On June 24, 2014, the Russian, East European, and Eurasian Center presented a Noontime Scholars Lecture from one of its Summer Research Lab participants, Audra Yoder, a Ph.D. Candidate in history from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Entitled “The ‘Unknown’ and the ‘Superfluous’: The Curious History of Tea in Seventeenth-Century Muscovy,” the lecture gave a historical overview of tea in Russia. According to Yoder, tea drinking is a fairly new tradition in Russian culture. While tea was widely used in China by the third century B.C.E., Europeans only started consuming and purchasing tea in the seventeenth century. Although documented accounts of tea in seventeenth-century Russia are sparse, they do exist in diplomatic and medical records. The earliest tea reference in Russia was made in 1616 during the diplomatic mission of Tiumenets and Petrov. It was also the first arrival of tea to Muscovy. The next Russian reference to tea was made in 1638, when the Russian diplomat Starkov refused a gift of tea. That reference was the first use of “chai” in the Russian language (“chai” is the Russian word for tea). Other than “chai,” there is no record of any other word meaning tea in Russian.

Throughout her lecture, Yoder noted how Russians initially did not see the value of tea and tea drinking. They did not understand the ubiquity of tea in Asia and had no idea what to do with the generous amounts of tea offered in diplomatic rations. In spite of tea being seen as a highly prized gift in Asian cultures, Russian diplomats had no use for it. The refusal of gifts of ceremonial offers of tea reflected religious and cultural tensions between the Russians and the Asian countries with whom they sought diplomatic relations. In 1658, Russian diplomat Baikov refused a gift of tea in China because the tea contained dairy, and he was fasting during Lent. His refusal meant that he would not receive an audience with the Chinese emperor. That same year, the diplomat Perfil’ev sold gifts of tea in Beijing and bought precious stones, which he considered more desirable, with the money.

Later Russian missions to China, though failures, demonstrated that Russian diplomats were gradually willing to accept offers of tea. In 1670, Milovanov drank a ceremonial offer of tea. Spafarrii, during his 1675-1677 mission, not only drank the offered tea, but he also prepared the first Russian translation of tea manufacture. He distinguished between the “Tatar” method (with dairy) and the “Chinese” method (without dairy) of tea preparation. Notably, the “Chinese” method became the standard tea preparation in Russia.

In 1689, Russia became the first non-Asian country to sign a treaty with China and receive extraterritorial rights in China. The Treaty of Nercinsk drew the border between the two empires and outlawed the use of violence in the resolution of future disputes. Furthermore, the treaty established regular trade between Russia and China, which allowed for greater imports of tea to Russia.

In seventeenth-century Muscovy, tea did not exactly have the warmest welcome. Its reception was mixed. At first, tea was seen as medicine; only later, during the reign of Peter the Great, would it be considered a drink for the elite. Yet, the view of tea as medicine was problematic in a society that was suspicious of foreign products. The Russian Orthodox Church
and the state associated tea with folk medicine, which they regarded as sorcery. Western doctors like the Englishman Samuel Collins, who treated the tsar, tried to advocate the benefits of tea’s medicinal properties. Collins aimed to persuade Muscovites of tea’s harmlessness. However, he gave the only prescription for tea at that time, indicating that tea was rarely prescribed as medicine. Other plants, such as rhubarb, were more frequently prescribed and even exported for profit.

As time went on, more foreign products were used as medicine, despite Church taboos. Foreign knowledge and practice, especially in medicine, became more attractive. Economic considerations trumped religious prohibitions. As Western medicine became more widely accepted, tea drinking became more popular.

At the conclusion of her lecture, Yoder described how tea was brewed in seventeenth-century Russia. Since there were no indoor open fires or documented tea pots, Muscovites boiled tea leaves in a cauldron. They did not add dairy or filter the tea with grains, which was the custom in Central Asia. During the eighteenth century, the samovar was an innovation that more efficiently boiled water for tea drinking. It could boil the water by itself, without a stove. Contrary to popular Russian opinion, the samovar is not ancient, but only appeared in Russia in the 1740s. The word “samovar,” which is a Russian word, first appeared in the 1770s.

Despite tea’s gradual popularity in Russia, there were still economic and cultural factors working against it. The vast majority of the population had little spending power and could not purchase tea. After precious stones, tea was the most expensive commodity in Moscow markets. Mercantilism, the practice of the state regulating a nation’s economy to ensure its dominance over other nations, viewed that tea would drain money and could not be exported profitably. Since Russia did not have newspapers and very few information outlets at that time, the little information about tea was not widely distributed. There was a tendency to associate medicinal plants, especially foreign ones, with sorcery and illegal magical healing. In contrast to Western Europe, where tea became a very popular beverage, Russia already had a tradition of drinking hot beverages (for example, spitin – a mixture of water, honey, and herbs), which made tea seem like nothing new.

Yoder’s lecture was a fascinating study of how a commodity, tea, gained a foothold in Russian culture. It revealed tea’s intersections with culture, religion, politics, and economics. In addition, the lecture discussed both seventeenth-century Muscovy’s perceived need to control foreign influence and its hunger for knowledge of Western Europe, where tea was considered healthy. Tea was one important player in Russian history’s tension between innovation and security, and economics and religion.

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