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Book Review: Merchants, noblewomen, magnates: Women entrepreneurs in Russia of the 19th century¹

Karolina Koval²

The Merchants, noblewomen, magnates: Women entrepreneurs in Russia of the 19th century is a splendid book written by the Russian historian Galina Ulyanova. The title of the book is descriptive of the content. Ulyanova's focus is on the development and formation of women's entrepreneurship in Russia. The topic is very relevant today, because after the collapse of the USSR and within the framework of the formation of a market economy in Russia, women's entrepreneurship has had a revitalization. Ulyanova connects the present with the past and provides a historical perspective on the role of women.

Galina Ulyanova has a PhD in history, and is the chief researcher at the Institute of Russian History of the Russian Academy of Sciences. She also is a recognized specialist in the history of entrepreneurship and charity of the 19th - early 20th century. In total, Ulyanova has written seven books and many scientific articles. In her research, she used a special method of "retrospective questioning". Ulyanova both invented this method and introduced it into scientific circulation on her own, now many historians use it.

In the last 25 years, both in Russia and abroad, historians have begun to study women's history in more detail. In the course of these studies, greatly visibility on gender relations has been created and the traditionally accepted patriarchally determined role of women in the Russian family has been questioned. Already in the 18th and 19th centuries, Russian woman played the role of not only a mother and keeper of the hearth, but also the head of the family business. Mostly businesswomen belonged to merchant and noble families, but in the 19th century their ranks were joined by middle-class women, soldiers and peasants.

Supporting the perception of women's status, Ulyanova identifies important differences between Russian and Western legislation. According to the laws of the Russian Empire, a woman enjoyed the same property rights as men. For example, the principle of separate ownership prevailed, that is, the husband did not receive legal rights to real estate and other property of his wife. In 1753, a law was passed that stated that wives could sell their real estate without their husband's consent.

In her research, Ulyanova raises the question "Did women and men have equal rights when doing business"(28)? She notes that in 1857, the right of married women to trade was legally confirmed. The law was adopted after Belkin's merchant's wife filed a request addressed to Emperor Alexander II to allow her to trade separately from her husband. The Emperor sent the merchant's statement to the Minister of Finance. Finance Minister P.F. Brok entered the State Council with a corresponding submission, where the case was resolved positively. Married women began to be engaged not only in the house work and children, but also in their own business.

In the 19th - early 20th century women of all classes had the right to engage in entrepreneurship. Significant economic independence of women was expressed in their massive ownership of real estate. Of the 33 biographies of Russian businesswomen reviewed, 31 women have placed their businesses in their own premises. The age of active women ranged from 27 to 67 years.

¹ Ulyanova, G. (2021). *Merchants, noblewomen, magnates: Women-entrepreneurs in Russia in the 19th century*. Moscow: NLO 2021.

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In evaluating industrial statistics and archival files of enterprises Ulyanova refutes another gendered perception, only women with a large initial capital, as well as those who inherited already established enterprises by their husband or parents, could be engaged in business. Firstly, women's entrepreneurship was characterized by a mixed class composition: noblewomen, merchants, philistines, peasant women and soldiers' wives. Secondly, many women started small and medium-sized enterprises, developing them to large ones. So, middle-class women realized themselves in the production of soap and candles, shoes, scarves, dresses, and sometimes bricks.

It is noteworthy that in the 18th century Russian Empire, the government established regulations to protect the environment. According to the decrees of 1803, 1833 and 1849, the supervision of enterprises was increasingly tightened. Ulyanova addresses how the construction of enterprises producing steam or fire was prohibited near residential buildings. This affected all businesses but may also have been a contributing factor to what types of business an entrepreneur may engage in, given that if an enterprise had no emissions into the atmosphere and did not threaten the safety and health of citizens, then its location did not matter.

The era of reforms in Russia and the process of urbanization had a great impact on women's entrepreneurship. With the growth of residents in cities, the need for food products has increased. Due to this factor, there was a growth of women's factory and craft enterprises.

The Merchants, noblewomen, magnates: Women entrepreneurs in Russia of the 19th century is divided into two main sections. The first section addresses the image of Russian woman and its metamorphoses, and the second is devoted to the biographies of individual women entrepreneurs. Such a division of information in the book justifies itself. However, there were not enough illustrations in the book, perhaps portraits or photographs of the women in question. Additionally, the first section of the text could have been enhanced with data tables and references detailing sources. In spite of these limitations, Galina Ulyanova has provided a reference that would be beneficial reading, not only for academics and researchers of women's history, but also for everyone interested in both the history of Russia and women's issues.