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Robert Ponzini

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# The Italian ‘Invasion’ of Russia and Its Key Role in the Emergence of a Unified Russian State

Ponzini Robert

M.Sc. in Economics  
New York University  
Professor in charge  
Lingue e Culture Moderne  
Dipartimento di Studi  
Umanistici  
Pavia University

## Corresponding Author:

Robert Ponzini  
Dipartimento di Studi  
Umanistici.  
Piazza Botta n. 6.  
Pavia University  
27000 Pavia, Italy  
Email: robert.ponzini@unipv.it

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## ABSTRACT

The prestige and importance of the Court Artist in Renaissance Italy is well documented. The epitome of this figure was Leonardo Da Vinci, but there were many others who exploited the competition between the wealthy city-states, duchies, and republics to earn a handsome livelihood from their patrons. Toward the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, their services were also in demand abroad at the court of Ivan the Great in Muscovy, who was feverishly engaged in consolidating the Rus’ duchies under Moscow’s rule and fending off outside threats from the Great Russian lands and the Tatars. A succession of architects/military engineers, some more famous than others, came to the Grand Prince’s court to build the citadel of the new Kremlin and provide the military weaponry needed to subdue Muscovy’s adversaries. Although this period of Italian influence would end after Ivan the Terrible’s reign, Peter the Great would later inaugurate a new phase of Italian presence in his attempt to modernize Russia along Western lines.

Il prestigio e l'importanza dell'Artista di Corte nell'Italia rinascimentale è ben documentato. L'epitome di questa figura era Leonardo Da Vinci, molti altri sfruttarono la competizione tra le ricche città-stato, i ducati e le repubbliche per guadagnarsi un bel sostentamento dai loro mecenati. Verso la fine del XV secolo, i loro servizi erano richiesti anche all'estero presso la corte di Ivan il Grande in Moscovia, che era febbrilmente impegnato nel consolidamento dei ducati della Russia sotto il dominio di Mosca e nel respingere le minacce esterne delle Grandi terre russe e dei tartari. Un susseguirsi di architetti/ingegneri militari, alcuni più famosi di altri, giunsero alla corte del Gran Principe per costruire la cittadella del nuovo Cremlino e fornire le armi necessarie ai militari per sottomettere gli avversari di Moscovia. Sebbene questo periodo di influenza italiana sarebbe terminato dopo il regno di Ivan il Terribile, Pietro il Grande avrebbe poi inaugurato una nuova fase della presenza italiana nel suo tentativo di modernizzare la Russia lungo le linee occidentali.

**Keywords:** Unified Russian State, Pietro Antonio Solari, Dormition Cathedral (Kremlin), Palace of Facets, Cathedral of the Annunciation, Spasskaya Tower, Bolshoi Theater

## 1 – First appearance of the Italian “Court Artist” in Ivan the Great’s Muscovy

The Made-in-Italy brand is, and has been for some time, one of the most recognizable and popular in the world, ranging from fashion to cuisine, to art, religion, architecture, music,

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and industrial design. Play word association with “Italy” with anyone and you would get, for example (not necessarily in order of importance): Verdi, pizza, cappuccino, Armani, gelato, Pavarotti, Ferrari, Bocelli, tiramisù, Da Vinci, the Roman Empire. Over the centuries, the Italian diaspora (IDS online) has also contributed significantly to enriching culture, for example, in North and South America, England, and Australia. However, few people might suspect the importance of the Italian “invasion” (Moore, 2015) that began at a key moment in the emergence of a unified Russian state.

Italian architects-cum-military engineers played a primary role in the construction of the new Kremlin during Ivan the Great’s rule and in providing the military arsenal needed to meet both internal and external threats to expanding Muscovite Russia (Murrell, 2021). In the latter part of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Ivan began to gather the Rus’ duchies under Moscow’s rule, and to help him in this endeavour he began to forge closer ties with the northern city-states in Italy. Russian ambassadors first came to Italy in 1461, visiting the court of Francesco I Sforza, Duke of Milan. Many other visits and messages would follow, and toward the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century the Grand Prince of Moscow would invite Italian architects to help in building the new Kremlin.

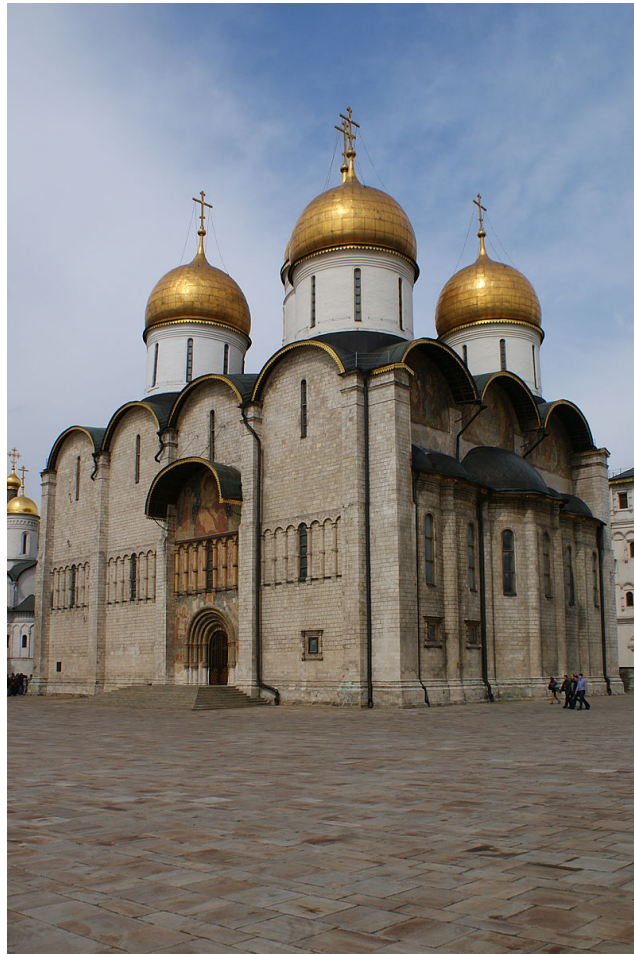
The arrival of Italian Masters in Moscow represented an extension of the “court artist” phenomenon in Italy, where independent city-states such as Milan, Venice, Mantua, Florence, and Siena followed the patronage system (*mecenatismo*) with the aim of increasing their prestige and reputation, and therefore their power (Wikipedia 2020). Renaissance artists wore many hats, and whether their patron was a ruler of a dukedom or city, a wealthy merchant or aristocrat, the Pope, or other high members of the church, they could be considered, in some respects, as high-priced handymen: in addition to their strictly artistic contributions, they might be asked to be an interior decorator, or to design the liveries and flags of their patron’s army. The poster boy for the court artist was Leonardo Da Vinci (Einstein, 2008). Da Vinci and his contemporaries were paid lavishly for their efforts, not only in coin but also with palatial residences, land, and titles (although, as their correspondence shows, they often had to deal with tight-fisted patrons who they had to repeatedly pressure for their payments). In 1475, Rodolfo “Aristotele” Fioravanti came to the court of Ivan the Great (Illingworth, 2021) from Bologna at the extravagant cost of 10 roubles a month (the highest pay in all of Muscovy, ten times what a serf had to pay to purchase his entire family, house, and land from his landlord). Ivan commissioned him to rebuild the Dormition Cathedral (now within the walls of the Kremlin) (Figure 1), which had been partially destroyed by an earthquake. First, however, Fioravanti had to design and build the first Italian-style brick mill in Moscow since the Russians were not capable of producing decent bricks.

## 2 – Fioravanti’s successors and the completion of the new Kremlin

In 1490, the Milanese Pietro Antonio Solari came to Moscow, where he designed the Palace of Facets in the Kremlin (Figure 2). The northern wall of the palace was in white stone and had the “diamond rustication” pattern typical of Italian Renaissance architecture, as exemplified by the Palazzo dei Diamanti in Ferrara. The Palace of Facets hosted royal diplomatic receptions and was the largest of its kind for over two centuries. Solari also designed six of the current towers in the Kremlin, including the clocktower, the Spasskaya Tower (Figure 3), which is the main symbol of the citadel and serves as its main entrance.

Another architect of note was Marco Ruffo, also known as Marco Fryazin (Wikipedia 2016). Russians gave the nickname “Fryazin” to all Masters from Italy, and since there were at least three other contemporaries with the same nickname, there is a bit of confusion at times regarding who is really who. From 1485-1495, Ruffo worked on building the new walls and

towers of the Kremlin, among which the Beklemishevskaya (Moskow. Info a online) and Nikolskaya (Moskow. Info b online) towers. He also worked with Pietro Solari in finishing construction of the Palace of Facets.

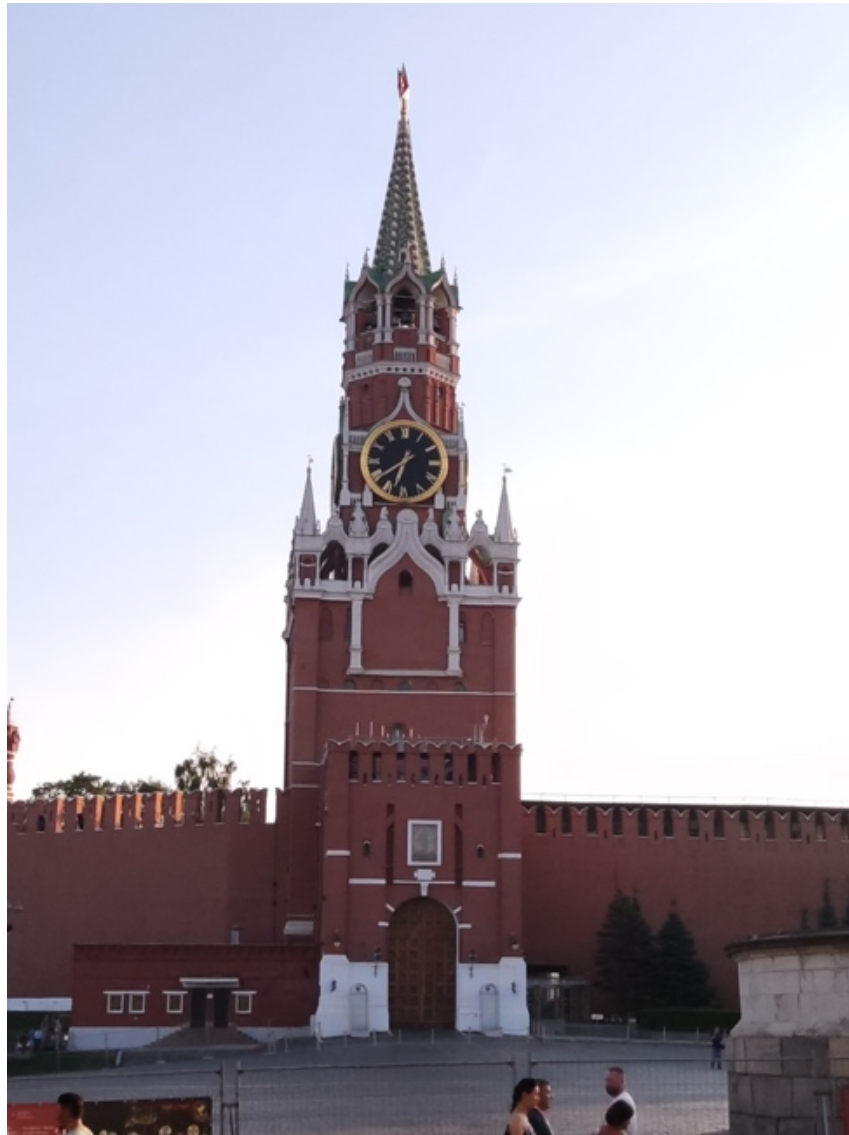


**Fig. 1 – Dormition Cathedral, Kremlin.** (Daniel Kruczynski, Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.0 Generic license)



**Fig. 2 – Palace of Facets and Cathedral of the Annunciation** (Pedro Szekely Creative Commons Attribution -ShareAlike 2.0 Generic License)

Aloisio da Carcano completed the Kremlin fortifications from 1494-99. Among his achievements was the erection of a wall on the side bordering the Neglinnaya River (which is now Alexander Garden). Antonio Gilardi (also known as Antonio Fryazin) built the Taynitskaya and Vodovzvodnaya towers (Wikipedia, 2021a), and around a decade later (from 1505-1508), Aloisio the New (who had been working in Venice) was commissioned by Ivan the Great to build the Cathedral of the Archangel Michael (Wikipedia, 2021b), which would house the reliquary of the Moscow dukes. In line with his Italian predecessors, Aloisio maintained the old Russian structural layout while incorporating richly decorated facades in Venetian Renaissance style.



**Fig. 3 – Spasskaya Tower, Kremlin (photography by the author)**

During this same three-year period, Bon Fryazin (his real name or year of birth is unknown) constructed the Ivan the Great Bell Tower (Wikipedia, 2021c) (Figure 4) and the Kitay-Gorod wall of the Kremlin. Erected in 1508, the tower is simple in its design and proportionality, resembling late-fifteenth-century Lombard campaniles. It was composed of three progressively narrowing octagonal drums rising to a height of 60 meters (later increased to 81 meters by Tsar Boris Godunov), as instructed by the architect. The tower stands alongside the Assumption Belfry, built by Pietro Annibale (Little Petrok) between 1523 and 1543.



Fig. 4 – Ivan the Great Bell Tower (GrahamColm, at Wikimedia Commons)

### 3 – The role of Italian military engineers in the expansion and consolidation of Muscovy

Architectural talent represented only part of the allure of the Italian Masters. Ivan the Great was chiefly concerned with expanding the territory of Muscovy and repelling the threat from the Mongols (or Tatars), and for this he relied heavily on the military engineering abilities of the itinerant Renaissance artists. Leonardo Da Vinci himself worked at the court of Ludovico il Moro in Milan for 17 years, designing tanks, catapults, submarines, and machine guns, among other weapons. Italian engineers were Masters in the design of weapons and explosive arms, and therefore very much in demand. When he was not working on architectural projects, Rodolfo Fioravanti kept busy with arms productions in the service of Ivan the Great (Einstein, 2008). He organized a gun factory to produce gunpowder and light canons, which, being easy to transport and reload, proved extremely deadly at that time. It is no stretch to state that without Italian-made canons Ivan would have been hard-pressed to stave off the threats from other duchies and from the Mongols.

Fioravanti even accompanied Ivan in his war against the Novgorod Republic, supervising an artillery unit and teaching the troops when to fire their canons during battles (Manaev, 2020). A contemporary chronicler wrote that: “The guns were firing ceaselessly because Aristotle was a Master of his craft”. Fioravanti was also on hand in 1480 during the Great Stand at the Ugra River against the Mongol army of Ahmed, Khan of the Great Horde. The massive bronze mortars he had designed could literally shred to pieces the Tatar cavalry. Ahmed, choosing discretion over valor, eventually would retreat into the steppes, signalling the end of Tatar-Mongol rule over Moscow.

Fioravanti was not the only military engineer employed in Muscovy. Soon after Fioravanti’s death, Paolo De Bossis would design the ‘Pavli’ (‘peacock’ in Russian), a giant canon that was used for nearly a century and referenced in Ivan the Terrible’s siege of Polotsk during the Lithuanian War (Wikipedia, 2021d). At the same time, another Italian gunsmith named Jacopo

designed smaller canons, which were used during Ivan the Terrible's defeat of the Tartars of Kazan in 1552. The chronicles recount that Ivan personally spoke with the Italian engineers, who, by constructing siege towers, bridges, and tunnels, enabled the Russians to destroy the town walls and invade the Kazan garrison.

#### 4 – Conclusions. A second wave of Italian presence in Russia

The century-long Italian presence begun during Ivan the Great's rule would come to an end after Ivan the Terrible's epoch, as economic and military crises made it impossible for Russian tsars to continue to meet the salary demands of Italian engineers. However, in the 18<sup>th</sup>-century, Peter the Great would turn to Italian shipbuilders and gunmakers in his efforts to modernize Russia along Western European lines, initiating another period of Italian influence that would continue into the 19<sup>th</sup> century. For example, Joseph Bové, a neoclassical Renaissance architect born into an Italian family in St. Petersburg, designed and rebuilt the new Central Squares of Moscow and Red Square after the great fire of 1812. His most famous achievement was the Bolshoi Theater and surrounding Theater Square (Figure 5).



**Fig. 5 – The Bolshoi Theater and Theater Square** (photography by the author)

His contemporary, Domenico Gilardi, was also entrusted with helping to rebuild Moscow after the fire; his neoclassical style can be seen in public buildings such as the Moscow Orphanage, the Widows' House, and the Old Hall of Moscow University. The Bergamasco, Giacomo Quarenghi, designed the Gostiny Dvor, the Old Merchant Court, which can still be seen near the Kremlin.

Cultural 'invasions' evolve to reflect the changing historical times. Despite recent diplomatic tensions between Russia and Italy, there clearly is a special relationship between the two countries, with political commentators often referring to Italy as the Kremlin's "Trojan Horse" in the EU. Italy continues to be a favorite destination for Russian tourists, and when speaking

to Russians, their love for Italy and its people clearly comes across. Italian brands in fashion and luxury products top the list for European countries in Russia, while 30% of food and beverage (F&B) products on Russian shelves come from Italy. And to think it all began 550 years ago when an Italian architect taught the Russians how to make a decent brick.

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