

TRESSETTE IN RUSSIA

Franco Pratesi – 17.10.1993

RIASSUNTO

Con riferimento specialmente al Tressette, si studiano alcune relazioni fra Italia e Russia nella storia dei giochi di carte. Contrariamente alle attese, si incontrano testimonianze su una problematica mediazione britannica, specialmente nel caso della interessante varietà russa del gioco di Semerik.

MAIN CHARACTERISTICS OF TRESSETTE

The Origin

The origin of Tressette still represents an open question. In Italy, it seems to have a Southern origin: the first document known to me is a 1631 law from Naples; several technical terms are also from Naples and Southern Italy. It cannot be excluded that the game arrived there from Spain (as known, large parts of Italy, and particularly the Southern ones, have been for several centuries under Spanish government or influence). However, we have no direct information about it from Spain.

The Pack

The game is played with the 40-card pack, which has been the commonest one in Italy for a long time. This pack seems to be of Spanish origin, even if the more traditional Spanish pack is the 48-card one, only lacking 9s. A few games exist which are or have been common in Italy with the 40-card pack and elsewhere with the 52-card one. However, when we find a variant of Tressette quoted abroad, it is always played with the 40-card pack. In this case, it is easier for us to recognise the game, even if under an unknown name, among various local variants. Differently from other exotic packs, this can easily be obtained by any standard 52-card pack (needed in the past everywhere for playing Whist, as now for Bridge): one has only to set aside the 10s, 9s, 8s, and obviously any joker. Nevertheless, in every country except Italy and Spain, it remains an unusual pack, necessarily linked to a foreign game.

The Game

In the long history of Italian card games, Tressette is one of the few candidates for being considered the most usual game. Certainly it has by far the richest specific literature. It also belongs to a series of games which, starting from Italy, found an international acceptance.

Tressette is based on tricks, but the number of tricks is not in itself the object of the game, since only counting cards contribute to the score. The ranking of the cards is unusual, 3,2,A,K,Q,J, followed by the worthless cards 7,6,5 and 4. There are no trumps; following suit is compulsory. A whole family of variants is known, different forms having been played among a number of players ranging from two to eight. The partnership game, with ten cards dealt to each player, is probably that most often played and is the only form involved in the following discussion. If some variations have developed in the course of time, they usually concern the counting of points and honours, not the rules for playing.

There are at most three different stages for counting points in Tressette. i) Each player, before playing his first card, may score points by melding particular card combinations existing in his hand. ii) After the end of the game, points contained in the tricks won by partners are counted; iii) To the obtained score, other points are added (or it is multiplied by given factors) if certain conditions are met, such as winning without the adversaries reaching 1 or 7 or 11 points.

The essential part of the rules is part ii) above, in the sense that one can play only according to this part, without taking the remaining ones into account. Let us therefore examine this fundamental part. Points from play are one for each A and 1/3 for each 3, 2, and court card: as a whole, there are thus four points from As, four from court cards, 8/3 from 3s and 2s, making 10+2/3, and a further point is assigned to the last trick. In conclusion, 11 points are in play for each game, since finally the remaining two thirds count nothing. This part is the least changed one in the rules kept from every country and time. As real exceptions, some older rules must be considered which added further points for winning the last trick(s) with one 4 (or two 4s), the lowest card(s) in play.

An interesting consequence of the ranking of the cards is that a chase for As often develops, due to their counting three times more than all other counting cards, while being only the third ones in order of taking power. This is a feature reminding us of other similar chases, for ages typical of tarot play.

EARLY LITERATURE AND RUSSIAN CONNECTION

European Collections of Rules

We are not interested here in a complete survey or early literature on Tressette; for Italy, some indications can be found in *L'Esopo* 46 (1990) 56-68. Briefly, it seems that Tressette enjoyed a large fame in the second half of the 18th century. Many booklets with its rules were printed in Italy, and particularly in Emilia; several editions appeared also in Germany and, later on, in France. The chapters on Tressette could thus enter the renowned *Académies des jeux*; that was of interest also in Italy – some Italian collections of games from the early 19th century acknowledge the *Académies des jeux* as source of the Tressette rules reported there.

Russian Connection

For this game, we find something which is rather surprising, a Russia-Italy link. In fact, other more direct links are expected for Russia. One might rather suspect a path from France; as known, among Russian noblemen the fashion for French culture was strong, as of journeys to and stays in France. For sports and games, also the English fashion must be taken into account, particularly in later times. The most traditional channel, however, may be found through Germany: as is known, Russian cards and sometimes games were of a German provenance.

In addition to these usual channels, another may be of direct Italian provenance, by the end of the 18th century; not from books but from Italian artists and musicians, as well as craftsmen and architects working in the big towns of St Petersburg and Moskow then in rapid growth. There is also an early witness by Casanova pointing to a habit of playing Tressette in Poland and Russia, at least among court personages.

Less expected is a Russian influence on Italian cards and card games. However, Sylvia Mann has described (*Alle Karten auf den Tisch*. Leinfelden-Echterdingen 1990, p. 44-45) a kind of Florentine cards of the 19th century which were surprisingly called *Alla Russa*.

There is also an indication for some Russian influence on the game we are examining. The first important Italian collection of game rules, *Il giuoco pratico* was printed in Bologna in the mid-18th century. It underwent at least four different editions and even more reprints. Rules were updated in the different editions, and for Tressette we have several variants reported; one of them is here of great interest, owing to its name, *Tressette alla moscovita*. The chapter dealing with it is a nine-page text inserted (with its own page numbering) in the book *Il giuoco pratico. Terza edizione*. Bologna 1774, which appeared under two different title pages. The same text was also separately printed, providing thus a booklet, certainly a very thin one, *Capitoli del tresette alla moscovita*. s.d., 9 pp. entirely devoted to a game so unusually named. Apart from the name, the rules themselves are not so extraordinary – even the melds of Neapolitans with following cards appended were known from earlier Italian printed rules.

It is difficult for us now to find out whether the name really corresponded to a Russian provenance. In order to advance in our understanding of the situation, attention must be addressed to original Russian sources, in the hope there are traces left of this interesting connection. I have not yet been able to find out any collection of Russian game rules from the 18th century. Other sources have been checked without significant results. Therefore, I am outlining my report here on the basis of three fundamental collections of rules of Russian games, published in the 19th century.

TRESET IN 1809

The game of our study is reported at the very end of the second part, from page 159 to 165 of *Novejšij russkij kartochnyj igrok*. St Petersburg 1809. The name of the game is written as Treset; namely, without any attempt for a translation. The description is divided into two chapters: first *General understanding of the game of Treset*, and second, *Rules for playing the game of Treset*. At the very beginning it is stated that the game had been devised in Spain.

Then, we find all the three known stages of counting represented. Two kinds of chips are used for counting either points or games. First, before the game begins, points are scored for suitable cards combinations which may be melded: any combination of 3,2,A of the same suit is called *Neapolitan* and brings three points. If it is followed by other consecutive cards (in the order K, Q, J,7, and so on) its value is increased by one for each following card. For three cards of the same rank, in case of 3s, 2s, As, and 7s, one gets three points and four points if they are accompanied by the fourth card of the same rank [misprinted “suit” in the text]. In case of other cards (namely, from Ks to 4s) three of them bring one point, four of them four [probably, again misprinted instead of the correct two, known from other sources].

The second count occurs after play: as usual, each group of three cards of 3,2,K,Q and Js brings one point, each A also brings one point so there are 10 and 2/3 points; one further point is added for the last trick, for a total of eleven points (the remaining 2/3 points counting nothing).

As a third stage, there are also particular awards (*opery*) for following situations: *Stramaseta*, 3 game-chips, for partners winning nine tricks with the tenth not reaching one point; *Stramassona*, 6, same as above but from one player; *Callada*, 4, all the tricks; *Calladona*, honour points not given but from other works known to be 8 game-chips, same as above but from one player; *Callondriona*, 16, from a *Neapolitan* provided with all the cards of the same suit [I don't think such a rule could be originally inserted, unless some more or less skilful legerdemain was admitted].

The second chapter has some advice for good play. It also includes signalling strength in suits and so on.

SEMERIK IN 1880

In the book, by V.Bahirev, *Russkij kartochnyj igrok*. St Petersburg 1880, we also find a game of the family, under the name of Semerik. It is described on pages 63-66, among commerce games, together with other club games, often of foreign provenance, such as Whist, Boston, and Piquet. It is also quoted in the introduction as example of games described for the first time in Russian.

The rules of Semerik

They are summarised here, while keeping the original numbers of the rules, as listed in the book.

1. 3,2 and A of the same suit are called *Baba* and score three points.
2. Each following card to a *Baba* adds one point.
3. For three cards of same rank, points are four for 7s; three for 3,2 and As; one for every else triplet.
4. A *Baba* followed by all the 7 cards of its suit, is said a *Trena* [a funny parenthesis states that it occurs very seldom] and counts sixteen points.

5. If together with *Baba* one has also three 3s or 2s or As, they are counted three points.
6. A player winning nine tricks gains six points for himself. Therefore each player keeps his own tricks.
7. Partners winning all ten tricks receive four points each from the adversaries.
8. All court cards, as well as 3s, 2s and As, are counted one point if three of them are present in a trick.
9. Game is 21, but is scored 42 if the opponents have not reached 11. Points above 21 are taken for the next game.
10. A player can ask to see the first trick, if not yet covered by further tricks.
11. Hearts is the main suit and takes the other suits as a trump. Its *Baba* gains five points instead of three. Its numeral cards 6s, 5s and 4s don't have any value and are not considered trumps.
12. The gain is divided equally between partners at the end of the game.
13. Three games represent a "group"; only after that, players can change places, or partners, or go out from play.

The origin of Semerik in Russia

Again, we find an unexpected witness – Semerik is a new game for Russians; Bahirev explicitly states that the game was unknown to Russians until very recently. We have to bear in mind that there is a question of fashion implied: in order for a game to gain popularity in the exclusive clubs of St Petersburg, it needed not only to exist; there ought to be some good opportunity for it to become all the rage, so as to compete with Whist, Boston, Preference, Vint, and similar well-known commerce games.

Here we find even the indication of this opportunity. By the end of the Russian-Turkish war of 1876-1878, the Russian fleet remained in the Marmara Sea, near Santo Stefano, where the Russians had imposed a burdensome treaty on Turkey. [The British government, as well as the Austrian one, was envious of the Russian successes in the Balkans so that later on, with Bismarck's intervention, the Berlin Treaty was imposed instead on the czar, limiting the Russian conquests and influence.] Now, a much played game among mariners of the British fleet, located not far away, was precisely Three-Sewen (sic). Russian naval officers had some opportunity to play together with visiting British mariners; they learned the game and appreciated it so much that it rapidly spread to all the clubs in the major Russian towns. I have no means to verify this information and I suspect it may be one of the items hardly to be found in the big tomes devoted to the historical deeds of that time. However, it is not too hard to think of British mariners, who – "disregarding all the passing fancies of the politics of their government" – visited their tired and bored opponents and played cards with them.

Back from England to India

But where did Three-Seven come from, before reaching England? Also for this previous stage, Bahirev has an answer: people say that the game had its beginning on the banks of the Ganges, in British India, and developed essentially during the stay there in 1876 of the Prince of Wales, the heir to Great Britain's and India's crowns.

SEMERIK IN 1890

In a book entirely devoted to commerce games (M. Shevljakovskij, *Kommercheskie igry*. St Petersburg 1890) the same game of Semerik is described on pages 168-171. Initially, the game is stated to have entered Russia (as Whist had done earlier) from England, where the game was called Three-Seven. It is also admitted that the game had been modified somewhat in Russia, so that it had acquired a different character. It is a very difficult game, unless one is provided with knowledge, experience and attention. Its rules are summarised as follows:

1. A 40-card pack is used, setting aside the 10s, 9s, and 8s.

2. It is a partnership game two against two.
3. The deal changes in turn.
4. Ten cards are dealt to each player.
5. 21 points are game.
6. Partners are engaged to reach the needed 21 points.
7. Counting of points won by partners is cumulative; one of the players of each pair keeps the scores.
8. The highest cards are 3s followed in order by 2,A,K,Q,J, 7,6,5, and 4s.
9. There are no trumps.
10. Points for holding three cards of same rank in one hand are: four for 7s, three for 3,2,and A.
11. One point is due for holding in one hand three equal cards of K,Q,J,6,5,4s
12. 3,2 and A of the same suit in one hand is named *Baba* and takes three points.
13. If besides *Baba* there is the King of the same suit, points are six; with K and Q points become nine; with K,Q, and J fifteen.
14. If together with a *Baba* there are three 3s or 2s or As, they are counted four.
15. Hearts is the head suit; as if it were a trump, it can take the other suits.
16. Hearts' *Baba* is counted five points.
17. Low cards 6s, 5s and 4s, even of hearts, have no value and add nothing to any count.
18. Counting cards are 3,2,A,K,Q,J. In each trick, for three of them one gets one point, for four of them two points.
19. If partners collect all ten tricks, they take four points.
20. If partners reach 21 when the opponents have not reached 11, instead of 21 they write 42.
21. Counting points goes on after reaching 21; any surplus is transferred to following game.
23. Looking at previous tricks, in the same way, speaking or winking is forbidden. On first occurring, the players have from one to three points deducted.
24. There are no rules for leading – everybody plays his strongest suit. Obviously, general card rules must be followed as playing partner's suit again, showing one's own, and so on.
25. Answering suit is compulsory. Revokes are punished by three points.
26. Being void in the suit played, one may play any card.
27. Partner's winning cards should not be overtaken, unless one gets a trick with three or four counting cards.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The Rules of the Game

One clearly finds in all these rules an original stock of old provenance. However, the impression is that both distance and time have greatly affected the play of this traditional Italian game.

In the 1809 rules, nothing can be found for Treset which had not been reported earlier in Italian and French booklets on the same subject. In particular, the description at the end of the 1809 book appears to be a simple translation from the *Académies des jeux*. I have compared this text with that of the 1786 Amsterdam edition and, language apart, they appear to be practically identical; the same text is repeated, unchanged, in many other French collection of rules of the 19th century.

Further modifications, however, resulted in a rather different game. This is mostly evident with the appearance of Semerik, where also the fixed rules for scoring trick points are strongly changed. Indeed, according to both the 1880 and 1890 rules, trick points may change depending on how the counting cards are distributed among the ten tricks: instead of the fixed 10+2/3 total, we now obtain different scores for each play, from 4 to 12. The maximum value is obtained for 4 tricks void of counting cards and 6 tricks with all the four cards being counting ones. On the other side, the lowest score is obtained for an even distribution of the 24 counting cards among the 10 tricks. (This result can be obtained in different ways – 2 tricks with four counting cards and 8 with two; 1 with four, 2 with three, 7 with two; 4 tricks with three counting cards and 6 with two.) On the whole, this

modification does not appear to improve the game; on the contrary, one loses here any interest in chasing for aces, because they now score exactly the same as the remaining counting cards.

There is an even stranger rule, that of hearts being the strongest suit. This is not an absolutely new rule (it has been applied for ages in some traditional games, particularly in Germany) but it has really no sense here, in a game always played without trumps. The course itself of the game would be strongly modified by this “simple” change in the rules.

An interesting innovation in the 1890 book is the way of counting *Babas* with lower cards appended, somewhat limiting the possible influence of legerdemain. Instead of the traditional score (where accepted, as somewhere and sometimes in Italy, and practically always in Russia) of one point for each additional card in sequence, here we have a greater award for the first three added cards, which contribute respectively three, three, and six points each, but nothing more for the most uncommon cases of further additions of lower cards.

The Indian connection

The suggestion of an Indian origin, reported as deriving from common knowledge, seems to be a fruit of sheer fantasy. It is only unclear whose fantasy it is in play, whether of Bahirev himself or of any “mass media” of the time. The only thing that makes this record worth commenting on is that just at that time another much more successful game was under development, Bridge. For it too, an exotic origin has usually been suggested, either from Constantinople, or from India itself. Evidently, people thought *hic sunt leones* – or, maybe better, tigers.

The British connection

The main problem for us in accepting Bahirev’s version of the facts, is that we don’t know of Three-Seven being all the rage among Britons from any familiar game book of the time (and English books on games were then numerous and wide spread). Perhaps Britons were unwilling to acknowledge that a foreign game was becoming a rival to their Whist. On the other hand, there may be a remarkable difference between the games of the books and those commonly played; particularly so, when the players belong to an environment so different from city clubs, as mariners.

On the whole, however, we remain puzzled by Bahirev’s information, and we suspect a different and earlier derivation. What has been stated above about the 40-card pack being unusual in Russia can be maintained for Great Britain too. It had been the pack used for Hombre, but also this fashionable game was becoming outdated in the second half of the 19th century.

The Names of the Game

The Italian name of Tressette may mean at least two different things involving numbers *tre* (3) and *sette* (7). The more likely is “game of three 7s”, the other meaning might be, “game of 3s and 7s”. Actually, I don’t know any other game where 3s are the highest cards, and that could justify the latter meaning; moreover, 7s are the highest cards in the older game of Primiera, and, probably from it, in the games of the Scopa family also. However, it seems more likely that it was a specific score for melding “three 7s” that originated the name.

As for Russian names, Treset cannot be found in common Russian dictionaries and is evidently the plain transcription of the Italian or French name. Semerik, on the contrary, is reported in every Russian dictionary, even though never – as far as I could verify – with reference to a card game. Its meaning is again connected with *sem*’ (7). Actually, it corresponds to 7 exactly as “dozen” corresponds to 12, being thus used for any measure of seven units or any set of seven identical objects (and particularly 7 horses in a team, or 7 candles once sold in a bunch).

Let us end with the English names. Three-seven is not even reported in the second edition of *The Oxford English Dictionary* of 1989. The same extensive dictionary does, however, report names similar to the Italian Tressette, with literary references too. The most curious thing is that from the four different references we get four different spellings of the same name: Trisette in 1785, Trissett in 1858, Treset in 1902 and Tressette in 1903. We have not to think of an evolution of the spelling

and we must instead suppose an uncertainty about the best way to write this exotic name, evidently never fully entered into the repertory of the English words – and games.

Conclusion

As it often happens, while searching the solution to a given question, we meet with further questions without ready answers. While searching how and when Italian Tressette could enter Russia in the 18th century, we are informed by Russian sources that their corresponding variant had been borrowed from British usage, and a century later!

We know that somebody played Tressette in Russia in the 18th century. We don't know from other sources of a fashion of Three-Seven among Britons. Should the origin of Semerik really be found in the stay of the Russian fleet in the Marmara Sea, in the absence of reports on Three-Seven from Great Britain, we have to conclude that it occurred without any English involvement. A possibility is that the game was borrowed from the Turks (again, however, any evidence for a fashion of the game among Turks is unknown to me). Another possibility is that the game spread among the Russians themselves, as a revival and a further success of a game, already known to Russians but until then only played by small groups of enthusiasts.

In conclusion, it seems that we have to distinguish two different introductions of Tressette variants in Russia, separated by more than a century. Out of them, only the second was able to reach large numbers of club players; that might correspond to the formation in the meantime of a different social environment, more suitable to a wider acceptance by players. Even if Tressette variants probably never reached a true mass popularity outside Italy, these witnesses on Russian Semerik must not be neglected; along with those coming from Germany and France, also from the previous century, they prove the international fortune of the old Italian Tressette, a fine game played for five centuries until now.