

Muscovy Described

Ambrose Contarini, ambassador from the Republic of Venice, his travelogue about his journey to Persia and Moscow, 1473 – 1477 CE

This city [Moscow], which is the capital of the Russian dominions, and the residence of the grand duke, or sovereign, is built on a small elevation, on the banks of the Moskva, over which there are several bridges; the castle and all the houses of the city being built of wood, which is procured from several thick forests near the place. The soil of this country is fertile, and produces abundance of corn of all kinds, which sell here much cheaper than with us; The country abounds in cattle and swine, and with incredible numbers of poultry, ducks, geese, and hares; but they have no venison, either because there are no deer, or because the natives are ignorant of the art of taking them. But they have no vines, and their only fruits are cucumbers, wild apples, and nuts. The country is extremely cold, and the inhabitants are under the necessity of living for nine months of the year in stoves. They provide during winter for their living in summer. When the whole country is enveloped in frost and snow, they use sledges drawn by horses, which are very convenient and useful for traveling; and are even used in summer on account of the miry bad roads, which are exceedingly difficult and unpleasant. The river ordinarily freezes over about the end of October, when the merchants erect booths on the ice, in which they expose their wares of all kinds for sale, as in a fair or market; and they here sell great numbers of cattle and swine, and great quantities of corn, timber, and all other necessaries of life; every thing being procurable in great abundance all the winter. About the end of November, they kill all the cattle, sheep, and other animals that are required for winter provision, and expose them for sale on the river in a frozen state; and the rigor of the season preserves these provisions for two or three months, without any risk of spoiling. Fish, poultry, and all other articles of food, are kept in the same manner. The horses run with great ease and swiftness on the ice yet they sometimes fall and break their necks. Both men and women of this country have very good faces, but their manners are exceedingly bad.

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