

Scholars determine Tsar Boris Godunov's exact date of birth

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The Russian Noble, Adam Olearius. Credit: Wikimedia Commons

HSE University researchers Feodor Uspenskij and Anna Litvina studied the notes of Georg Tectander, a diplomat of the Holy Roman Empire, as collected in the book *The Travel to Persia through Muscovy: 1602–1603*, and discovered the exact date of birth of Tsar Boris Godunov: August 2 (Julian calendar) or August 12 (Gregorian calendar). The scholars then verified and confirmed this date with other 17th-century sources—in particular, with the notes of Baron Heinrich von Logau, the Empire's ambassador in Moscow. The results of the study are presented in a paper published in the *Studi Slavistici* journal (Florence, Italy), and in a follow-up paper to be published by the same journal at the end of the year.

The controversial ruler Boris Godunov (1552–1605) has unwillingly become an unpopular character in Russian history. His biography is full of ambiguities and gaps. Some have attributed non-existing names to him, others have blamed him for the death of almost all the last Rurikids—not only Tsarevich Dmitry, but also Ivan the Terrible and Feodor I Ioannovich. Historians turned a blind eye to the tsar's date of birth, with only estimates of the date given: for example, that he was born shortly before the 1552 Kazan campaign, which happened over summer and autumn.

However controversial a ruler he was, it makes sense to restore his historical 'rights'—starting by determining his exact date of birth. Feodor Uspenskij and Anna Litvina managed to do so via thorough analysis of one source: Georg Tectander's notes.

Georg Tectander von der Jabel (about 1570–1614) wrote: 'Also on August 2, when the Great Prince [Boris Godunov] was celebrating his birthday, they sent us, as previously, 200 people from the palace, each of whom was carrying a dish with different types of fish, since it was a fasting day for Muscovites'.

The Austrian diplomat's work is hardly unknown: it was published three

times while the author was still alive, and has been republished since. In 1896, it was translated into Russian and published as a book: *The Travel to Persia through Muscovy: 1602–1603* by Georg Tectander and Stephan Kakash. However, historians have always seemed to overlook Tectander's remark. Neither the historians Gerhard Friedrich Müller, Nikolay Karamzin, Sergey Solovyov and Vasily Klyuchevsky, nor Godunov's biographers Sergey Platonov and Ruslan Skrynnikov, took this valuable evidence into account.

Foreign specialists, from mercenaries in the Russian army to merchants and travelers who could be considered 'part-time' diplomats, have left some invaluable evidence. The accounts of English diplomats Giles Fletcher and Jerome Horsey, the French officer Jacques Margeret at Godunov's court, ambassador of the Holy German Empire Sigismund von Herberstein, Dutch diplomat Isaac Massa, Ivan the Terrible's German oprichnik Heinrich von Staden, German scholar Adam Olearius, and the Italian Antonio Possevino (a papal legate in Eastern Europe), reveal a lot about Muscovy in the 16th–17th centuries.

Setting aside the inevitable bias and variety of interpretation in foreigners' evidence on Russian history, it can still be essential in cross-checking important data. For example, European chronicles have repeatedly shed light on events mentioned in their Russian counterparts.

The notes by Tectander, secretary of Emperor Rudolph II's embassy to Shah Abbas I of Persia, are an example of a trustworthy source. The diplomat visited Godunov's court twice: on his way to Persia and on the way back (1602–1604). The first time, Tectander came to Moscow with the head of the embassy, Transylvanian nobleman Stephan Kakash, and then came back without him—the head of the mission died on his way to Persia. After losing all his fellow travelers and enduring hardships, Tectander completed his Persian mission (as instructed by the late Kakash) and went to Moscow, where he celebrated Boris Godunov's

birthday.

Importantly, Georg Tectander was extremely precise in terms of dates. During his mission, he thoroughly recorded every date. He was also very worried when he found himself 'out of time' in Persia: 'They [Muslims] have no clocks or anything similar, so I lost count of dates. For half a year before coming back to Muscovy, I was living day to day without the opportunity to distinguish one day from another'.

He wrote that he managed to start counting the days again in Moscow. At that point, he was recording the days not according to the 'new style'—the Gregorian calendar—as previously, but by the 'old style'—the Julian calendar, which was used in Russia during that time.

In the beginning, both Tectander and Kakash made records about the mission independently of each other. Tectander, as a Protestant and grandson of one of Martin Luther's students, wrote in German. Kakash, a Catholic, wrote in Latin. Tectander published his diaries when he came back home, while Kakash wrote 'on the road' during the trip and up to his death.

Such 'double recording' has given historians a unique opportunity to cross-check the embassy secretary's evidence with that of his superior, who was recording the same events. 'Tectander passed this examination flawlessly: all the dates in his notes—including those during his first visit to Moscow, when the head of the embassy was still alive—completely align with dates provided by Kakash, although not in a simple way,' explain Feodor Uspenskij and Anna Litvina.

The issue is the difference in calendars. Even two decades after the introduction of the Gregorian calendar, Europe was still living out of sync. Some had switched to the new calendar, while others stuck to the old style. At the time, the difference in dates was ten days. Catholic

countries had mostly switched to the new style, while most Protestant monarchies did not accept it. In the religiously diverse Holy Roman Empire, the situation was particularly ambiguous: people in neighboring lands were often using different calendars. Curiously, Kakash, a Catholic, unexpectedly dated his letters in the old style, while Tectander, his Protestant assistant, dated his letters in the new style (as was common in his homeland, Bohemia) while the ambassador was alive.

Example: according to Kakash's dating, their first audience with Boris Godunov took place on November 17, 1602, while in Tectander's dating, it occurred on November 27. The former wrote that they left Moscow on November 27, while the latter dated their departure to December 7.

If the embassy head had survived and joined his secretary on the return trip to Moscow in 1604, both of them would have participated in the royal celebration and most probably would have assigned their dual dating system to it. But reality turned out otherwise. Tectander came back alone and, due to reasons unknown, started dating his records in Moscow using the Julian calendar.

It is possible that having assumed Kakash's responsibilities, Tectander also adopted his style. Or perhaps, after the 'failed' calendar in Muslim countries, it was easier for him to follow the style used in Russia. The old calendar was also common in Saxony, where Tectander stayed on his way back from the mission. He got a position there and published his writings.

How Was It Studied?

To prove that August 2 is Boris Godunov's date of birth under the old calendar (August 12 under the new one) and that this date is correct, the researchers performed an internal reconstruction of the events and analyzed external sources of information. The key moment was the

arrival of the Emperor's embassy headed by Heinrich von Logau, a Knight of Malta, in Moscow. Tectander, much like his fellow countrymen, was looking forward to meeting him. He wrote that Baron von Logau arrived on July 15. But was this by the old calendar or the new?

According to diplomatic correspondence, the Russians only sent a delegation to meet the Emperor's ambassador in Torzhok on July 5 (July 15 in the new calendar) ahead of his arrival in Moscow. This means that Logau could not have entered Moscow on that date. On July 6, they were clarifying the details of his catering along the way, and on July 7 (17) he arrived in Tver. After that, the Tsar ordered the ambassador to move slower (which the Russian escort complied with) and stay in each district on the way. Before arriving in Moscow, the embassy was sent precious clothes and horses from the Tsar. 'Obviously, at such a pace, Heinrich von Logau entered Moscow on July 15 under the old style, as Tectander recorded,' the researchers concluded.

What about confirming the date of August 2 by contradiction? Let's say Tectander misunderstood the Russian holidays and confused Godunov's birthday with his name day. July 24 is the day of Saints Boris and Gleb, which is, accordingly, Boris Godunov's name day and is close to the date of interest.

Let's assume that Tectander's August 2 is a new-style date. But in this case, the Tsar's birthday would fall not on July 24, but on July 23. One could assume that Tectander, contrary to his usual accuracy, was mistaken by one day, and that the ambassadors were treated to dishes from the Tsar on July 24. But then, it is unclear why the 200 fish dishes and a fasting day appear. 'July 24, 1604 was a Tuesday—a non-fasting day of the week—and there is no other major fast on this day, so there was no reason to eat only fish on the Tsar's name day,' the authors of the study explain.

Finally, the hypothesis that Tectander used the new-style dating fails even if he wasn't mistaken with the date. August 2 in the new style was July 23 in the old style, and it would be quite logical in the Russian tradition for a boy born on July 23—the eve of Saint Boris and Gleb's day—to be named Boris. But the problem is that in 1604, July 23 was a Monday, and the Tsar had no reason to send fish dishes to the ambassadors.

August 2 in the old calendar was part of the Dormition fast (celebrating the Dormition of the Mother of God). 'The Tsar's birthday, of course, could not override the fast, and the Germans were sent numerous fasting dishes. This shows that Tectander did not make a mistake and understood everything correctly,' the researchers said. 'Everything in his account makes sense: the Tsar's birthday rather than his name day, the fast, and the specific date'.

There is also further external evidence that proves Tectander's data is correct, courtesy of the abovementioned Logau. Tectander's quote about the holiday contains the words 'as previously' (*wiederumb*, which can be translated as 'again', 'as before', etc). He mentions the generous meals sent to the foreign guests 'again'. But what was the occasion of the previous feast?

Heinrich von Logau's report clarifies the issue. Unlike Tectander's notes, which have been published repeatedly, Logau's manuscript remained hidden in the Vienna Archive. But both chroniclers were precise in terms of dates. However, once again, Logau used the Gregorian calendar and Tectander used the Julian. While Tectander said that Logau entered Moscow on July 15, the latter mentioned the date as July 25.

Baron von Logau wrote that on the third day of August (July 24 in the old style), the embassy received hundreds of food dishes and drinks: 'On the third [day] of the same [month], the Great Prince celebrated his

birthday—*Borisium*—quite splendidly, and sent to my apartments, with one of his noble boyars, over 200 meals on golden dishes and almost the same number of vessels with drinks from his table'.

Most probably, the word *Borisium* means 'Boris's day'—the tsar's name day, not his birthday. The ambassador, like many other foreigners, conflated the two celebrations in Muscovy. This is quite understandable, as in the Russian tradition, name days were usually close to birthdays.

What Was the Outcome?

The final task was to collect the data altogether. Logau's notes helped to clarify what Tectander meant when he wrote 'as previously': he meant the name day, which preceded the birthday, but was celebrated more lavishly due to the circumstances. The name day, unlike the birthday, did not fall on a fasting day. That's why on *Borisium*, the guests were treated to a variety of food, while only fish was served on the Tsar's birthday.

In this context, Tectander's comment that the menu was a fasting one is particularly telling. It not only references the Dormition fast and helps confirm Tsar Boris's date of birth, but it says a lot about the author too. Tectander, a Protestant who did not fast but spent a lot of time among Catholics, saw the need to fast as something unusual and specific to Russians. The Catholic world was not familiar with the idea of such a long Dormition fast.

Today, we can be sure that Tsar Boris Godunov's date of birth was August 2 (12), 1552. This complies with Russian naming practices of the time. 'When choosing a single Christian name—and Boris Godunov was mononymic—they chose the name of a saint celebrated not long before or not long after the birthday,' the researchers commented. 'With a name day nine days before the birth, and with the name of a beloved saint, Boris was the perfect match for a boy born on August 2 (12).'

More information: Fyodor Borisovich Uspenskij et al, The Birthday of Boris Godunov, *Studi Slavistici* (2021). [DOI: 10.36253/Studi_Slavis-10605](https://doi.org/10.36253/Studi_Slavis-10605)

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