who followed along the lines of one of the most revered and influential Russian historians. V. O. Klyuchevsky devoted a whole lecture to Ordyn-Nashchokin in his *Course of Russian History*.¹ But for a man who has been mentioned in the same breath with Bismarck, Cavour, and Richelieu, Ordyn-Nashchokin is surely less well known than he deserves to be. This afternoon I should like to speak briefly about him, to suggest some reasons why I think he deserves to be known better.

He was an approximate contemporary of Milton, of Lord Clarendon, of Colbert, and of Bishop Laval. He would seem to have been born between 1610 and 1620, probably closer to 1610. You will recall that the Russian Time of Troubles reached its lowest depths in the year 1610, with the Polish capture of Moscow. By a great effort on the part of all classes in Russia, the Poles were driven out of the capital, and in 1613, Michael was elected as the first Tsar of the Romanov dynasty. Three years later, Shakespeare died, and sixteen years later, Quebec was captured the first time.

Ordyn-Nashchokin was born in the province of Pskov, roughly four hundred miles north-west of Moscow. This was a frontier region, where the people had had long experience fighting Swedes, Poles, and other Westerners. His father was a landed gentleman of very limited means, financially, but he saw to it that his son got an exceptionally good education, including a thorough command of Latin, German, Polish, and mathematics.

Toward the end of the reign of Michael, in the year 1642, Ordyn-Nashchokin was first mentioned for his work in the foreign service, as one of the negotiators of the Russian-Swedish boundary in the peace of Stolbova. 1642 is also memorable as the year of the beginning of the Civil War and of the closing of the theatres in England, and, more happily, as the year of the founding of Montreal by Maisonneuve. If I seem to keep dragging in contemporary English and Canadian develop-

¹ Sir Bernard Pares, *A History of Russia*, 6th edition, New York, 1953, pp. 186-187; *Russia: Its Past and Present*, 2nd edition, New York, 1949, p. 35. Vasily Osipovich Klyuchevsky, *Kurs russkoy istorii*, 5 volumes, Moscow, 1937, III, 361-380. Lecture LVII.

ments that have nothing to do with Russia, it is not out of sheer frivolity. So far as England is concerned, at any rate, the Russian government, and Ordyn-Nashchokin especially, were actively and seriously concerned with it.

On the 30th of January 1649, King Charles I was executed. On the 1st of June of the same year, the English merchants whose company had been operating in Russia for nearly a century were ordered out of the country. The law expelling them says that people who have done such a grossly evil deed as to slay their sovereign should not be allowed to remain in the land of Russia.² On reading a law that takes such an exalted moral stand, one is naturally skeptical, and tends to wonder what real economic motives are hidden under this high-sounding phraseology. Though the exclusive privileges of the English traders had been considerably reduced since the days of Ivan the Terrible, there continued to be some resentment at and jealousy of this still prosperous foreign company so actively operating in and across Russia. As far back as Antony Jenkinson, the English had hoped to trade across and through Russia with Persia and India. There is some suggestion that one part of the Russian government's motivation for sending the English merchants out in 1649 may have been in order to take over from them direct control of the Persian and Indian trade.³ All the same, it would be a mistake to write off the Russian government's resentment at the execution of Charles I as mere hypocrisy. Russia was one of the very few countries in Europe which consistently refused to have anything to do with Oliver Cromwell, and supported the exiled Charles II from the time of his father's execution. Both the Tsar, Aleksey Mikhaylovich, who succeeded his father in 1645, and Ordyn-Nashchokin, are consistently reported as feeling very strongly on this point.⁴ The Tsar had had to face a serious uprising in Moscow in 1648. In 1650, Ordyn-Nashchokin would have to deal with a rebellion in his native Pskov. Doubtless both could sympathise with Charles I in 1649.

In the contemporary English work of Dr. Samuel Collins, who was personal physician to the Tsar in the years 1660 to 1669, Ordyn-Nashchokin is quoted as saying that he wished the kings of France and Denmark would "joyn together with the rest of the Princes in Europe to destroy all Republicks, which are no better than the Nurseries of Heresie

² *Polnoe sobranie zakonov Rossiyskoy Imperii, s 1649 goda* (Complete Collection of the Laws of the Russian Empire, from the Year 1649), St. Petersburg, 1830, I, 167-169, No. 9, June 1, 1649. Hereafter cited as *P.S.Z.*

³ *Sobranie gosudarstvennykh gramot i dogovorov* (A Collection of State Papers and Treaties), Moscow, 1828, IV, 204-208, May 31, 1667. Hereafter cited as *S.G.* G.D. Dr. Samuel Collins, *The Present State of Russia*, London, 1671, p. 107. Hereafter cited as Collins.

⁴ Guy Miede, *A Relation of Three Embassies* [from King Charles II to Russia, Sweden, and Denmark, by Charles Howard, first Earl of Carlisle, 1663-1664], London, 1669, p. 2. Collins, pp. 107-108.

and Rebellion".⁵ This seems to anticipate Metternich and the Emperor Nicholas I, and scarcely seems to accord with my calling Ordyn-Nashchokin a liberal. But it is well to remember that, in his time, republics were identified with revolution. And, while he opposed revolution, he strongly favoured reform, on several fronts.

A strong believer in local, individual initiative on the part of capable, intelligent officials, Ordyn-Nashchokin was a real precursor of Peter the Great. Like Peter, he was a great believer in education, but not only for its military value. It is true that he felt that one competent military engineer would be worth more than large numbers of untrained troops. But he went much farther than this. He anticipated Peter in wanting to make effective use of the talents of men of other than noble origin, by giving the opportunity for education to those who showed promise of benefitting by it. He himself, as late as 1664, was the object of hostility on the part of colleagues of far more exalted origin but lesser ability than himself. While he served on an embassy in that year, along with the Princes Odoevsky and Dolgoruky, among others, they treated him as a parvenu and upstart, whose ability they seem grudgingly to have recognised, but not to have appreciated or approved of.⁶ Ordyn-Nashchokin was eventually raised to a very high station himself, being made a *blizhny boyarin*, a nobleman close to the person of the Tsar, perhaps roughly equivalent to a privy councillor. But there is reason to believe that he felt the existing system thoroughly inadequate, because it put far too much of a premium on hereditary standing. He was certainly opposed to the system of *mestnichestvo*, or hereditary precedence in the state service. Under this system, for example, if, two hundred years before, a member of the Odoevsky family had held a higher office than that held by a member of the Buturlin family, then, in 1664, a member of the Odoevsky family could refuse to serve the state at all, unless he was given an office higher than that held by his contemporary, of the same generation, of the Buturlin family. This was his hereditary right. I have often wished that W. S. Gilbert had known about *mestnichestvo*. It was a system peculiarly suited to his genius. Unfortunately, Ordyn-Nashchokin did not quite live to see the end of it. It was abolished by Tsar Fyodor Alekseevich in 1682, two years after he died. Forty years later, in 1722, the Orthodox Sovereign Emperor Peter the Great, of blessed memory, finished up the job by establishing the Table of Ranks, in which, ideally at least, one's family position was not supposed to count for anything, but anyone, whatever his origin, was supposed to be able to reach the highest rank, if he had the ability.⁷

⁵ Collins, p. 108.

⁶ *P.S.Z.*, I, 590-591, No. 360, June 30, 1664. E. Likhach, "Ordin-Nashchokin, Afanasy Lavrent'evich", *Russky biografichesky slovar'* (Russian Biographical Dictionary), St. Petersburg, 1905, XII, 287.

⁷ *P.S.Z.*, II, 368-379, No. 905, January 12, 1682; VI, 486-493, No. 3890, January 24, 1722. Cf. Gilbert and Sullivan, *Iolanthe, or The Peer and the Peri*, London, 1882, Act I, Lord Tollole's song "Spurn Not the Nobly Born".

Ordyn-Nashchokin's interest in Russian trade with Persia and India has already been mentioned. In this connection, in order to protect and encourage such trade, he once again showed himself a farsighted forerunner of Peter the Great. Like Peter, he tried to start a Russian fleet. One first-class warship was actually put into service, but unfortunately it was destroyed during the rebellion of Stenka Razin. While the fleet did not become effective then, the idea of starting it certainly pointed the way for Peter.

Another project of Ordyn-Nashchokin's, this one more immediately successful, reflects his desire for more commercial and cultural contact with other European countries. He took the lead in setting up a postal service between Russia, Courland, and Poland. It will be remembered that the British post office was set up at approximately the same time.⁸

The Polish post was set up in the late 1660's. It was a natural development of his policy toward Poland. This policy was one of his most important achievements. Russia and Poland had been in a state of intermittent war, broken by breathing-spell truces, during a great part of the time since 1492. The conflict had become somewhat reminiscent of the "Hundred Years War" between England and France, except that it had gone on longer in the East. Since the 1560's, the Poles had, for the most part, had rather the better of it. I remind you of this because so many of us in the West, being familiar with Russian and Polish history only since the time of Catherine the Great, tend to extrapolate, and assume that Russia was always the stronger power. This was by no means the case. The Polish capture of Moscow in 1610 has already been noted. In all this series of wars, the Russians never even came close to capturing Warsaw. In the last war of this series, which broke out in 1654, the Russians, for the first time in almost a century, largely held their own. Ordyn-Nashchokin recognised that Poland was no longer the threat that it had been. Seeing that Russia no longer needed to fear Poland, his idea was to make a real peace. After negotiations lasting for three years, he succeeded in making the Peace of Andrusovo, in 1667. In brief, this provided that, for the most part, the Dnieper River should form the boundary, but that the cities of Smolensk and Kiev, on the west (generally Polish) bank, should go to Russia for two years. After two years, they were supposed to be returned to Poland. This peace proved reasonably satisfactory to both sides, and, for the first time in 175 years, did not leave either with the feeling that it must start the war up again, to get revenge, as soon as it had recovered sufficiently to do so. In fact, this peace lasted for over a century. For such an achievement alone, Ordyn-Nashchokin is surely well worth remembering.⁹

⁸ *S.C.G.D.*, IV, 629, April 21, 1691, Peter the Great by that time being Tsar, reference to Ordyn-Nashchokin's role in the establishment of the system. The Post Office Act (1660), 12 Car. II, c. 35, *Statutes of the Realm*, V, 297 ff.

⁹ *P.S.Z.*, I, 656-669, No. 398, January 30, 1667, the Peace of Andrusovo. *Cf.* I, 590-591, No. 360, June 30, 1664; I, 637-639, No. 387, May 29, 1666.

But the peace must be put into its context. He felt that a real peace with Poland, genuinely accepted on both sides, would make possible cooperation and alliance between the two long-standing enemies. He felt that Sweden was now the real threat to Russia, and that an alliance with Poland would put Russia into a far better position to deal with a Swedish attack — and, eventually, to move over to the offensive. This, of course, was the very policy which Peter the Great carried on with such success. But the idea of it was Ordyn-Nashchokin's, and it was he who did the spade work. Perhaps more than anything else, he wanted the Baltic coastal area, the "window on Europe", which Peter eventually achieved. Ordyn-Nashchokin deserves substantial credit as one who helped to prepare the way for Peter.

1667 was the year of his crowning triumph. In January, as chief of the Russian delegation, he negotiated the peace. In July, he was made head of the Russian Foreign Office and became, in effect, chief minister. In December, he negotiated an alliance with Poland. Coming somewhat closer home, it may be recalled that, in France, 1667 was the year of the beginning of Louis XIV's War of Devolution. In England, it was the year of the publication of *Paradise Lost*. It was also the year of the treaty of Breda, in which the Dutch recognised the English conquest of New Amsterdam.¹⁰

The Anglo-Dutch commercial rivalry, of which this had been a part, also had its reflection in Russia. The Tsar's English physician, Dr. Collins, has been cited earlier. He was troubled by Dutch cartoons and pictures which were being circulated in Moscow, showing the English in a ridiculous light:

"They represent us by a Lyon painted with three Crowns revers'd and without a tail, and by many Mastive Dogs, whose ears are cropt and tails cut off. These stories take much with barbarous people, when no body is present to contradict them.

"It would not be impertinent, in my opinion, if some intelligent person in Moscua should represent the state of his Majesty of Great Britains Kingdoms, Forces and Territories to the best advantage, and also his Colonies in the West-Indies, with all their Revenues, and drawing a Map of the aforesaid places, present it to Afanasy Nashockin, to breed in him an opinion of his British Majesties real greatness, which the Dutch have so much extenuated."

¹⁰ Aleksey Fyodorovich Malinovsky, "Biograficheskaya svedeniya o pervom v Rossii Kantserere, Boyarine Afanasie Lavrent'eviche Ordyn-Nashchokine" (Biographical Information about the First Russian Chancellor, the Boyar Afanasy Lavrent'evich Ordyn-Nashchokin), *Trudy i letopisi Obshchestva Istorii i Drevnostey Rossiyskikh, uchrezhdennago pri Imperatorskom Moskovskom Universitete* (Works and Annals of the Society of Russian History and Antiquities, Established in the Imperial University of Moscow), VI (1833), 177. Hereafter cited as Malinovsky. *P.S.Z.*, I, 727-734, No. 420, December 14, 1667.

Ordyn-Nashchokin himself gave the English some good commercial advice, advice that might even still have its value nowadays, and not only for the English:

“Being solicited to admit of English goods, he produced the London Bill of Mortality, wherein very few dyed of the Plague; notwithstanding (said he) how do we know but the Goods may be brought out of some of the infected houses, and one spark of fire will kindle a whole sack of Charcoale. 'Tis a strange custom to publish your infirmities. Beggars indeed expose their ulcers to raise commiseration, and get relief. But they who proclaim the Pest, give a caveat against all commerce of them, as men set up lights to keep ships off their coasts.”

I was strongly reminded of this when I read President Kennedy's speech of the 27th of April 1961, to the American Newspaper Publishers Association, appealing to them to refrain from publishing stories calculated to damage the national security.¹¹

Ordyn-Nashchokin resigned in 1671, when he was unable to persuade the Tsar to live up to the terms of the Peace of Andrusovo, and return Smolensk and Kiev to the Poles. The Tsar continued to treat him as a personal friend, however, and both he and his son occasionally asked his advice on questions of foreign policy, even after his retirement. He spent the greater part of his last nine years, by his own free choice, in a monastery, and he died in 1680.¹²

His work was largely carried on by his successor Matveev, who, like him, was not afraid to borrow and adapt what seemed good from the West. Matveev indeed carried even farther his old royalist, anti-Cromwellian love of the theatre. But that is another story.

As for Ordyn-Nashchokin, Dr. Collins's diagnosis of him is that “he is a great Politician, and a very grave and wise Minister of State, not inferiour peradventure to any one in Europe”.¹³ A diagnosis with which I think we may well concur.

¹¹ Collins, pp. 129-130, 108-109.

¹² Malinovsky, p. 185.

¹³ Collins, p. 109.