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Natalia Shelikhov: Her Unique and Influential Involvement in the Merchantile and Imperial Russian Arenas

By Dr. Alexander Petrov and Dawn Lea Black

In late August of 1783, three Russian ships left Okhotsk for the shores of Alaska. On the captain's bridge of one of the ships stood a husband and wife who were sailing into a future that would bring them world fame for establishing the first Russian permanent settlement in Alaska and circum Pacific business which gradually extended from China to Kodiak Island in Alaska to Fort Ross in California. Their business in furs, liquor and other commodities could be extremely remunerative. The thirty-five year old husband was Grigorii Ivanovich Shelikhov, merchant from the old southern Russian town of Ryl'sk, and his beautiful wife who had just reached twenty-one years of age was Natalia Alekseevna Shelikhova.

It was unusual for a woman from a merchant family to be in a position of so much scope and potential power. In order to eventually attain the pinnacle of success, Natalia engaged in some shrewd maneuvering driven, in part, by desperation after becoming a widow in 1795. One of these maneuvers was to petition the Empress through powerful intermediaries stating that Natalia had been a full-scale partner as well as wife to her merchant husband. Natalia wanted to be an inheritor in her own right along with her children. The Empress encouraged Natalia's ambitions. Later Natalia also bought out the guardianship of her son's interests from her brother-in law. By reading Natalia's letters to her husband, dating from about 1788 through 1794 it is possible to see how she gained her partnership. While Grigorii was absent from Irkutsk, Natalia was in charge of all the business affairs there and at certain other trading centers. She sent goods to various fairs, dealt with debtors and creditors, gave orders to numerous salesmen, took care of the house and many other things. In addition, since her marriage in 1775, she had become the mother of six children plus she took care of several Alaskan Natives who had accompanied the Shelikhovs back from Alaska. Natalia managed to give both her own children and the Native Alaskan young people an excellent education even though she had to dictate most of her letters because she had little or no formal schooling herself. Natalia had successes on many fronts, but because of her unusual position she also had much opposition which she had to strive to overcome.

After Grigorii's death, many individuals sought to gain a handhold or stranglehold on Shelikhov's vast holdings and capital. Natalia had to engage in a battle of wits and words with Shelikhov's former partners and other merchants. She managed to win by writing petitions and letters to both the court and other highly placed regional officials. She also gave lavish presents to persons with whom she wished to curry favor. Two of her strongest supporters were Nikita N. Demidov, a rich landowner and businessman, and Nikolai Rezanov, a high ranking government official and Natalia's son-in-law who was born in St. Petersburg but later lived with his judicial family in Irkutsk. Both of these men had good connections in St. Petersburg, the capital. The Empress, Katherine II, before her death in 1796 gave her full-scale support to Natalia Shelikhova. The son of Katherine II, Paul I, also proved himself to be a constant supporter of Shelikhov's interests. Moreover, despite all of the detractors' attempts to disgrace Natalia and shove her aside from the North-Pacific market, the Empress Katherine granted Natalia hereditary nobility in 1796 which gave her a status far above other merchants and allowed her greater access to those in power. Also in 1797, after her partner, I. L. Golikov unsuccessfully tried to break-off business relations with Natalia by withdrawing his half of the capital, they separately united their capitals with Myl'nikovs' Company one day apart on July 18 and 19. Natalia followed Golikov into this new company, in a rather brilliant chess move which preserved the power of her shares and made her a continuing major player in the merchandising world. Golikov's first dealings with the Shelikhovs went back to when Grigorii had worked for I. L. Golikov as a salesman until they and a nephew, M. S. Golikov, became partners in a Golikov-Shelikhov company in 1781 after Grigorii agreed to go to Alaska with Natalia to promote their trading ventures. Even though the business dealings of I. L. Golikov and Shelikhovs had gone over some bumpy road, their partnership continued, and about a year after their merger with the Myl'nikovs, they formed yet another company called the United American Company. On August 3, 1798 its charter was granted by Imperial decree and under Imperial protection. This brought most of the fur companies under a single directorship controlled by Shelikhov syncopants. Natalia's position in this company was even stronger than previously. She was the main partner, owned one-

third of the shares, and had the right by contract to choose the director and edit company proposals. She presented many proposals to St. Petersburg in regard to organizing a solid company which could effectively operate in the North Pacific and in the Russian and world markets. She also presented a concrete plan called, "Memorial," divided into some thirty paragraphs which was to set the course of this new company. Much of the Memorial was included in the charter of the new Russian-American Company which was formed on July 8, 1799. Some of the context and rhetoric of the Memorial are similar to a former petition of G.I. Shelikhov, and it is possible that Rezanov might have participated in the writing of the Memorial. Rezanov was more or less representing the government since he had been appointed chief secretary of the Senate in 1797 and was also the representative of the United American Company in the capital. Once the Russian-American Company was formed, Natalia's influence gradually diminished although she still retained a great many shares.

Natalia Shelikhov and her family are noted for their varied contributions to the new company. Natalia's two sons-in-law became prominent in the its directorship. Mikhail M. Buldakov, a rich, young merchant from Velikii Ustyug in northern Vologda province, became chairman of the board; and Nikolai Rezanov, who held many shares, wrote copious reports and letters and traveled widely through Russia, Alaska and California promoting the company's interests. He was imprisoned in a house in Japan for about six months after trying to encourage trade there following the death of his wife after childbirth and his appointment as Ambassador to Japan. In 1806 in California, he became engaged to the San Francisco commandant's daughter, acquired a shipload of food for Russian Alaska and received permission for the Russians to explore the San Francisco Bay area supposedly to look for some missing Russians. This information was later useful in considering the 1811 establishment of Fort Ross north of San Francisco for agricultural and sea otter hunting support. One letter written by Grigorii's brother implies that Natalia became somewhat alcoholic in her later life. Despite this possible impairment, we should consider Natalia Alekseevna to be one of the most distinguished individuals of her time. Grigorii Shelikhov, along with Natalia, were founders of Russian America. A book about their venture across the North Pacific Ocean to Alaska and back had been written by Grigorii, and Natalia provided the formation guideposts for the Russian-American Company in the Memorial. Because Natalia and her family held a majority of shares in some of the most prominent early Russian merchantile companies that controlled southern coastal Alaska, Natalia could be considered the first woman Governor of Alaska. The Russian-American Company controlled vast territories until 1867 when Alaska was sold to the United States for 7.2 million dollars. Fort Ross was founded shortly after Natalia's 1810 death so only her policies and spirit as expressed in the Memorial and Charter lived on there. In the Memorial, she promoted, among many other things, a self-sufficient agricultural supply in America and the translation of all Russian passports into Spanish and other languages so Russian boats would be well received

What was Natalia really like, personally? Her personality peeks out from some of her letters. Her detractors had some unkind words to say about her. Her relatives who are alive today have a little oral history about her, but not too much. In her letters we see a woman who was passionately fond of her family, sometimes emotional to the point of tears; who would manipulate others with her emotions when few other means were available; who kept strict control over her servants and certainly did not allow alcoholic excesses among them; who worried about the finances, but tried very hard to keep the business on an even keel; whose relationship with her husband varied from respectfully loving, to mildly scolding to possibly physically and verbally abusive at times (Grigorii, himself was no saint). Natalia's last letters to her husband indicate that their working relationship had become fairly harmonious and well-coordinated. Natalia was dependent on her husband for her position in the business, but she functioned well and effectively in those areas of the business delegated to her. In her letters, she kept Grigorii well-informed, consulted with him and told him over and over that she and the children missed him. Her detractors seemed to think that she lived a life of debauchery, and possibly she did have such phases during her varied life. One of her letters mentions past sins which she seems to regret. Her present day relatives who live in such distant places as South America and Africa, have an oral history of her as a stern lady. Apparently, as Natalia aged, she became more exacting in her family relations, as well. Her last known letter shows her to be distinctly unhappy that her son had decided to become a soldier instead of a merchant and that one of his sisters supported him in this decision. This dismay is understandable in a woman who had dedicated virtually her

whole life to the merchantile business. She, no doubt, would have wanted her son to become prominent in that field so she could continue to take part in it through him. In fact, she wrote into the Memorial the expectation that her son would take over her position when he came of age.

It is interesting to follow the transformation of Natalia the homemaker into a globally-minded woman merchant who was one of the progressive individuals of her time and to compare her life with the lives of other business women in both Russia and Russian-America. Although the path that Natalia took was quite unique for the eighteenth century, there were similar biographical sketches for other women merchants by the end of the nineteenth century such as that of A. V. Maraeva who owned fabric factories in Moscow, Russia. Maraeva also had to overcome antagonists who sought to prevent her from inheriting her deceased husband's business. Maraeva prevailed over all pessimistic forecasts and increased the productivity of this business which she then merged with other companies in an attempt to monopolize the market. In Natalia's case, the government under Paul I, with Natalia's and Rezanov's prodding, seemed to promote the monopoly in order to decrease commercial squabbling, and, possibly, increase the value of the government's and high ranking people's shares. This was even more the case under the Emperor Alexander I after 1801. Ironically, once these companies gained a monopoly, the entrepreneurial drive of their founders was no longer in demand. Slowly but surely, both Natalia Shelikhov and A. V. Maraeva found themselves pushed aside from the helms of their businesses. This situation is not unique to women entrepreneurs, but the added burden of having to battle the strong sexual stereotyping of that period, probably made it much more difficult to keep their positions and to maintain a well-balanced self-image. The fact that a woman like Natalia got to the top of her field, became well-known and influential then rapidly faded from view does not decrease the brilliance of that lift-off or the place that she will forever hold in history.