

America's First Student of Russian: William David Lewis of Philadelphia

ENTERPRISING American merchants fostered a remarkably rapid growth in Russian-American commerce in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. This expansion continued until the trade restrictions of the British and the French in the Napoleonic Wars caused an embargo to be declared in 1807 on commerce with Europe. But when nonintercourse was lifted in 1809, American ships sailed to Northern Europe in record numbers to unload stockpiled goods at high prices, many of them bringing out cargoes of Russian products for which the war had created a strong demand—hemp, linen for sailcloth, and iron. As a result, the American flag practically ruled the trade of the Baltic in 1810.¹ One of the little-known by-products of a booming Russian-American business was the first serious effort by an American to learn the Russian language. Through the letters and notebooks of William David Lewis, later a prominent banker and customs collector in Philadelphia, it is possible to examine the circumstances and difficulties attendant upon a young American's quest of this knowledge and draw some conclusions about the results.²

In St. Petersburg American shippers relied upon English and German firms, chiefly Cramer Brothers, Stieglitz & Company, and Meyer and Brusner, that had been established especially to handle

¹ For the background to Russian-American trade, see Alfred S. Crosby, *America, Russia, Hemp, and Napoleon: American Trade with Russia and the Baltic, 1783-1812* (Columbus, Ohio, 1965), and the author's "Jonathan Russell, *President Adams*, and Europe in 1810," *American Neptune*, XXX (1970), 279-293. The best general survey of Russian-American relations for this period is in Russian: N. N. Bolkhovitinov, *Stanovlenie russko-amerikanskikh otnoshenii, 1775-1815* (Moscow, 1966).

² I am grateful to the staffs of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania and of Special Collections, John Hay Library, Brown University, for their assistance in searching the Lewis-Neilson Papers and Jonathan Russell Papers, respectively. The work was supported by the American Philosophical Society and the General Research Fund of the University of Kansas.

foreign trade.³ After 1803 the new American consul, Levitt Harris, provided some assistance (for a fee). But this situation began to change after the arrival in the Russian capital in October, 1810, of John Delaware Lewis, a Philadelphia merchant who came to Russia to engage in the import-export business.⁴ More than a year was needed to break in and become known, and the modest success of his firm (Lewis & Willing) in 1812 was followed by the setback of the War of 1812, which temporarily ended United States trade with the Baltic. But in early 1814, with peace negotiations on the horizon, Lewis anticipated a booming business in St. Petersburg and sent for his younger brother to assist him.⁵

Did any American learn Russian before the arrival in Russia of William David Lewis? Not according to available records. Of course, many captains and sailors had visited Russia regularly, had seen the sights of Russian Baltic ports, and had probably acquired a few words of the local language while supervising the loading and unloading of vessels. But business negotiations were entirely with foreign firms and usually conducted in English. When a ship was caught by ice and forced to winter in a Russian port, a greater opportunity to learn Russian was naturally presented. While the seamen stayed close to ship in port areas and rarely mixed with the local population, the captains and supercargoes found more comfortable quarters and entertainment in the city.⁶ In general, however, contacts with Russians, both at the official and popular levels, were few and inconsequential considering the large number of American ships that called at Russian ports.

³ A list of all American ships and their consignees for the years 1808 to 1812 is in John Delaware Lewis, 1810-1821, Lewis-Neilson Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania (HSP). Unless otherwise noted, all manuscripts cited are from this collection.

⁴ William Lewis was notified by the ship master that John had been left in St. Petersburg on October 8. Undated, unsigned letter in W. D. Lewis letters, 1801-1828. The master was probably Capt. William Bainbridge, who commanded the Philadelphia ship *Lion* which arrived at Kronstadt on September 24 and was passed by George Coggeshall along the Swedish coast at the end of October. Henry A. S. Dearborn, *The Life of William Bainbridge, Esq. of the United States Navy*, James Barnes, ed. (Princeton, 1931), 87; George Coggeshall, *Thirty-Six Voyages to Various Parts of the World . . .*, 3rd ed. (New York, 1858), 123.

⁵ The actual invitation has not been found, but its existence is known from other letters of this year in W. D. Lewis letters, 1801-1828.

⁶ Coggeshall found life fairly pleasant in Riga during the winter of 1810-1811. *Thirty-Six Voyages*, 130-138.

A few Americans did travel extensively or live for a time in Russia before 1814. In the 1780's several famous citizens—Francis Dana, John Ledyard, and John Paul Jones—visited Russia, but none acquired a knowledge of the language or even showed much interest in Russian culture and society.⁷ At the beginning of the nineteenth century John D'Wolf of Bristol, Rhode Island, spent more than two years on Russian territory. After selling his ship to the governor of the Russian-American Company, D'Wolf journeyed from the Siberian coast to St. Petersburg to collect his money. Though the young adventurer won the name of "Nor'west John," he learned very little if any Russian, since, according to his memoirs, he was accompanied by Russian officers who knew English.⁸ Another, more sophisticated American traveler, Joel Poinsett of South Carolina, included Russia on his itinerary. During his stay of over a year in 1806 and 1807, Poinsett went from St. Petersburg to Moscow, Kazan, Astrakhan, Baku, Tiflis, Erevan, and, when the Russo-Turkish war blocked his path to Constantinople, returned to St. Petersburg. Though obviously a tourist of exceptionally high motivation and endurance, Poinsett was not a scholar of Russian language and culture.⁹ American diplomats, such as Levitt Harris and John Quincy Adams, were confined to court and commercial circles that were largely foreign, certainly as far as language and customs were concerned. John D. Lewis, although a resident merchant in St. Petersburg since 1810, still could not speak Russian in 1814 (nor even ten years later). But he thought that facility in the language could provide him better intelligence about Russian markets and products. Too busy himself with business operations to learn it, he summoned his brother from Philadelphia.

William David Lewis had been working as a commercial agent in the customs house in Philadelphia since 1809, when he was just

⁷ Anna M. Babey, *Americans in Russia, 1776-1917: A Study of the American Travelers in Russia from the American Revolution to the Russian Revolution* (New York, 1938), 1-16. Babey's survey is very thin on the early period and is mainly confined to those who published about their travels. Bolkhovitinov is more thorough but worked in a small number of American archives.

⁸ John D'Wolf, *A Voyage to the North Pacific and a Journey through Siberia More than Half a Century Ago* (Cambridge, Mass., 1861); George Howe, "The Voyage of Nor'west John," *American Heritage*, X, no. 3 (April, 1959), 65-80.

⁹ J. Fred Rippey, *Joel R. Poinsett, Versatile American* (Durham, N. C., 1935), 20-29. A few of Poinsett's letters from Russia are in the Poinsett Papers, HSP.

seventeen. A newcomer from Delaware, he was ambitious to acquire the skills and techniques of a cultivated urban businessman. In 1813 he was assisting Baltimore merchant John Gill with international transactions. By this time Lewis had mastered French, joined the Polynesian Debating Society, become a master mason, and was dabbling in poetry and studying Italian (the Spanish tutor having just left town).¹⁰ His brother's invitation arrived at an opportune time: a bid for a midshipman's commission had been turned down in 1812 and the parents of the girl for whom most of the poetry was written had just rejected his proposal of marriage.¹¹

Fortunately, the young Lewis was able to sail on one of the few American ships allowed in European waters, the corvette *John Adams*, as "attaché" to Henry Clay and Jonathan Russell, who were going to negotiate peace at Ghent.¹² Separating from the commissioners at Gothenburg, Lewis traveled overland, arriving at St. Petersburg the end of May, 1814. Since commerce was still affected by the war that summer, John Lewis decided that his brother's time could best be used by concentrating on learning Russian and German.¹³ Studying Russian in the capital proved to be difficult, because Lewis was acquainted with only Germans and British who spoke little of the native language. Since Moscow by reputation was much more "Russian," William decided to go there. Arriving in August, 1814, with letters of introduction to leading German merchants, he obtained a room in the home of Andrew Zenker, one of the most prominent foreign merchants in Moscow, and began regular lessons in both Russian and German with Dr. Strahl, a tutor of Swedish origin. Lewis planned from the beginning on devoting a full year to the study of languages: "If . . . I remain here a year and do not attain to at least as tolerable degree of proficiency as people generally do in that time I shall return to Petersburg full of shame."¹⁴

¹⁰ Lewis to J. D. Lewis, Mar. 14 and June 21, 1811, W. D. Lewis letters, 1801-1828. A series of letters from Gill to Lewis in 1813 is in the Library of Congress Manuscripts Collection, Ac. 3133.

¹¹ Lewis to Paul Hamilton (Secretary of the Navy), June 29, 1812, and to Eliza (no last name), Mar. 19, 1814 (from Shetland Islands), W. D. Lewis letters, 1801-1828.

¹² Lewis (Gothenburg) to Henry Clay, May 4, 1814.

¹³ Lewis (St. Petersburg) to Eliza, May 30, 1814.

¹⁴ Lewis (Moscow) to J. D. Lewis, Aug. 27, 1814 [dates of letters from Moscow are according to the Russian (Julian) calendar, twelve days behind the Western (Gregorian) calendar], W. D. Lewis Letter Book, 1814-1815.

Lewis spent four hours a day with Dr. Strahl, two hours on each language. Translations and exercises occupied the remainder of the day. To St. Petersburg he wrote, "The labor of learning two languages at a time admits of but little relaxation for pleasure and altho' I cannot think they can be perfectly acquired in a year I shall do my utmost to acquire as much of them in that time as I can."¹⁵

From St. Petersburg John Lewis continued to bolster the resolution of his protégé, stressing the "importance those languages will be to us both hereafter," but advised that study should be tempered with making social connections that might be valuable in the future.¹⁶ "I wish you to be much in Society—that of the German and Russian, of course, the most," and "by all means learn to dance and waltz, *at once*, so as to appear not only with *Ease* but *gracefully* when you attempt either."¹⁷ In an early letter John issued a stern warning:

If you should be so unfortunate as to catch a V. complaint you will be under the necessity of leaving this country—it is impossible to have it cured here so dreadful is the climate. You will be obliged to remain in the house all Winter bereft of Society; my projects and yours will thereby be destroyed. . . . I do not pretend to say that such gratifications are not to take place but this I do say that *common professed* Prost —s can be avoided, and should be avoided.¹⁸

After reflecting that two new languages might be too much for William to handle and also break into society, John wrote, "If knowing the german language interferes with the acquisition of the russ—it must give way—the russ is the most important tongue for examining the accounts of articles etc. Let the greater part of your attention be directed to Russian."¹⁹

Learning Russian was not as easy as German, though William Lewis considered it less difficult grammatically. "The Dr. [Strahl] is a very learned, agreeable & friendly man, but, altho' he evinces much willingness to impart his knowledge to others, his anxiety to accrue more is still great and nearly half the time I have been with

¹⁵ Lewis to J. D. Lewis, Sept. 21, 1814, *ibid.*

¹⁶ J. D. Lewis to Lewis, Oct. 7, 1814, J. D. Lewis, 1810-1821.

¹⁷ J. D. Lewis to Lewis, Oct. 30, 1814, *ibid.*

¹⁸ J. D. Lewis to Lewis, Aug. 21, 1814, *ibid.*

¹⁹ J. D. Lewis to Lewis, Oct. 20, 1814, *ibid.*

him of late has been taken up in reading Shakespeare."²⁰ But the biggest problem was meeting people who spoke Russian natively. Living with a German family, most of his social life was confined to the foreign quarter. In February, 1815, Lewis described with enthusiasm how he had finally attended a ball given by a Moscow merchant, "where no one . . . spoke any thing but Russ."²¹ Such opportunities were rare, however, and efforts to secure lodging with a Russian family were unsuccessful. The nobility were apparently reluctant to accept an unknown foreign guest with mercantile connections, and the only possibility that turned up—living with a priest's family—he considered too demeaning: "A respectable man . . . is a rarity among the priesthood here."²²

Study continued through the winter, however, and in February William reported to his brother, "I can understand simple topics of conversation in them [Russian and German] and make myself understood but badly. In reading I am stronger in Russ than in German and can make out newspapers & the generality of prose composition without a great deal of trouble. . . . My acquaintances here flatter me much on my progress but in doing this they give me credit for more than I have."²³ Lewis was on the point of giving up obtaining a better speaking knowledge at the end of March and returning to St. Petersburg, when he suddenly decided to move to the provincial town of Tver (now Kalinin), about 100 miles northeast of Moscow.

In Tver William still could not find a Russian family to adopt him, but he was pleased by the town and especially by the fact that all levels of society spoke Russian.²⁴ He pretended not to know French, so that all conversation would be in Russian, and he soon found a young civil servant who agreed to live in furnished rooms with him and speak nothing but Russian.²⁵ As an American living where few foreigners then resided, Lewis was a social curiosity, receiving considerable attention from the governor who introduced Lewis into the best homes. "I speak nothing but Russ and even at

²⁰ Lewis to J. D. Lewis, Sept. 28, 1814, Letter Book, 1814-1815.

²¹ Lewis to J. D. Lewis, Feb. 8, 1815, *ibid.*

²² Lewis to J. D. Lewis, Mar. 25, 1815, *ibid.*

²³ Lewis to J. D. Lewis, Feb. 8, 1815, *ibid.*

²⁴ Lewis to J. D. Lewis, Apr. 5, 1815, *ibid.*

²⁵ Lewis to J. D. Lewis, Apr. 8, 1815, *ibid.*

the tables of the first people Russian is the language which is spoken, altho' a few of them understand French perfectly well."²⁶ Under these circumstances speaking ability improved rapidly. And with this in mind, he wrote his brother, "I consider it very fortunate for me to have pitched upon Tver."²⁷ In May William Lewis received several invitations to live at country estates for the summer, and he accepted the one where no French would be spoken by the family. Unfortunately, he mentions no local names during his stay in Tver, because he feared that letters were being opened at the post office, and his letter book ends in June, although Lewis did not return to St. Petersburg until August.²⁸

His efforts to gain conversational fluency in Russian illustrate the difficulties that foreigners faced in developing social contacts with Russians. This was one reason why Americans and Russians were largely ignorant of each other. While serving in the Russian consulate in Philadelphia, Pavel Svinin complained, "Unfortunately, travels in Russia, as well as in the United States, have generally been the object of speculators, who, taking advantage of the remote situation of these countries, and desirous of rendering their travels interesting, relate ridiculous wonders and strange falsehoods."²⁹ The caste nature of Russian society produced obstacles for American perceptions of Russia. Two months after his arrival in Moscow, Lewis wrote, "I do not speak of the nobility—I have never met with any of them & probably shall not; they are said to be prouder than those in P[etersburg]." But in Tver, where foreign visitors were rare and where Lewis did not associate with merchants, the situation was quite different. To a Moscow acquaintance, Lewis wrote,

I believe the singularity of seeing an American is a great inducement to the good people of Tver to invite me so often as I must be a great curiosity to them. I get however very good dinners by it, and so long as they feed me well they may talk among themselves about that odd fellow of a Choc-taw or Chickasaw as much as they please. For the first time I have an

²⁶ Lewis to J. D. Lewis, Apr. 22, 1815, *ibid.*

²⁷ Lewis to J. D. Lewis, Apr. 25, 1815, *ibid.*

²⁸ Lewis to J. D. Lewis, May 24 and 31, 1815, *ibid.*

²⁹ Paul Svinin, *Sketches of Moscow and St. Petersburg Ornamented with Nine Coloured Engravings Taken from Nature* (Philadelphia, 1813), 1.

³⁰ Lewis to J. D. Lewis, Oct. 19, 1814, Letter Book, 1814-1815.

opportunity to judge of the Russian nobility and indeed I think they are a good hospitable people, but as the Yankees say they have some very queer ways.³¹

Upon returning to St. Petersburg, Lewis was again classified as a merchant and no longer received by nobility.³²

Lewis reported economic information to his brother that may have promoted the rise of the Lewis firm to become one of the three leading commercial houses in St. Petersburg by 1820. William was especially impressed by the rebuilding of Moscow after the disastrous fire of 1812. From *Syn Otechestva* (Son of the Fatherland), a leading Russian journal, he copied figures on the total destruction: 2,041 houses of stone and 4,491 of wood, leaving unburned 536 stone and 2,100 wooden houses. The loss of churches was much less in proportion: only 56 churches and 3 monasteries burned out of a total of 329 churches and 23 monasteries. Lewis wrote that 919 stone and 1,187 wooden houses had been rebuilt and 74 new stone houses added by the winter of 1814-1815.³³ The population of the city was back to 170,000 (including 8,000 nobles, 30,000 servants, and 2,000 priests). Lewis thought that the successful reconstruction of Moscow proved Russia's economic potential.³⁴

During his winter's residence in the old Russian capital, Lewis observed with disappointment that "almost all articles of Russian products are in the hands of the Russians themselves,"³⁵ but, surprisingly, in the customs house business was "almost altogether conducted in German."³⁶ A market for American tobacco could not be developed in Russia, he also noted, because the German colony on the Volga grew an inferior kind and trade in this item was monopolized by Russian merchants.³⁷ Information of this nature was not

³¹ Lewis to Mrs. Preter, June 1, 1814, *ibid.*

³² Lewis (St. Petersburg) to Jonathan Russell (Stockholm), Aug. 17, 1815, Russell Papers, Brown University.

³³ Lewis to J. D. Lewis, Oct. 23, 1814, and to Jonathan Russell, Feb. 22, 1815, Letter Book, 1814-1815. The massive Soviet history of Moscow cites the same figures, though omitting the religious buildings. *Istoriia Moskvy* (Moscow, 1954), III, 144.

³⁴ Lewis to Joel Lewis (Philadelphia), Feb. 4, 1815, Letter Book, 1814-1815.

³⁵ Lewis to J. D. Lewis, Mar. 10, 1815, *ibid.*

³⁶ Lewis to J. D. Lewis, Mar. 4, 1815, *ibid.*

³⁷ Lewis to J. D. Lewis, Sept. 14, 1814, *ibid.*

easily obtained, however: "The merchants are closer mouthed here than the Yankees themselves."³⁸

In Tver, where the headquarters of the water communications direction for northern Russia was located, Lewis learned how the hemp, the major item of American export, was moved along the rivers from the site of production in Kaluga and Smolensk provinces. He discovered that one could predict the supplies of hemp in the Baltic ports by studying the ice clearings and water levels of the Volga and Dvina river systems in the spring.³⁹

Lewis' letters to friends outside of Russia contained more complete descriptions of Russian life, but they were intentionally written in an exaggerated and entertaining form. In a letter to Jonathan Russell, then United States minister to Sweden, he summed up his year in Moscow and Tver.

And so for the present my travels are over and from the dignified situations of an *attache* to a celebrated & successful mission and *young American traveller*, which was my denomination in the interior, I have sunk into nothing more than a merchant or something rather lower. . . .

You ask me to give you some description of the manners and customs of the people among whom I have been. That sir, would be a difficult task and I should not even dare to express my sentiments to you on paper upon this subject in so clear and explicit a manner, as a person would be desirous of doing when talking to a friend. You must therefore in a general way rub off a little varnish from my pictures and expose them to pretty severe tarnishes before you can expect to get a good likeness.

On the subject of Mosco if I were to begin I should never know when to end as that is my hobby-horse & besides to tell you the truth I have written a great big book about it which I should like you to see, amazingly not because I think it at all worthy your notice, but because I think that it would give you good reason to suppose that there is little in the town meriting it. It is a great ugly, monstrous, unwieldy, muddy place affording very little comfort take it in what way you will. I went there however with the determination of being satisfied and by the attentions and hospitality of the people rendered 8 months in quite a passable manner that is to say in a noisy laughing one at least. I was for the most part among the Germans there who you know are very vulgar people yet they seem like such good hearted fellows when they get their pipes in their mouths and their glass of grog upon the table that it made me feel quite happy to look at them.

³⁸ Lewis to J. D. Lewis, Feb. 25, 1815, *ibid*.

³⁹ Lewis to J. D. Lewis, Apr. 8 and May 6, 1815, *ibid*.

At Tver I was much more among the Russians—indeed I held quite a distinguished place as it would appear in the opinions of the very first of the nobility; i.e. they endeavored to contrive to make me believe so, and it was no uncommon thing to see me riding in the morning to their neighboring country places in a carriage with four and sometimes even six horses and as many as four attendants. So you may see that I have been quite a *dasher*. Indeed they are a good hospitable people and I like them very much, and as long as I have had little money to be cheated out of it does not make much odds how polite they are to me. There I had an opportunity of seeing much of them being a traveller, here I seldom meet with them being a merchant.⁴⁰

Lewis satisfied Russell's desire for a more complete description of Russian society about a year later but in the same vein.⁴¹ In the meantime he tested his newly acquired language skills with a Russian version of "Yankee Doodle" requested by Russell.⁴² He remained in Russia until October, 1819, but there are no records of any more trips outside of St. Petersburg, and, except for a volume of Russian poems in translation, published in Philadelphia in 1849, made little literary use of the language that he had taken so much trouble to learn.⁴³

Why didn't William David Lewis use his unique knowledge of Russian and rare experience of life in Russian provincial society for the benefit of a wider audience? There was, after all, a demand in America for knowledge about Russia, and Lewis was probably better informed about that nation than any of his countrymen. His notebook efforts at poetry and translation show that he had some literary pretensions, but he apparently did not submit them for publication for years. The reason may be that Lewis had business and political ambitions which might be hurt by amateurish publication. But then why was he not successful in obtaining a political appointment such as that of a consulship in Russia that would make use of his ability? He obviously had such a career in mind in his correspondence with

⁴⁰ Lewis to Jonathan Russell, Aug. 17, 1815, Russell Papers, Brown University.

⁴¹ Lewis to Jonathan Russell, Aug. 15, 1816, *ibid.* This twenty-four page description of Russia varies in minor details from a copy given to an American visitor, Edward Coles, two months later. See Stanley J. Zyzniewski, "A Delawarean's View of Russia in 1816," *Delaware History*, IX (1961), 326-340. Lewis hoped Russell would be appointed minister to Russia, and the essay on Russia was intended as an advertisement for public service.

⁴² Lewis to Jonathan Russell, Sept. 28, 1815, Russell Papers, Brown University.

⁴³ William D. Lewis, *Bakchesarian Fountain by Alexander Pooshkeen and Other Poems by*

Jonathan Russell, Henry Clay, and Christopher Hughes, who were all aware of Lewis' linguistic achievements, and Clay, who was Secretary of State from 1825 to 1829, secured Lewis an appointment as collector of the port of Philadelphia many years later.

Unfortunately, Lewis made the mistake of losing his temper one day in St. Petersburg in August, 1817, and publicly insulted the American consul, Levitt Harris, by pulling his nose. Lewis expected Harris to be recalled for consular irregularities and hoped to be nominated to his place.⁴⁴ But his treatment of a duly accredited American official and the publicity that accompanied a subsequent duel and lengthy libel case (which Lewis lost) in Philadelphia prevented his consideration for an appointment to a diplomatic post in the 1820's and 1830's.

Lewis could have followed the example of Pavel Svinin and written about America for Russian publication.⁴⁵ He had observed on several occasions how ignorant Russians were of America, and, in the period of Lewis' residence in Russia, interest in the United States was rising. But the status of Lewis as a merchant would have severely reduced the chances of his material being acceptable to presses controlled by the government and the nobility. The first American student of Russian gained recognition as a Russian scholar, and then only in a modest way, when he was the first to translate "The Fountain of Bakhchisarai" by Alexander Pushkin into English.

The University of Kansas

NORMAN E. SAUL

Various Authors (Philadelphia, 1849).

⁴⁴ Though the altercation is mentioned in a number of sources, since John Quincy Adams, James Madison, Henry Clay, and Daniel Webster were among the prominent Americans involved in the legal aspects, the most complete published analysis is in James Barton Rhoads, "Harris, Lewis and the Hollow Tree," *American Archivist*, XXV (1962), 295-314. But the affair did not begin with a "public street brawl" as Rhoads asserts. The Harris-Lewis feud simmered for a number of years over consular practices and trade rivalries. The particular incident arose through a complaint by a client of Lewis, Joseph Bowditch of Salem, regarding fees charged by Harris. Lewis and Bowditch appealed to the American minister, William Pinkney, but Harris insinuated that Lewis was lying. A few days later Lewis met Harris in the exchange and tried to extract an apology. Harris' refusal angered Lewis and he pulled the nose of his opponent. Lewis to Jonathan Russell, Sept. 1/13, 1817, Russell Papers, Brown University.

⁴⁵ Svinin's articles for *Syn Otechestva* were expanded into a book, *Opyt zhivopisnago putshestviia po Severnoi Amerike* (St. Petersburg, 1815).