ARTICLES

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Vasili Shorin: Seventeenth-Century Russian Merchant Extraordinary

INTRODUCTION

In an assessment of research on seventeenth-century Russian economic history, two leading Soviet students recently remarked: "There is an urgent need for study of the privileged trading corporations of the seventeenth century, the gosti, gostinnaia sotnia, and sukonnaia sotnia."¹ N. I. Pavlenko has added a more pointed criticism: "In concrete-historical terms the 'capitalist-merchants' of the seventeenth century have thus far been studied extremely unsatisfactorily, both on the qualitative and on the quantitative side... The activity of only a few of them has attracted the attention of researchers, and in the majority of cases [they] have been studied not in all [their] complexity but one-sidedly, that is, only in relation to their commercial-industrial activity."²

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²"Spornye voprosy genezisa kapitalizma v Rossii," Voprosy istorii, No. 11 (1966), p. 88. The only studies of individual gosti I have found are: S. V. Bakhrušin, "Torgi gostia Nikitina v Sibiri i Kitae," Nauchnye trudy, 4 vols. in 5 (Moscow, 1952-1959), III, Pt. 1; the same author's treatment of N. Sveteshnikov in ibid., II, 228-247; E. Zaozerskaiia, "Vologodskii gost' F. M. Fetiiev (Iz byta torgovykh liudei XVII v.)," Zapiski istoriko-bytovogo otdela Gosudarstvennogo Russkogo Muzeia, No. 1 (1928); V. Geiman. "Selinoi promysel Gostia I. D. Pankrat'eva v Iarenskom uyeze v..."
It is difficult to disagree with these criticisms, or with the implicit conviction that sustained attention to the upper merchant strata is crucial for understanding what Soviet writers term "the genesis of capitalism in Russia," and what I am inclined to think of as the failure of capitalist development. Among the upper merchant strata of the gosti of course take first place, and of their number none is more deserving of attention than the Shorins.

Compared with their peers, they had extraordinary staying power. Only two other families—the Iur'evs and the Sverchkovs—were represented among the gosti throughout the entire period from the 1620's to the second decade of the eighteenth century. Neither of the other two produced such an arresting figure as Vasilii Shorin. Shorin not only built a great economic empire but he was perhaps the most politically active and influential of all the gosti. An intimate of top-level government figures, he reputedly exercised a significant influence on state economic and fiscal policies. He effectively spearheaded campaigns against foreign merchants active in Muscovy. In the eyes of Moscow's lesser townsmen he came to symbolize the detested privileged merchants, and he was the only gost' subjected to attack in both the 1648 and the 1662 Moscow upheavals.

K. V. Bazilevich characterized Shorin as "one of the most powerful representatives of merchant capital in the seventeenth century, [who] at the same time was very close to the managing directors of the Moscow bureaucracy." Similar evaluations are frequently met with in the historical literature. But one can hardly agree with S. V. Bakhrushin's assertion, made in 1917, that Shorin "is [too] well known [to require that we] dwell upon his personality and the great role he played in Moscow government circles." Except for a skimpy article in the Russkii Biograficheskii Slovar', nothing whatever had been written specifically on Shorin, and the situation has scarcely changed since. The few helpful pages D. Tverskaia has devoted to Shorin can by no stretch of the imagination be considered an ample treatment.


4. Denezhnaia reforma Alekseiia Mikhailovicha i vosstanie v Moskve v 1662 g. (Moscow, 1936), p. 111.

5. "Moskovskoe vosstanie 1648 g.," Nauchnye trudy, II, 87.

6. Moskva vtoroi poloviny XVII veka—tsentr skladyvaushchegosia vserossiiskogo rynka (Moscow, 1959), pp. 112-116; also, "K voprosu o roli kupechestva v protsesse formirovaniia vserossiiskogo rynka v XVII v.," in Novoe o proshlom nashei strany (Moscow, 1967), pp. 290-300. The first pages of this article give many references to sources on Shorin, but most of it is devoted to one of the numerous litigations in which he was involved.