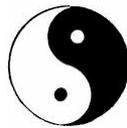


A First Complete Translation into English of Peter the Great's Original Table of Ranks:
Observations on the Occurrence of a Black Hole in the Translation of Russian Historical Documents

by Angelo Segrillo

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A First Complete Translation into English of Peter the Great's Original Table of Ranks:
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Angelo Segrillo¹

There is a black hole in the translation of historical documents into English. The famous Table of Ranks was promulgated by Peter the Great in 1722. Almost three centuries later, we still do not have a complete English translation of this original document.²

What is written in the paragraph above may seem surprising to readers familiar with Russian history. How is it that the Table has not been translated if we can find it in English in the corresponding entry of Wikipedia, for example (not to speak of numerous other encyclopedias and regular books)? Well, look more carefully. The Table of Ranks you have seen in English on the internet or in books until now are all either abridged versions or versions which are “mixed” ones, that is, not the “pure” original, but versions in which only some of the original ranks established by Peter are mingled with additional ones inserted by later czars.

This mysterious omission can be better clarified by explaining the origins of the present text. The purpose of this article is to present for the first time a translation into English of the *complete*, original (1722) Table of Ranks — the one Peter himself signed. However, the origin of the article leads farther away, to Brazil. Being a Brazilian historian with an educational background both from the U.S. (undergraduate) and Russia (master's degree), I noticed that the original Table of Ranks had not been translated into Portuguese. No surprise there, since Slavic Studies are not highly developed in Brazil. Therefore, I prepared such a translation into Portuguese in a collaborative work.³ My surprise came when I noticed that in most Western languages, including English, the same omission still exists. At first I was incredulous. After conducting a fairly extensive survey of internet sites, I confirmed my above-mentioned diagnosis: all translations are either partial/abridged or mixed with later additions (not the “pure” original). Then I started a deeper, more serious search in specialized books and conducted an inquiry among selected history professors. I thought I had finally found the missing link in the essay by a specialist, Charles E. Timberlake, in an excellent book edited by M.L. Bush. In his chapter on “The Middle Classes in Tsarist Russia,” Timberlake literally stated that “a translation of the original Table of Ranks is in B. Dmytryshin, *Imperial Russia: A Source Book 1700-1917* (2nd edn, Hinsdale, 1974), pp. 17-19.”⁴ I went to check Dmytryshin's work certain that my search had ended. Not only was Timberlake a specialist, but Basil Dmytryshin is a renowned author and one of the best translators of Russian primary sources. What I read astonished me. On the pages indicated there was only an abridged version of the 1722 Table of Ranks!⁵

That was the moment when I began to understand the origins of the black hole. First of all, I tried to understand why Dmytryshin, with his superb command of the language and of the original sources, would not put the complete Table there in English. Of course, his sourcebook was not supposed to a verbatim translation of all documents — it would take up too much space — but a book with a selection of the most important parts of each document indicating the lacunae by means of the usual ellipses. Therefore, the item with Peter's decree and the Table itself was also abridged. However, I have to fault Dmytryshin's otherwise wonderful book with one problematic weakness: he should have inserted the

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² I would like to thank Mikhail Taits for his invaluable technical help along this research project and Evgeniya Gribova for introducing him to me.

³ Angelo Segrillo, Camilo Domingues & Vicente Ferraro Jr., *Rússia, Ontem e Hoje: ensaios de pesquisadores do LEA sobre a história da Rússia* (Sao Paulo: FFLCH-USP, 2016), pp. 139-149. Available online at http://lea.vitis.uspnet.usp.br/arquivos/russiaoh_lea.pdf.

⁴ Charles Timberlake, “The Middle Classes in Tsarist Russia,” In *Social Orders and Social Classes in Europe Since 1500: Studies in Social Stratification*, ed. M.L. Bush (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 89, footnote 5.

⁵ In 2003, Jerzy Lukowski wrote: “I am unaware of any complete translation of the Table of Ranks into English.” Today, more than a decade later, we are forced to reach the same conclusion. Jerzy Lukowski, *The European Nobility in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 196, endnote 36.

ellipses inside the Table itself in the places where he was omitting some ranks. This type of carelessness may have been the origin of much misunderstanding about the Table of Ranks. When a skilled specialist like Timberlake thinks (or states) that what is in Dmytryshin's sourcebook is the original Table, it has a ripple effect further down the road when it reaches the general, non-Russian speaking readers. Since for many decades (until very recently) it was difficult to access the official original of this document — which is the *Polnoe Sobranie Zakonov Rossiiskoi Imperii* (Complete Collection of the Laws of the Russian Empire), the 133-volume collection available only in a few places in Russia and the world — these authoritative translations (such as Dmytryshin's) were the basis from which most English-speaking readers departed. For some reason, these basic translated texts began a pattern of shortening the Table down to the essentials (that is, to the main ranks which have survived onto later ages) and of trimming the ranks that were accessory or were revoked/replaced later. While the original, Russian-speaking translators who were able to read the official text of the 1722 Table of Ranks were well aware of the complete version, the subsequent non-Russian speaking general public was not and took these abridged versions as the real thing. This ripple effect was leveraged in our internet age with its high turn-over of information. Not being able to be checked against the original source, the abridged versions of the Table of Ranks became the currency in the business. “A lie told a thousand times becomes the truth.” In our internet age, an inaccuracy repeated a thousand times becomes the standard.⁶

I encountered a similar (“internet leverage”) phenomenon in Russia as well. In that country, the 1722 Table of Ranks is easily found in its original, complete format on the internet. When I started my investigations, I chose an authoritative internet source to begin with — that of the History Department of Moscow State University. They published an online version of the 1722 decree by Peter the Great (available at <http://www.hist.msu.ru/ER/Etext/tabel.htm>). For practical purposes, this is a very reliable resource and I used it intensively. At one point I came across a doubtful spot. In class 5 of the “Navy” column of their Table of Ranks, there was a strangely long military rank: “*обер сарваер от строения карабельнаго интендант цейх мейстер обер итер крикс комисар*”. Since there was no comma inside this expression — commas separate the ranks in the Table of Ranks — it read as one rank. But anyone who knows some technical Russian would immediately notice that it is possible to distinguish three or four separate military ranks in this word scramble. I thought that maybe it was a typo of the Moscow State University site. Therefore, I checked other Russian internet sites; the expression was written the same way (without commas) in all of them. I was already blaming Peter's proverbially poor literacy skills for the spelling mistake in his own decree when I decided to check again in the original *Polnoe Sobranie Zakonov Rossiiskoi Imperii* (“Complete Collection of the Laws of the Russian Empire”).⁷ To my surprise, in this official primary source there is no ambiguity. The commas are there and these are four different ranks, not one. Another big surprise, similar to the one I had in the U.S! How is it that most of the Russian internet sites which carry the *complete*, original Table of Ranks have the same error? I believe the same phenomenon of “internet leverage” I witnessed in the U.S. was at work here. Once an authoritative site (such as the Moscow State University History Department site) makes a typo while compiling the Table

⁶ I cited Dmytryshin's book above because it was the first major authoritative Western source I came across along this pattern of “condensed” versions of the 1722 Table of Ranks being (rather carelessly) presented as if they were the complete one. But several others can be found with the same problem. See, for example, the 1722 Table of Ranks presented in Bucknell's virtual exhibit of Russian historical documents at <http://www.bucknell.edu/arts-and-sciences-college-of-academic-departments-and-programs/russian-studies/resources/russian-history/table-of-ranks.html> or the one in Frank W. Thackeray & John E. Findling, eds., *Events that Formed the Modern World: From the European Renaissance through the War on Terror* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2012), vol. 1, p. 25. In this regard, the other major English-language sourcebook of Russian history next to Dmytryshin's, i.e. George Vernadsky's, was a little more careful. It also presented only a shortened version of the 1722 original table, but expressly warned it was not a complete translation. See George Vernadsky, ed., *A Source Book For Russian History from Early Times to 1917* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), vol. 2, pp. 343-344.

⁷ A grammar or spelling mistake in the Table of Ranks decree would not be out of the question. In his youth, Peter was known to be hyperactive and overcurious — I suspect that if he lived nowadays he would be classified as an ADHD case... — but not especially well endowed with literacy skills. His spelling mistakes persisted into adulthood. Actually, some of the wording in the Table of Ranks decree could arguably be classified as inconsistent and literarily poor. That said, we should make some allowance for the fact that the Russian language was in a transitional state at the time, away from the influence of Church Slavonic towards becoming an independent literary language. Suffice to say that the first major systematic grammars of this new “modern” Russian language — Vasily Adodurov's and Mikhail Lomonosov's — were only published years after the promulgation of the Table of Ranks decree (respectively in 1731 and 1755).

of Ranks from the original primary source (the *Polnoe Sobranie...*), all the other internet sites — which do not have easy access to the official primary source — begin copying from this authoritative site trusting they are making a faithful copy of the original. And since the internet quickly disseminates other copies from these copies exponentially, soon we again have the situation of “a typo repeated a thousand times, becomes... the standard.”

As I mentioned, the purpose of this piece is simply to present a first complete English version of the original 1722 Table of Ranks by Peter the Great in order to dispel the widespread misconceptions about what it even looks like — for example, it does not four columns as normally presented, but seven. However, I think a few words about how we got to these discrepancies are in order because I feel we are dealing with some new methodological challenges in this internet age.

The question is. Why did this happen? The “internet leverage” phenomenon is key to explain the two specific situations about the Table of Ranks that I encountered in the U.S. and Russia and described above. But this phenomenon alone doesn’t explain why the original Table of Ranks has never yet been translated into English in full. After all, the U.S.A. was the leading Western specialist in translating Russian documents in the twentieth century. Remember the Cold War and how so many of the Russian documents were translated in full not only in journals and books at large, but also by specialized organizations set up just for this purpose (like the USSR division of the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, for example)? With this background as the main Western center for translation of Russian primary sources in the twentieth century, how is it that this very important, seminal document of Russian history was never translated in full into English?

The answer, I believe, is contained in the question. As said, the U.S. was the main Western translator in the twentieth century, that is, of *Soviet* documents. The Cold War, and the confrontation with Soviet communism in general, provided a tremendous stimulus to “know the enemy from inside”. In this period, the U.S. government actively prioritized the Soviet Union as the main focus of its international attention and the result was a torrent of detailed knowledge and translation from that region. But the situation was different in other centuries. Up to the nineteenth century, the U.S. was not the major *locus* of Eastern Studies (including Russian studies); at that time countries like Germany and France were ahead of the U.S. in terms of Russian studies (and Oriental Studies in general). Consequently, we cannot transfer the leadership role the U.S. had in Russian (Soviet) studies in the twentieth century to the czarist times. Thus, this U.S. gap of information about an eighteenth century Russian document becomes less of a mystery.

Perhaps symptomatic of the fact that the U.S. trailed Germany in Russian (and Oriental) studies in the previous centuries is the fact that although in most Western languages there is not yet a complete translation of the original Table of Ranks, one exception is German. In the eighteenth century there was a complete translation of the original Table of Ranks into German. It was published in a so-called Magazine for New History and Geography.⁸

These episodes with the Table of Ranks in English should draw attention to some of the dangers of the super-speed of information transmission in our internet age which may also be leveraging the transmission of *misinformation*. Just like we had to introduce circuit-breakers in stock markets for the cases when high-speed electronic trading simply goes awry, in the historical field we should temper our free flow of high-speed internet information with periodic “back to the primary source” circuit-breakers.

Not being a revivalist, I am glad to notice that, in the case of the Table of Ranks, the internet itself may also help this “back to the primary source” movement. We know that the primary source for the Table of Ranks is the *Polnoe Sobranie Zakonov Rossiiskoi Imperii* (Complete Collection of the Laws of the Russian Empire), which for decades was not easily accessible. Good News. Recently, the Russian National Library (*Rossiiskaya Natsional'naya Biblioteka*) did the wonderful work of digitizing all of the 133 volumes of the *Polnoe Sobranie Zakonov Rossiiskoi Imperii*, making them available online to researchers at http://www.nlr.ru/e-res/law_r/search.php

Thus, below is the first complete translation into English of the original (1722) Table of Ranks by Peter the Great. Compare it with the Tables you have seen in English so far. They are different because either the other Tables are abridged (usually deleting the ranks which were later abolished by other czars)

⁸ Anton Frierich Büsching, ed., *Magazin für die Neue Historie und Geographie* (Halle: Curt, 1773), vol. 7, pp. 349-355.

or mixed with later additions to the original Table by other czars. But don't trust my word that now you are seeing the real thing. Compare this to the original Table as seen in the *Polnoe Sobranie Zakonov Rossiiskoi Imperii!* Back to the primary sources!

Peter the Great's Original (1722) Table of Ranks

| Class | Military Service | | | | Civil Service | Court Service |
|-------|---|-----------------------|---|--|--|---|
| | Army | Guards | Artillery | Navy | | |
| 1. | Field Marshal General | | | General Admiral | Chancellor | |
| 2. | General of Cavalry or General of Infantry; Stadtholder | | General Master of Field Artillery | Admiral | Actual Privy Counselor | Grand Marshal |
| 3. | Lieutenant General; Knight of the Order of St. Andrew; War Commissary General | | Lieutenant General | Vice-Admiral; War Commissary General | Procurator-General | Grand Master of the Stables |
| 4. | Major General | Colonel | Major General; Major General of Fortifications | Rear Admiral; Grand Master of Artillery | President of College or Government Office; Privy Counselor; Senior Procurator | Grand Master of the Court; Grand Chamberlain |
| 5. | War Commissary Brigadier; Provisions Master General | Lieutenant Colonel | Lieutenant Colonel of Artillery | Commodore; Captain of Kronshlot Port; Senior Shipbuilding Supervisor; Intendant; Master of Artillery; War Commissary Commodore | Master of Heraldry; General Master of Requests; Grand Master of Ceremonies; Chief Forest Warden; Collegiate Vice- President; General Chief of Police; Director of Construction; Director General of the Posts; Archiater | Master of the Court; Grand Master of the Court and of the Stables; Privy Cabinet Secretary; Grand Master of the Court of Her Majesty the Empress; Grand Cup Bearer |
| 6. | Colonel; Treasurer; Grand Provisions Master; Senior Commissary; Adjutant General; Procurator; Quartermaster Lieutenant General | Major | Lieutenant Colonel of Artillery; Engineer Lieutenant Colonel; Senior Commissary | Captain 1 st rank; Captain of other Ports; Shipbuilding Supervisor; Procurator; Intendant of Saint Petersburg's Shipyard; Treasurer; Grand Provisions Master; Senior | Civil College Procurator; President of High Court of Appeals; Privy Counselor of the Chancery of the College of Foreign Affairs; Senior Secretary of the Senate; State Commissary; Senior Government Treasurer in Residence; | Master of the Stables; Actual Chamberlain; Marshal of the Court; Grand Master of the Hunt; First Physician; |

| | | | | | | |
|----|---|--------------------|---|---|--|--|
| | | | | Commissary | Collegiate Counselor | |
| 7. | Lieutenant Colonel; Auditor General; Provisions Master Lieutenant General; Wagonmaster General; Senior Provost General; Adjutant General to Field Marshal General; Comptroller | Captain | Major; Engineer Lieutenant Colonel; Senior Comptroller | Captain 2 nd rank; Comptroller | Vice-President of High Court of Appeals; Senior Secretary of Colleges of War, Admiralty and Foreign Affairs; Senate Superintendent; Chief Government Inspector; Procurator of High Court of Appeals; Master of Ceremonies | Master of the Court of Her Majesty the Empress; Personal Physician to Her Majesty the Empress |
| 8. | Major; Adjutant General to Full General; Auditor Lieutenant General; Senior Quartermaster; Chief Inspector; Paymaster | Lieutenant Captain | Engineer Major; Captain; Master of the Stables; Chief Armorer; Comptroller | Captain 3 rd rank; Ship Master; Paymaster; Chief Inspector | Under-Stattholder in Residence; Economy Intendant; Government Counselor in governorates; Senior Director of Customs and Excise in Residence; Senior Judge in Residence; President of City Council in Residence; Collegiate Senior Commissary; Collegiate Assessor; Grand Provisions Master in Residence; Senior Secretary of other Colleges; Senate Secretary; Grand Master of Mines; Grand Warden of the Mint; Grand Master of the Mint; Court Counselor; Forest Warden; Voevoda | Titular Chamberlain; Master of the Court and of the Stables; Court Intendant; |
| 9. | Captain; Flugel Adjutant to Field Marshal General or to Full General; Adjutant to Lieutenant General; | Lieutenant | Lieutenant Captain; Engineer Captain; Senior Auditor; Quartermaster; Commissary of Gunpowder/Salt peter Factories | Lieutenant Captain; Master of the Galleys | Titular Counselor; Secretary of Colleges of War, Admiralty and Foreign Affairs; Senior Government Treasurer in Governorates; Chief of Police in Residence; Permanent City Council Burgomaster | Court Master of the Hunt; Court Master of Ceremonies; Grand Kitchen Master; Chamber Junker |

| | | | | | | |
|-----|---|-------------------|---|---|---|-------------------------------|
| | Grand Provisions Master; General-Staff Quartermaster; Senior Auditor; Field Postmaster; Provost General | | | | in Residence; Provincial Judge; Professor of the Academies; Doctor from any faculty in State Service; Archivist at both State Archives; Senate Translator and Senate Clerk; Treasurer of the Mint; Assessor to High Court of Appeals in Residence; Collector of Customs at ports | |
| 10. | Lieutenant Captain | Second Lieutenant | Lieutenant; Engineer Lieutenant Captain; Auditor; Armorer; Comptroller; Grand Wagonmaster; Masters' Captain | Lieutenant | Secretary of other Colleges; Burgomaster of Governorate Boards; Translator of Colleges of War, Admiralty and Foreign Affairs; Clerk of same Colleges; Senior Economy Commissary in Governorates; Senior Commissary in Governorates; Assessor of Governorate High Court of Appeals; Senior Government Treasurer; Master of Mines; Senior Assayer | |
| 11. | | | | Ship Secretary | | |
| 12. | Lieutenant | Ensign | Second Lieutenant; Engineer Lieutenant; Transportation Officer; Wagonmaster | Second Lieutenant; Skipper 1 st rank | Secretary of High Court of Appeals, of Chancery or of Governorates; Collegiate High Government Treasurer; City Councilman in Residence; Master of the Mint; Master of the Forest; Foundry Administrator; Mine Surveyor | Court Junker; Court Physician |
| 13. | Second Lieutenant; Flugel Adjutant to Lieutenant General | | Bayonet Junker; Engineer Second Lieutenant | | Provincial Secretary; Mechanicus; Postmaster in Saint Petersburg or Riga; Collegiate Translator and Collegiate Clerk; Senate Registrar | |

| | | | | | | |
|-----|--|--|-----------------|--|---|---|
| 14. | Ensign; Flugel Adjutant to Major General or Brigadier; Staff Furir | | Engineer Ensign | Ship Commissary; Skipper 2 nd rank; Gunner | Collegiate Commissary; Inspector of High Court of Appeals or Governorate; Provincial High Government Treasurer; District Commissary; Assessor of Provincial Courts; Collegiate Archivist, Collegiate Registrar and Collegiate Accountant; District Government Treasurer; Postmaster in Moscow and other noble cities where there are governors; Collegiate Junker | Court Ecclesiarch; Master of the Court Pages; Secretary of the Court; Court Librarian; Antiquarian; Court High Government Treasurer; Court Auditor; Court Quartermaster; Court Apothecary; Castellan; Court Master of Artillery; Office Courier; Cup Bearer; Kitchen Master; Master of the Cellar; Drillmaster; Court Barber |
|-----|--|--|-----------------|--|---|---|

Source: *Polnoe Sobranie Zakonov Rossiiskoi Imperii* ("Complete Collection of the Laws of the Russian Empire"), 1st series, vol. 6, pp. 486-489, law number 3890. Available online at http://www.nlr.ru/e-res/law_r/search.php (law number 3890).