

## INTRODUCTION

In 1832, a ‘moral narrative’ novel (as it was stated on its title page) was published in Moscow. Its author was Aleksandr Orlov, its title – *Anna, a Merchant’s Daughter, or a Velvet Reticule from the Haberdashery Row*. The hero of this novel was a young trader in haberdashery from Kitai-Gorod, Valerian, whose way of doing business was to cut the price of his goods – in exchange for his female customers’ smiles and attention – to the lowest possible level, and this brought him to the brink of ruin.

However, Valerian was saved from this ruinous outcome by a letter sent to him by his beautiful customer Anna, a merchant’s daughter. In this letter, Anna demonstrated her liking and sympathy for the young merchant by offering the following rational piece of advice:

‘Valerian! I am a merchant’s daughter, and my name is Anna. I have heard from my father and brother that you are reduced to resorting to credit by selling your goods for a song to women, and so you will have nothing to buy any [more] goods with for your shop, and you cannot have them any more on credit. At least so I have heard my father and brother say – who, knowing all merchants’ turnovers, and having large-scale speculations of their own, seldom make mistakes either in their calculations or in their judgment of trading people. I sympathize with you sincerely, and wish with a pure heart that you may set right your affairs. Anna.’<sup>1</sup>

Then Anna, without disclosing her surname, sent Valerian 1,000 roubles, to enable him to repay the credit and once again make his trade profitable. The plot develops further: the young people made personal acquaintance when Anna, under the pretence of being a customer, once again visited Valerian’s shop. They gradually developed romantic feelings for each other, and their story had a happy ending: they got married.

This is a fictional illustration of a situation when a young merchant’s daughter’s tender feelings become intertwined with her pragmatic outlook and her ideas of ‘the right way’ to transact business – based on her ability to count money and to rationally invest available financial resources in the development of an enterprise.

Orlov's novel depicts a fairly typical social situation. In the nineteenth century, Russian women were brought up with the notion that a female had to be as competent as her male counterpart in tackling financial issues and carrying out trade and real estate transactions. This was also true of women belonging to all economically active classes: noblewomen, female merchants, *meshchanki* and to a certain degree, peasant women who settled in towns. Michelle Marrese, in her in-depth study on the noblewomen's control of property in Russia, noted that

by the nineteenth century noblewomen featured in roughly 40 percent of real estate transfers, as sellers and investors, throughout Russia – a figure, as far as we know, that greatly exceeded female property holding in other European countries.<sup>2</sup>

Marrese's statistical analysis demonstrates that noblewomen owned no less than one-third of all privately held land in the decades before the Emancipation of the Serfs in 1861.

### 1. The Issue of Separate Property

The major difference between Russian and west-European legislation consisted in the fact that, according to Russian law, women enjoyed the same property rights as men.<sup>3</sup> By a law adopted in 1753, wives were permitted to 'sell their own property without the consent of [their] husbands.'<sup>4</sup> Each of the spouses could own and independently acquire new and separate property (through purchase, gifts, inheritance or by any other legal means). Moreover, spouses could enter into certain legal relationships with each other involving transfer of property under a deed of gift, purchase-and-sale, etc., as if they were unrelated persons. In 1825 this right was confirmed by a special legal provision entitled 'Explanation that the Sale of an Estate from One Spouse to the Other is Not Contrary to the Law'<sup>5</sup>

In the *Corpus of Laws of the Russian Empire*, first published in 1832, the principle of separate property in marriage was definitely consolidated in the following legal formula: that the property of a wife shall not become the husband's property, moreover, irrespective of the way and time of its acquisition (be it during or before marriage), the husband even shall not acquire, through marriage, the right to use his wife's property.<sup>6</sup> This legislative landmark made it possible for a woman to become independent in property matters. Adele Lindenmeyr characterized this dichotomy – expressed in a situation when

Russia's patriarchal family law imposed severe restrictions on women's autonomy', while at the same time 'its property and inheritance law protected the rights of women' – as 'one of the most intriguing paradoxes in Russian history.'<sup>7</sup>

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the right of independent ownership of property was a very important factor that definitely shaped the Russian woman's gender role in management and household structures. A detailed explanation of this phenomenon is offered by Barbara A. Engel:

Although the 'domestic' was defined as women's proper sphere, as it was in Europe and the United States, in Russia the domestic extended well beyond the confines of home and housework. Women's subordinate status in life and law coexisted, sometimes uneasily, with their legal rights to own and manage immovable property, which Russian wives, as well as single women and widows, enjoyed. Even married women could buy and sell and enter contracts, a status that was unique in Europe.<sup>8</sup>

William G. Wagner was the first contemporary historian to address the issue of separate property on the basis on Russian material.<sup>9</sup> Due to the availability of published studies where this issue is tackled in the context of European countries and the United States,<sup>10</sup> Wagner, by applying comparative analysis, came to the conclusion that

the most important legal advantage enjoyed by married women in Imperial Russia in comparison with their Western European and American counterparts, however, was their right to control their own property, including their dowries ... Such proprietary power could provide wives with a counterweight to their complete personal subordination to their husbands. Except in limited circumstances, by contrast, married women in most Western European countries and American states did not acquire comparable proprietary independence until the mid-nineteenth century or later.<sup>11</sup>

Still more progress in our understanding of the nature of women's property rights, as reflected both in legislation and everyday practice, became possible owing to pioneering monographs by Michelle Lamarche Marrese<sup>12</sup> and Lee Farrow,<sup>13</sup> which appeared two years later.

This independence in property matters was the key factor in the development of female entrepreneurship because of the 'patterns of ownership being closely related to patterns of control'.<sup>14</sup> According to one Russian lawyer of the late nineteenth century,

the separateness of spouses' property, which is in no way compatible with the nature and idea of marriage, did its historical service to the Russian woman in a much better and more feasible way than the currently existing systems of Germanic community property and Roman dowry.<sup>15</sup>

(However, researchers should by no means absolutize the principle of independent female property ownership, thus overlooking the paradoxical nature of the situation when the principle of separate property of spouses coexisted with the legally consolidated subordination of a wife to her husband and of daughters to their father in the context of personal legal relations.)

As early as the dawn of industrial development, in the mid-eighteenth century, some women were already owners of big enterprises. Thus, for example, in 1748, the Kadashevskaja Linen Manufactory in Moscow belonged to 'a merchant's widow' Natal'ia Babkina; another two cloth manufactories (established in 1763 and 1769) were owned by noblewomen – an admiral's wife, Miatleva, and Princess Yusupova.<sup>16</sup>

Throughout the nineteenth century female entrepreneurship was continually expanding to encompass various new spheres of commercial activity. At the same time, legislation regulating trade and industry did not treat female entrepreneurs as a special group, distinct from their male counterparts.

## 2. The Historiographical Situation and the Beginning of Studies on the History of Russian Female Entrepreneurship

The history of women in Russia, within the framework of general discourse on women's history and gender studies, has become an important segment of humanities research. In the last twenty-five years there have appeared a number of works shedding light on various aspects of this segment of Russian history. Valuable contributions to recent bibliography in this field were made by L. H. Edmondson, R. Stites, G. A. Tishkin, D. L. Ransel, B. A. Engel, D. B. Clements, N. L. Pushkareva, C. Worobec, B. Pietrow-Ennker, O. A. Khasbulatova, C. Ruane, W. Rosslyn and other authors of note.<sup>17</sup>

However, despite the existing interest in the problem of female entrepreneurship in Western historiography, the study of Russian women entrepreneurs in retrospect is still in its initial phase. In the article by Catriona Kelly, published more than ten years ago, it was aptly noted that,

whilst trading and factory owning made the fortunes of few women, they appear to have provided a number with a reasonable living; and though the proportion of women traders ... in city populations was far lower than that of factory workers or servants, the mercantile elite no less deserves description than those other elites (for example, women writers or women revolutionaries).<sup>18</sup>

It is also true that since then the situation with regard to historiography has improved only slightly.

Adele Lindenmeyr and Muriel Joffe analysed for the first time a group of the Moscow merchant elite women and noted:

merchant wives and daughters who owned the required amount of capital were registered in the merchant guilds, owned stock in family corporations, and attended meetings of corporate shareholders.<sup>19</sup>

The issue of female entrepreneurs is essentially outlined in the monograph by M. L. Marrese.<sup>20</sup> The greatest analytical contribution to this problem so far has been made by N. Kozlova, in a series of her articles on the economic status and entrepreneurial activity of Moscow female merchants in the eighteenth century.<sup>21</sup> It is Kozlova who put in circulation archival documents illustrating the thesis that the economic independence of merchants' wives was a widespread phenomenon (which, by the way, is also confirmed by our materials dating to the nineteenth century). Kozlova's views are shared by O. Fomina, whose research addresses the issues of women's property status within the merchant family during the last third of the eighteenth century.<sup>22</sup>

As for the nineteenth century, there have been no extensive studies of this period as yet – all that is published is several articles and a section in a book written by I. Potkina, M. Tikhomirova, and the present author.<sup>23</sup>

We should also mention that in our study of female entrepreneurship we also used as sources the works by our predecessors, who have greatly increased our understanding of the history of the Russian bourgeoisie – B. Anan'ich, A. Rieber, Yu. Petrov, M. Hildermeier, A. Aksenov, J.A. Ruckman, J. West, D. L. Ransel, A. Bokhanov and T. C. Owen.<sup>24</sup>

### 3. The Prospective Approaches Developed in Western Historiography: 'to Render Businesswomen Visible'

The study of the history of female entrepreneurship in Russia is still young, although for the past fifteen years the issue of women's economic role in the nineteenth century has been attracting increasing interest from historians from both Europe and the USA.<sup>25</sup>

It appears desirable that in our brief historiographical overview we should pay tribute to the research approaches developed by Western historians, which create promising prospects for the study of female entrepreneurship in Russia.

Since the 1960s, historians' attention to the roles of women in history has been steadily growing. An important milestone was reached in 1987 with the publication of *Family Fortunes* by Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall. Immediately recognized as a 'classic in its field', the book deals with such fundamental issues as the 'separate spheres' and gender system in the English middle strata.<sup>26</sup> The authors' conceptual approaches to the history of property relationships between men and women attracted many followers and provided a strong impetus to further discussion of the issues raised in their work. The most notable contribution to this discourse was made by Amanda Vickery in her eloquently titled article 'Golden Age to separate spheres? A review of the categories and chronology of English Women history', where the excessive use of the separate spheres pattern was justly criticized.<sup>27</sup>

From the early 1990s historians, in their attempts to understand precisely where the boundaries between these separate spheres lay, have begun to study the issue of the property rights enjoyed by women belonging to the middle urban strata.

Maxine Berg, by analysing the wills of women from entrepreneurial families in Birmingham and Sheffield, demonstrated that this source of historical information could somewhat alter our understanding of the woman's property status as being restricted by legislative acts. Thus, within the family women could indeed control property while not being exactly its owners: '...Women set up a good proportion of trusts themselves and played a significant role as executors.'<sup>28</sup> Arguing against the assumption put forth by Davidoff and Hall, that after the death of their husbands women received only income in trust, Berg put forth the following objection: 'of women leaving wills in the Birmingham and Sheffield samples, 46.8 per cent in both towns owned real property, that is, land or houses', and, furthermore, 'approximately 33 per cent of men's property bequests were made to wives, and another 14 per cent to daughters.'<sup>29</sup>

Therefore, it is logical that the discourse on the property rights of women gave rise to interest in the sources of their incomes and wealth, and particularly those specific to the group of female entrepreneurs whose personal estates were created as a result of their activities outside of their domestic circle. While characterizing the study of female entrepreneurs as a gap in contemporary historiography, Wendy Gamber concluded her article (1998) with a meaningful statement:

Much work, empirical and theoretical, remains to be done. Only then will we be able to render businesswomen visible, to see them not as exceptions to preconceived rules, but as part of the gendered history of economic life.<sup>30</sup>

However, three years later it was already obvious that several dozen researchers were simultaneously developing this theme in different countries, with the results beginning to be published, and so Angel Kwolek-Folland wrote as follows in her analytical article:

In the last few years, many books, articles, and dissertations have raised important questions about gender in the history of business, suggesting that the topic is one of the fastest growing and most intellectually innovative areas of historical study.<sup>31</sup>

The outcome of the development of this 'innovative area' was several important publications that appeared in the last decade. In monographs by W. Gamber, A. Kwolek-Folland, H. Barker, N. Phillips and a number of other authors, various regional and national female entrepreneurship models were presented. The product of the participation of a broader circle of researchers in the studies aimed at adequately assessing the role of female entrepreneurship in the economic development of European countries was the book 'Women, Business, and Finance in

Nineteenth-century Europe. Rethinking Separate Spheres' (2005), where one can find a variety of scientific approaches and research aspects. Its introduction offers an analytical review of the currently existing areas of research with regard to female entrepreneurship. It is suggested that one should be guided by the basic principle that

the separate spheres ideology was but one among many forms of gender identity co-existing and overlapping in nineteenth-century Europe.<sup>32</sup>

In the future, studies across different countries and regions – as well as those aimed at correlating the development of female entrepreneurship in the nineteenth century with that of the Industrial Revolution – could provide a sound grounding for generalization, if based on careful empirical research.

#### 4. A Note on Sources and Our Approach to Research

First, this study examines the history of female entrepreneurship in the Russian Empire in the course of its industrial development in the nineteenth century. Our goal was not only to describe female entrepreneurship *per se*, but also to discuss it in the general context of the development of Russian business. We wanted to find out in which sectors of industry and trade it was possible for women to achieve greatest success, and also which economic and social factors determined their victories and defeats in various business spheres. Wherever possible, we tried to achieve integration of quantitative and qualitative analysis. Much of this investigation is based on primary sources previously untapped, including archival documents, which contain statistical information on female entrepreneurs from 1814 to 1900. Besides, we made an attempt to analyze, from a sociological point of view, the relevant statistics with regard to wide range of enterprises, from the smallest to the biggest. (Regretfully, it was impossible to draw any comprehensive comparison, because there are no uniform data for the entire nineteenth century in the available sources. Thus, the book also lacks data on the dynamics of trade in the 1830s-40s and the 1850s-60s, for absence of relevant sources).

The second focus of this book is the examination of legal materials. The purpose of these materials was to define the driving forces of female entrepreneurship and to see how legal challenges were shaping women's business strategies. Thus, property disputes were increasingly frequently submitted to the consideration by the Commercial Court and other supreme instances (for example, after submitting an appeal to the governor-general of a given province).

Thirdly, the work concentrates on the correlation of economic parameters with the available data on the social world of female entrepreneurs. In each of the chapters, we provided some lively case-histories in order to illustrate the 'dry'

statistics. Their incorporation in the text helped to reveal the background of a number of fortunes, including the instances of bankruptcy and property litigations which involved close relatives and criminal proceedings initiated against sales personnel. The unwavering desire of certain individuals to increase their wealth was influencing their family life and thus gave rise to some rather bizarre situations. Three examples: a merchant's widow, who married a merchant, transacts business independently of her second husband, so that the factory can be inherited by her son from a previous marriage; a husband changes his family name for that of his wife in order to preserve their firm's brand and retain clients; a husband is expelled from the matrimonial bedroom for his failure in business.

The case-studies presented in the book are reconstructions of the biographies of women who were directly involved as leading entrepreneurs or partners in family-run businesses. Our main sources were the rich documentary collections kept in Moscow archives, which contain materials pertaining to Moscow as the Empire's most important commercial and industrial centre and to some other cities of European Russia as well. Our emphasis on Moscow documents enabled us to trace the lives of several generations of merchant dynasties and to depict female entrepreneurship in the context of urban industrial transformation. Regretfully, we have yet failed to find in the archives, in sufficient quantities, certain valuable sources like the wills or insurance policies of female entrepreneurs. However, even occasional documents of this type have made it possible for us to define the size of capital owned by women entrepreneurs, and thus to obtain comprehensive information on female entrepreneurship.

By using the symbiosis of the statistical and biographical approaches, we are going to show how the patterns of ownership and the social composition of the strata of female entrepreneurs were changing over the course of the century.

It is our hope that, once this goal is achieved, our results may shed some light on the question of whether (and to what extent) Russia was unique in the way its female entrepreneurship was developing – or, conversely, shared, in this respect, many common features with European countries.

I hope that this book may become a starting point for reviving the long-forgotten histories of Russian women who, while evidently putting much at stake when engaging in business, were, nevertheless, ready to take this risk in order to fulfil their mission, viewed primarily as sustaining the economic viability of their families.