Russian Journal of World Politics and Law of Nations. 2022. 1(4). P. 4–17
DOI 10.24833/RJWPLN-2022-4-4-17 Research Article

Tsarist Doctors in the Implementation of Peter the Great's Foreign Policy Initiatives in 1716–1721[1]

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Abstract. This article is devoted to the role of tsarist doctors in solving several foreign policy issues in Russia during the reign of Peter the Great. It analyses the activities of two doctors – Robert Erskine and George Polikala. Erskine played a crucial role in Peter I's communication with the Jacobites under deteriorating relations between Russia and England in 1717–1718. Polikala, in turn, assisted the Russian government in several interactions with the Ottoman Empire.

Sources indicate that Robert Erskine was the leading lobbyist for the idea of the Russian government supporting James III Stuart. With the help of his relatives, who actively supported the overthrown dynasty, Erskine negotiated with representatives of the Swedish King Charles XII and with other European diplomats during the second European trip of Peter the Great. The diplomatic scandal of early 1717 connected to the disclosure of another Jacobite conspiracy involving the official circles of Sweden affected Erskine's endeavours. During these events, the doctor's secret negotiations with representatives of a state at war with Russia became public. Despite the official assurances of Peter the Great and Erskine that they were not involved in the activities of the opponents of King George I of England, negotiations with the Jacobites continued later, during the Tsar's stay in France and Holland. Erskine remained the main initiator of these contacts even after Peter I returned to Russia, which only aggravated the problematic relations with England. However, the death of the Tsar's doctor led to the fact that the "Jacobite intrigue" in Russia was over.

George Polikala was involved in the activities of Russian diplomacy in Turkey. In particular, he had contacts with the Russian envoy in Istanbul, Pyotr Tolstoy, and attempted to withdraw Antioch Cantemir from the territory of the Ottoman Empire. Unfortunately, the information about Polikala's participation in Peter I's secret diplomacy events is sketchy. The article concludes that the tsarist doctors played an essential role in implementing the foreign policy initiatives of Peter I.

Keywords: Russia, Great Britain, Turkey, secret diplomacy, life doctors, Jacobites.

[1] English translation from the Russian text: Morokhin A.V. 2021. O roli tsarskikh vrachei v realizatsii vneshnepoliticheskikh initsiativ Petra I v 1716–1721 gg. *Vestnik MGIMO-Universiteta [MGIMO Review of International Relations]*. 14(6). P. 110-126. https://doi.org/10.24833/2071-8160-2021-6-81-110-126

The history of Peter the Great's diplomacy has attracted the attention of researchers for centuries. Among the various topics, however, the role of Peter's court doctors in implementing some of his foreign policy initiatives remains understudied. The purpose of this article is to supplement the existing information about the secret diplomacy of Peter I and to reconstruct the involvement of his personal physicians in this field.

The activities of one of the court doctors, Robert Erskine (1677 – 1718), whose name was corrupted into Areskin in Russian, have repeatedly caught the attention of foreign researchers, including with regard to his involvement in the Russian government's unofficial contacts with the Jacobites (Wills 2002; Collins 2012; Cross 2005). Russian historians of the second half of the 19th century also touched upon this topic (Brückner1881; 1881a: 657–658). Contacts between Peter the Great's agents and the Jacobites also interested Soviet scholars who studied the history of Russian–British relations during the Great Northern War (Nikiforov 1950). Special mention should be made of the work of Sofya Feigina, who has introduced a number of original sources into scientific circulation relating to Erskine's activities in establishing contacts with the Jacobites (Fejgina1959). Contemporary authors also believe that Peter the Great's physician played an important role in the secret negotiations with the Jacobites (Sterlikova 2007: 67–69). Some new facts about Jacobite initiatives have come to light thanks to a recent study by Dmitry Kopelev (Kopelev 2018).

The figure of the second doctor, George Polikala (1655 – after 1725), has only recently come into the spotlight of research due to some "extra-professional" aspects of the doctor's activity, in particular, his contacts with the Cantemir family and with Pyotr Andreyevich Tolstoy (Tsvirkun 2008: 145–146; Yastrebov 2018: 151–152).

A number of new sources found in the central archives substantially supplement the information available to researchers on the role of the court doctors Robert Erskine and George Polikala in the secret diplomacy of Peter the Great.

The Activities of Robert Erskine in Russia in 1704–1716

Coming from a prominent Scottish family, Robert Erskine graduated from Oxford University with a doctorate in philosophy, and from Utrecht University with a doctorate in medicine. He also studied at the universities of Edinburgh and Paris, spoke several languages, and corresponded with famous scholars. Erskine's activities became linked with Russia in 1704.[2] First, he entered the service of Alexander Menshikov as

[2] On August 2, 1704, the English merchant Henry Stiles wrote to Alexander Menshikov that "on the orders of the Most Gracious, I wrote from Moscow to London about a doctor to my brother. And he, thanks be to God, has found man of excellent knowledge and skilled in all sciences, and I hope that in the liking of your mercy in all things he will be." In the same year, 1704, Henry Stiles wrote to His Serene Highness: "I would also like to hear whether the English doctor Erskine has arrived in good health. And please, Sir, be merciful to him, for he is indeed a very good man, and I hope he will be acceptable to your Grace." *Archive of the St. Petersburg Institute of History of the Russian Academy of Sciences.* Fonds 83, series 1, file 415, sheet 1, back side; file 371, sheet 1.

a house doctor. Peter I soon took note of the Scottish doctor's proper education and robust business skills, and from 1705 Erskine began to treat the Tsar. On May 14, 1705, Peter I, sick with fever, wrote to Menshikov from Moscow: "In which illness there is no less longing from separation from you, which I have suffered in me many times, but now I can no longer, please come to me promptly, so that I may feel happier, as you can judge for yourself. Take an English doctor and come here with a few of your people" (Letters and Papers 1893: 342). The "English doctor" the Tsar referred to in his letter was Erskine – and this is what he was called in a number of other letters from Peter I and his companions in 1705–1706.[3] The medical care provided by Ersksine to Peter I in 1705 was apparently not a one-off, as the British envoy in the same year described the physician as "a doctor to the Tsar" (Cross2005: 138). In 1707, Robert Karlovich, as Erskine was known in Russia, became the head of the Apothecary Prikaz (Pharmacy Department), and then promoted to the posiyion of the Tsar's personal physician. In his later years, he headed Russia's medical service as the chief court physician.[4]

Contemporaries left evidence of Erskine's prominent role in reorganizing the work of the Apothecary Prikaz, and later the Medical Chancellery. Alexander Gordon acknowledged that Erskine "brought the imperial pharmacy to the excellent condition in which it now finds itself: it supplies medicines to armies and fleets, and to the entire Empire, and brings great additional profits to the Tsar's treasury" (Cross 2005: 138). The Dutchman Cornelis de Bruijn, who visited Moscow on his way from Iran in 1710, wrote that Erskine "enjoys great attention from all, for his excellent knowledge of his business and personal virtues, as well as his courtesy and politeness." According to his report, Erskine "collected from everywhere the most important herbs and flowers used in medicine and put them into paper with amazing purity." It was then that Erskine came up with the idea of mounting an expedition to Siberia to collect medicinal herbs and plants. The business qualities of Robert Karlovich were also evident in the fact that he succeeded in obtaining a new stone building for the Apothecary Prikaz (Bruijn 1873: 248–249). The documents of the Apothecary Prikaz suggest that Robert Karlovich preferred to deal with English merchants. For instance, in 1712, the Chief Court Doctor borrowed money to pay the salaries of the apothecary servants in St Petersburg from "Ivan Ivanov son of Janet and Samoil Garzeit" who "gave 2200 roubles to Carlus Gutvel, a foreigner in Moscow."[5] In 1715, a hospital was built in St. Petersburg according to a drawing by Erskine.[6] His remarkable organizational skills are believed to have contributed to his successful career as a medical doctor in Russia.

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[3] Letters and Papers of Emperor Peter the Great. Vol. 4. (St. Petersburg: 1900), p. 297, 987.

[4] Peter I appointed Erskine Chief Court Doctor on April 30, 1716, while he was in Gdansk. The annual salary of the Tsar's doctor was 3000 roubles. See: Russian State Archive of Ancient Acts (hereinafter referred to as RGADA). F. 154, ser. 2, No. 106, sheet 1 - 1 back side; f. 9, book 14, sheet 2.

[5] *RGADA*. F. 16, ser. 1, No. 320, part 2, sheet 34, back side.

[6] Archive of the St. Petersburg Institute of History of the Russian Academy of Sciences. F. 270, ser. 1, No. 78, sheet 36.

There is evidence that, in addition to his immediate duties, the doctor often acted as an advisor to the Tsar on political matters (Bespyatykh 1997: 399). Sources reveal that during his first years in Russia, Erskine shared the information he informally received from Charles Whitworth, the English ambassador to Russia, with Peter I.[7] Étienne François du Libois, who accompanied Peter I on his trip to France, reported to Paris that the Tsar's physician "has a strong desire to meddle in all affairs."[8] Later, French politicians looking to conclude a trade treaty with Russia pinned their hopes on Peter the Great's court physician.

On May 17, 1717, the French diplomat Henri de Lavie reported that he had asked Erskine in writing to "speak in my favour in case he is questioned about me."[9] According to some reports, the doctor was also actively interested in other foreign policy issues. The English diplomat John Norris acknowledged in 1715 that Erskine had been "by his influence of great service to the British." It was Norris who, at the height of the Mecklenburg affair in the summer of 1717, intended to seek a solution for the withdrawal of Russian troops from northern Germany "by roundabout means, through the doctor with whom I have spoken" (Wills 2002: 43). Erskine's active contacts with the subjects of the British Empire who came to Russia must have contributed to the high opinion of the tsarist doctor's opportunities. In particular, there is evidence that in 1717, the English and Scots stayed in the doctor's summer house at Peterhof, which his friends called Braemar House (in reference to the Scottish Braemar Castle, which belonged to the Erskine family). In the summer of 1717, the English merchant R. Mainwaring was staying there, and he was soon joined by a sailor named Brown and the merchants J. Hodgkin and R. Hywitt. The group hosted General Bruce at Erskine's house, and "they liked it there, it was like in Scotland" (Driessen-van het Reve 2015: 73). It is noteworthy that on June 25 and July 13, 1717, this group of Englishmen was visited by Alexander Menshikov "in the doctor's house" in Peterhof.[10]

Robert Erskine and the "Jacobite Intrigue" of 1716–1717

Erskine, described by his contemporaries as a "zealous Jacobite," was best known for his active involvement with the supporters of James III Stuart in 1716–1717.

In early 1717, a Jacobite plot involving Swedes was uncovered in England. On February 9, 1717, the Swedish envoy Carl Gyllenborg was arrested in London; his correspondence was presented to diplomatic representatives in London and later published. Among Gyllenborg's papers, letters were found mentioning "certain fragments concerning doctor Erskine, the Tsar's physician, and His Tsarist Majesty personally,

[7] Letters and Papers of Emperor Peter the Great. Vol. 4 (St. Petersburg: 1900), p. 297.
[8] Collection of the Russian Historical Society. Vol. 34 (St Petersburg: 1881), p. 164.
[9] Ibid., p. 214.
[10] The Labors and Days of Alexander Danilovich Menshikov: The Daily Record of the Affairs of Prince A.D. Menshikov 1716–1720, 1726–1727 (Moscow: 2004), p. 139, 143.

and these are considered too weighty to be neglected or circumvented by silence, for they reflect to some extent the conduct of this Monarch towards His Britannic Majesty."[11] In particular, one of Erskine's letters stated that Peter I would not take any more hostile actions against the Swedish King and would never be friends with King George I of England, that the King sympathized with the just cause of the pretender (James III) and wished nothing more than a position in which he could restore him to the English throne. A letter from Charles XII's first minister Georg Heinrich von Görtz to Gyllenborg dated December 11, 1716 also mentioned a relative of the Earl of Mar (probably a cousin of Robert Erskine – *author's note*), who sent the news that "the KING has some inclination towards peace, which we will not fail to make use of."[12] These facts gave the English government reason to accuse Russia of involvement in the conspiracy. As Robert's older brother, John Erskine, who brokered talks between James III's Scottish supporters and the Swedish government in 1716–1717, is thought to have been the chief conspirator, it was suggested that the Tsar, through his court doctor, also knew of these plans.

Meanwhile, in March 1717, Peter I sent a memorandum to the English government through Fyodor Veselovsky, his resident in London, congratulating the King on the discovery of the plot and officially informing George that he had not been involved in the Swedish plan. The Tsar expressed astonishment at the information that "doctor Erskine of His Tsarist Majesty allegedly corresponded with the Earl of Mar about this matter and told the latter that His Tsarist Majesty recognized the justness of the pretender's cause and would like nothing better than an occasion and opportunity to restore him to his kingdom, with other evil and vexatious expressions, and, although His Tsarist Majesty, considering the faithfulness of the said physician during the thirteen years of his service, cannot believe that the latter could have forgotten himself so much and entered into such unseemly correspondence without any command," for Peter I "does not use his doctor, except in regard to his profession, for any advice or state affairs, so His Majesty can least believe that he would have abused His Majesty's high name by doing such injustice to him, and thereby endeavoured to bring him into peril," because the Tsar, "having soon learned that some of his relatives" were against George I, "at once deigned to order him not to have any correspondence with them, not only with regard to any business, but also about private matters." Peter I had a conversation with the doctor, who "testified that he was not guilty and not involved in all this" and "under an oath punishable by death, he declared that he had never written such letters to the Earl of Mar or anyone else, and was confident that there could be no one to produce such evidence, and that his letters would not appear anywhere, in which case he would willingly subject himself to the severest punishment." In turn,

[11] RGADA. F. 35, ser. 1, No. 7 (1717), sheet 121.
[12] RGADA. F. 35, ser. 1, No. 7 (1717), sheets 121 and 186.

Erskine wrote a letter to the English secretary of state, James Stanhope, denying the allegations and assuring him that he had not corresponded with Mar to the detriment of the King of England's interests.[13]

However, despite all these official assurances, in reality things looked different. By the end of the summer of 1716, Charles XII's minister Georg Heinrich von Görtz elaborated a plan for a separate peace treaty with Russia and an agreement with the Jacobites, who had already proposed joint action to the Swedish King back in 1715.[14] Important roles in these contacts were played by Robert's full blood brother John Erskine, his cousin Charles Erskine and his nephew Henry Stirling. In July 1716, John Erskine was instructed to deliver a letter to Charles XII from a pretender, which outlined a proposal to land some 8000–10,000 troops in Scotland (Fejgina1959: 159). Robert Erskine at the time accompanied Peter the Great on his second voyage to Europe. These journeys served to boost contacts between Peter the Great's entourage and the Jacobites. In September 1716, John Erskine received a letter from his brother in Denmark, inviting him to visit Copenhagen secretly on behalf of the Tsar. At the end of the same month, Charles Erskine wrote from Copenhagen to John Erskine that Robert enjoyed the favour and confidence of the Tsar, thus hinting at the wide possibilities of the Jacobites in Russia (Aleksandrenko 1897: 26). In November–December 1716, Görtz initiated correspondence between Swedish diplomats in England to establish contact with Peter via his doctor in order to draw the Tsar into the Jacobite intrigue. It is possible that these contacts were initiated by the Jacobites. On November 17, 1716, Görtz's secretary Gustav Gyllenborg wrote from The Hague to his brother Carl Gyllenborg in London about the possible involvement of secret Russian diplomacy in the Jacobite affair. He reported about a letter from the Swedish ambassador in Paris, Erik Sparre, who drew attention to the fact that the Earl of Mar's cousin was the Russian Tsar's doctor. Apparently, the Earl of Mar was instrumental in involving his cousin in the Jacobite affair, believing that all members of their clan should contribute to the restoration of the Stuarts, and "if they do not, they are unworthy to be come of that family" (Wills 2002: 44). Robert Erskine wrote to the Earl of Mar about Peter's plans: "The Tsar, having all the advantages fully on his side, cannot make the first move; but if the king [Charles XII – *author's note*] makes the slightest advance, an agreement will very soon be reached between them" (Fejgina 1959: 161). Görz wrote to Erik Sparre on November 12, 1716, that peace with Russia could be concluded within three months, referring to Robert Erskine: "The French channel is not the most convenient for us at this time. Meanwhile, I can't help but think that the Tsar's good intentions could be exploited through the channel represented by his doctor and favourite […] If the Tsar comes here and we manage to have a private conversation with the favourite, we would

[13] RGADA. F. 35, ser. 1, No. 445, sheets 1–20.

[14] Archive of the St Petersburg Institute of History of the Russian Academy of Sciences. F. 276, ser. 2, No. 133, vol. 1, p. 340.

certainly be able to make a good progress, assuming, as I said, that what the favourite has written is sufficiently substantiated." On December 11, Görtz told Carl Gyllenborg in London that the Tsar's physician had confirmed Peter's desire for peace. Having learned about Peter's plans to visit The Hague, Görtz hoped to meet the physician there in order to clarify the prospects for further negotiations with the Tsar (Fejgina 1959: 161–162). Evidence survives to suggest that, in early 1717, at the height of Gyllenborg's plot, doctor Erskine, accompanied by a certain "Scottish Capuchin," met with Görtz in Amsterdam to discuss how much money was needed to organize an invasion of Scotland (Murray 1969; Wills 2002: 48–49; Kopelev 2018: 28). This fact was known to people at the time. Boris Kurakin, the Russian ambassador to The Hague at the time, wrote in his "Introduction about the Chapters in the History" about "the beginning of Baron Görtz's intrigues in the Pretender's interests with our court and between us and the Pretender through doctor Aretin."[15] According to Voltaire, after his meeting with Görtz, Erskine described to Prince Menshikov "the importance and glory of such a project, with all the vivacity of a man who was himself interested in the cause. Prince Melnikov relished the overtures, and the czar approved them" (Voltaire 1999: 240).

In addition to personal negotiations with Charles XII's first minister, Peter's court doctor was in direct contact with Carl Gyllenborg, who after conversations with Erskine came to the conclusion that the Tsar hated George I and "would willingly send him to the devil himself" (Kopelev 2018: 29). All contacts and negotiations were secret, the doctor clearly did not intend to make them public.

In this regard, Erskine's reaction following the publication of Gyllenborg's letters by the British government is quite telling: the physician was clearly frightened. Sofya Fejgina drew attention to a report from Amsterdam dated March 16, 1717 by the English representative in Holland, Litz, who wrote that on March 14, 1717, he had visited Erskine when the latter was reading some papers. The doctor was in a state of extreme agitation, pacing the room up and down and talking to himself, and was unable to explain anything to his guest. It was then that the top brass of Russia's foreign office met to draw up a complaint against the court doctor. He swore that he had never written to Mar and that the thought of doing what he was being accused had never even crossed his mind. The English diplomat reported that Erskine had "powerful enemies at the Tsar's court, although Kurakin is in close friendship with him." On the evening of March 14, Peter received a note from his ministers, who accused the doctor of writing to Mar as if the Tsar had instructed Erskine to negotiate a separate peace. Peter replied that he knew nothing about it. The Tsar was enraged at the publication of Carl Gyllenborg's papers, and summoned the doctor, who denied everything and explained the publication of the letters as a plot by the Tsar's enemies to put him at odds with George I (Fejgina 1959: 172–173). It is clear from this text that the heads of the Russian

[15] Archive of Prince F.A. Kurakin. Book 1 (St. Petersburg: 1890), p. 89.

foreign office, Chancellor Gavriil Golovkin and Vice-Chancellor Pyotr Shafirov, were not aware of Erskine's contacts with the English opposition on the Continent and were not enthusiastic about his activities outside the scope of his official duties.

Meanwhile, even after the publication of Gyllenborg's papers, the secret ties of Russian diplomacy with the Jacobites were not severed. Now the main efforts of the Jacobites were aimed at mediating a peace between Russia and Sweden. Charles Erskine, in a letter dated March 1, 1717, informed the Earl of Mar that Peter had received the Jacobite Henry Stirling, the nephew of his physician. Mar was informing doctor Erskine of his stay in Paris, apparently hoping to meet with him. When it became known that Peter was on his way to France from Holland, the Jacobite Hugh Paterson wrote to the Earl of Mar in Paris on April 16, 1717, informing him that doctor Erskine wished to meet him, with the Tsar's approval, and that their other relative, William Erskine, could facilitate the meeting. On his arrival in Paris, the doctor met the Earl of Mar twice, on May 9 and 11. The court doctor suggested that one of Stuart's supporters, the Duke of Ormond, should be sent to the Swedish King to try to persuade him to make peace with Russia. The Earl of Mar was urging the Russians to accept the mediation of James III in negotiations with Charles XII, and in doing so recommended that the Tsar's demands be tempered. It is also known that in the summer of 1717, the Earl of Mar decided to send his representative to Sweden, instructing him to facilitate the conclusion of peace and a military alliance between Russia and Sweden with the involvement of James III. The Earl of Mar addressed Peter through Erskine: "How honourable it would be for the Tsar, being at the head of such an alliance, not only to strengthen and secure for himself the greater part of his own acquisitions, but also, having restored the offended monarch, to put all Europe in some sort of order, to become a powerful and reliable friend of that monarch and together with him, together with those sovereigns who would wish to seek their friendship, to dictate laws to all Europe" (Fejgina 1959: 173–174; 218). The Tsar's physician shared information about these negotiations with some other people. On November 11, 1717, the French diplomat Henri de Lavie reported: "The Swedish admiral Orenschildt told me that, as doctor Erskine informed him, peace with Sweden is very near at hand."[16]

During Peter's tour of Europe in 1717, his court physician was active in facilitating the Tsar's meetings with prominent Jacobite representatives. For example, while in France, Peter visited the convent of St. Mary in Chanoz, where he met the widow of James II, Mary of Modena. Thomas Crawford, the British embassy secretary, observed that in Paris "all the Jacobites are crowding outside his [the Tsar's] house, pretending as if it were very important. They are led by doctor Erskine" (Cross 2018: 107). Brit-

[16] Collection of the Russian Historical Society. Vol. 34 (St Petersburg: 1881), p. 261.

ish agents closely monitored all these contacts. The French also paid attention to the Tsar's doctor. They found that, in Holland, Erskine never parted with a certain "Scottish Capuchin, nicknamed the Archangel."[17]

Contacts with the Jacobites continued after Peter left France. On July 5, James Butler, Duke of Ormond, arrived in Spa, where the Tsar was taking in the waters; he met Robert Erskine and was granted an audience with Peter on July 8. In October 1717, the Hanoverian minister Robeton reported to the Hanoverian resident in Russia Friedrich Christian Weber: "I deem it necessary to inform you that the Tsar now receives letters from the pretender, as does Erskine (Areskin – *author's note.*), who was and is always the soul of these intrigues and with whom the pretender constantly keeps a secret agent…" (*Brückner* 1881a: 65).Weber also pointed to the doctor's active contacts with the Jacobites: "Every day Erskine gathers with this company of rebels." Not only did the diplomat complain about the doctor's intrigues, believing that he would "always remain an obstacle to good relations between the Tsar and the King," but he even demanded on behalf of the King of England that Erskine be expelled from Russia (Weber 2011: 260). In 1718, Weber offered Pyotr Shafirov 30,000 ducats for the "destruction" of Erskine (Bushkovich 2009: 392).

Robert Erskine and Henry Stirling: The Jacobites in Russia

The reason why George I's diplomats were so keenly interested in the figure of the court doctor was the fact that one of James III's emissaries – Henry Stirling, who, as noted above, was the doctor's nephew and lived in his house in the Malaya Morskaya Sloboda – had been very active in St. Petersburg since the early summer of 1718, with Erskine's support.[18] Stirling maintained correspondence with European courts, where his patron had his emissaries, and "was in the hands of the Russian government a trump card for putting pressure on English diplomacy" (Fejgina 1959: 348). According to archival documents, Weber stated at a meeting with the heads of the Russian foreign office in March 1718 that George I had been informed that Duke of Ormond and other Jacobites had taken refuge in Courland, and that they "seem to be negotiating with him [Peter I – *author's note*] to arrange a marriage with the Duchess of Courland [Anna Ioannovna – *author's note*] or with the lesser Princess, niece of His Tsarist Majesty [Praskovia Ioannovna – *author's note*]." The Duke of Ormond informed the Earl of Mar and his other supporters in England and Scotland of this, adding that "they [the Jacobites – author's note] are under the patronage of His Tsarist Majesty and are kept in all good graces, and look forward to a good precedence in their negotiation." Peter's diplomats denied this information, saying that the Tsar "did not promise any protection to the Duke of Ormond and the other Jacobites, nor was he not even aware

[17] Ibid., pp. 170–171.
[18] RGADA. F. 9, ser. 3, Book 44, sheet 155, back side.

of their stay there [in Courland – *author's note*]," and "they were not promised any protection." In response, Weber asked Peter to "give his orders to send the representatives of the pretender's party out of Mitava and thereby remove all suspicions." On May 10, 1718, Weber told the Tsar's ministers that "an emissary of the pretender named Stirling is staying at the house of mister Erskine who wrote to France that a marriage would be concluded between one of His Tsarist Majesty's princesses and the pretender" and asked for Stirling to be expelled from Russia.[19] Peter agreed to these requests, and at the end of 1718, Weber was forced to leave St. Petersburg. According to the Dutch diplomat de Bie, the Tsar ordered Erskine to remove his nephew from Russia immediately "and also not to receive or caress English and Scottish discontents, much less invite them to Russia, and to be generally careful in his words and actions for fear of the Tsar's disfavour."[20] According to Weber, having received this reprimand by the Tsar, Erskine "became terribly angry and said that he would maintain the connections mentioned even more than before" (Brückner1881: 197). It is difficult to judge how reliable this information is. It is likely that Peter chose to take half measures, ordering the nephew of his court physician to be expelled from St. Petersburg, but at the same time keeping him in Russia. This can be seen from the fact that in early 1719, Stirling popped up in St. Petersburg, and the Tsar, according to Weber, "showed him special favours" (Weber 2011:175). It should be noted that Stirling's expulsion from Russia failed to improve Russia's relations with Great Britain.

Erskine retained his position at Peter's court until his death. On September 4, 1718, the doctor felt unwell; he complained to Boris Kurakin: "I had hardly any free time: then I was aboard a ship, then on the galleys, then in a tent, but it was always bad, and I was exposed to the harsh conditions of the terrain, from which I am still suffering, and I thank God for our return, which was last night. His Majesty is in excellent health, as are the empress and the whole of the tsar's family" (Driessen-van het Reve 2015: 185). Judging by Erskine's extant letters to Alexander Menshikov, the doctor continued working until the beginning of October 1718.[21] His health then deteriorated and he went to Petrozavodsk for treatment by mineral waters, where he arrived on November 23, 1718. It is not known what illness the doctor was suffering from, only mentions of his "severe bodily weakness" have survived. Erskine intended to take mineral waters, but, according to Georg Wilhelm de Gennin, he was only able to drink two small glasses, which were of no use to the dying man: "… and in half an hour he vomited black phlegm" (Samoilov 1852: 20–21). The doctor died on the night of November 29–30,1718 at the Olonetsky Petrovsky Plant. Peter ordered an autopsy of his body to determine the cause of death – "what disease he had, and whether he was given any poison."[22] At the lavish funeral of his court physician at the Alexander

[19] RGADA. F. 35, ser. 1, No. 467 (1718), sheets 3–23, back side.
[20] Materials for the History of the Russian Navy. Part IV (St. Petersburg: 1867), pp. 158–159.
[21] RGADA. F. 198, ser. 1, No. 355, sheet 5.
[22] RGADA. F. 9, ser. 1, book 11, sheet 251, back side.

Nevsky Lavra, the Tsar "shed rivers of tears" (Driessen-van het Reve 2015: 185–186). After Robert Erskine's death, Peter clearly lost much of his interest in the "Jacobite intrigue." Attempts by Henry Stirling and other supporters of James III to persuade the Tsar to take active action against George I by sending an expeditionary corps of 10,000 soldiers to England were ignored (Bantysh-Kamensky 1894: 134).

The autopsy on Erskine's body was carried out by George Polikala, a doctor who was also, by a twist of fate, involved in Peter's clandestine foreign policy activities.

George Polikala: Pages from His Life

An Italian Greek educated at the universities of Padua and Rome, Polikala lived for a time in Istanbul. He set up a pharmacy and gained the trust of the Russian envoy Pyotr Tolstoy by curing his son from a serious illness, after which he became the family's house doctor. In 1704, he entered the Russian diplomatic service, and in 1711 became the attending physician to Tsarina Catherine I and remained in that position until his voluntary retirement in 1725. Catherine was more than satisfied with Polikala's work. The resignation document, signed on behalf of Peter I's widow on May 31, 1725, stated that the doctor "served at our court for 14 years and during his service was acting as faithfully and zealously in his office as a good and honest servant should, and we were most graciously pleased with him."[23]

In contrast to Erskine, information about Polikala's involvement in the activities of Peter's secret diplomacy is rather patchy. It is known that the physician travelled to Rome in 1709 and stayed for some time at the Vatican on the instructions of Pyotr Tolstoy. The details of this mission are unknown (Yastrebov 2018). In 1715, Polikala again performed some special assignments. In particular, he acted as an intermediary in lending 617 roubles to the wife of Tsarevich Alexei by Greek merchants D. Kazanova and I. Stomatyev.[24] The doctor proved to be a rather enterprising man. It is known, for example, that during his stay in Istanbul, Polikala lent a large sum to French merchants. In July 1720, Peter asked the Russian resident in Turkey, A.I. Dashkov, to facilitate the return of the loan.[25]

Polikala was close to the family of the Moldovan ruler Dimitrie Cantemir, to whom he provided medical services. It was later rumoured that it was Polikala who, to please Catherine, had induced Princess Maria Cantemir, reportedly pregnant by Peter, to give birth prematurely – the Empress feared that the Princess would have a son (Maikov 1897: 68; Memoirs of Prince Peter Dolgorukov 2007: 71, 119–120). The Moldavian historian Victor Tvirkun considers this story about the "failed alliance of the Russian monarch and the Moldavian princess" a fiction made up by Prince Peter Dolgoru-

[23] RGADA. F. 154, ser. 2, No. 223, sheet 1-1 back side.
[24] RGADA. F. 6, ser. 1, No. 97, sheet 1 - 1 back side.
[25] Manuscripts Department of the Russian State Library. F. 404, No. 14, sheets 97, back side – 98; No. 18, sheets 19–20.

kov – a descendant of the groom Ivan Grigorievich Dolgorukov, who was rejected by the Princess. In any case, Polikala "could in no way carry out Catherine's command 'to provoke a miscarriage' because at that time he was still on his way from the capital of the Ottoman Empire to Russia" (Tsvirkun 2010: 11–12).

George Polikala's Istanbul Mission

Of far greater interest is Polikala's secret mission to Istanbul in 1721–1722. In September 1721, Peter sent the physician to Constantinople with a written message regarding the conclusion of the Peace of Nystad between Russia and Sweden. In addition to this official commission, Polikala was given another, more important task – to use his old connections in the capital of the Ottoman Empire to prepare the conditions for the release and transportation to Russia of the brother of the Moldovan ruler Antioch Cantemir and his family, who were imprisoned in Constantinople. Polikala received money to bribe Turkish officials, and 500 roubles on top of that for the prince's pension. In addition, Peter ordered octopus and squid to be brought to Russia. It was assumed that a ship, preferably a French one, should be found in Constantinople to smuggle Antioch Cantemir, and the respective negotiations were also held in St. Petersburg with the French ambassador Jacques de Campredon. Very soon, diplomats and dignitaries from a number of countries were involved in this covert operation, and the operation itself became an open secret. Russian diplomat Vladimir Dolgorukov, who did not believe that the operation would work, proposed another plan in a letter to Peter dated January 5, 1722: "To me, the best way is to look for a merchant who would undertake it or to look for an officer who would come on a hired ship specially for that purpose. However, I will look to see how I can do it better, I will do my best to do it…" (Tsvirkun 2008; 2010: 70, 103, 252, 261, 263). Apparently, Polikala was exactly the sort of person who could look for a merchant. The details of the medic's activities in the Ottoman capital are unknown. In any case, the attempted kidnapping failed, and Polikala returned to Russia and continued to work as a court doctor until his retirement, so the failed mission had no impact on his career. It is known that in January 1725 there was an attempt to send Polikala, who was then in Moscow, to treat the dying Peter I: an order was given on January 19 so sendthe physician be sent to St. Petersburg "with the utmost haste."[26] However, Polikala was not in time to help the Tsar.

* * *

The above facts, many of which come from original sources that are being brought into scholarly circulation for the first time, show that Peter I tried to use the unofficial connections of his entourage in his foreign policy activities. This applied both to European foreign policy and to relations with the Ottoman Empire. Both cases

[26] RGADA. F. 396, ser. 2, No. 1104, sheet 23.

involved the Emperor's court physicians, the foreigners Robert Erskine and George Polikala, who had extensive contacts outside Russia. Thanks to these physicians, a secret diplomatic service was in fact established in Russia during the last years of Peter the Great's reign.

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Conflict of interests:
The author declares the absence of any conflicts of interests.

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