

# NIKOLAI NOVIKOV

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Novikov, Nikolai (1744-1818) was a prominent writer, journalist, publisher, and social worker who began the vogue of the satirical magazine. Catherine II's efforts to proliferate ideas of the Enlightenment had injected new vigor in Russian writers in the early 1760s. Hoping to demonstrate to the West that Russia was not a despotic state, she established a "commission for the compilation of a new code of laws" in 1767 and published "instructions" for the commission in major European languages--a treatise entitled *Nakaz dlya komissii po sochineniyu novogo ulozheniya*. She also began the publication in early 1769 of a satirical weekly modeled on the English Spectator entitled All Sorts and Sundries (*Vsyakaya vsyachina*) and urged intellectuals to follow her example. For a brief period, all editors were freed from preliminary censorship.

An enthusiastic believer in the enlightenment, Nikolai Novikov accepted the challenge and published a succession of successful journals—*The Drone* (*Truten*'), 1769-1770, *The Tatler* (*Pustomelya*) in 1770, *The Painter* (*Zhivopisets*) in 1772, and others. Novikov became a pioneer in the journalistic movement in the 1770s and 1780s, and the works of prose appearing in his journals amounted to both a new literary phenomenon for Russian culture and a new form for the expression of public opinion. He took Catherine's "instructions" seriously and cultivated works

that delved deeply into questions of political life and social phenomena that formerly lay within the sole jurisdiction of the tsarist bureaucracy—topics that could be considered before only in secret and with official approval. In addition to editing and publishing four periodicals and a historical dictionary, *The Library of Old Russian Authors* (1772-1775) in 30 volumes, Novikov also took over the Moscow University Press in 1778. His publishing houses operated first in St. Petersburg and then in Moscow, offering a prodigious quantity of books designed to spread enlightenment at a modest price. Novikov dedicated himself and his fortune to the advancement of elementary education as well, publishing textbooks and even the first Russian magazine for children.

Novikov can be viewed as a tragic figure in Russian history. Abruptly in 1774 Catherine II blocked publication of his journals because of their sharp attacks on serious social injustice. By imperial order she stopped further books from being produced. In 1791 she closed his printing presses. Regarding education as her own bailiwick, Novikov's successful activities probably irked her. Novikov's association with the Freemasons also alienated her. A middle-of-the-road theorist rather than a purist, Novikov was sometimes caught in a paradox between his keen appreciation of European Enlightenment and his high regard for the ancient Russian virtues. Freemasonry seemed to offer a way out of the paradox to a firm moral standpoint.

Catherine II, however, had always opposed secret societies, which had been outlawed in 1782 (although Freemasonry had been exempted). Her predecessor Peter III, whom she had skillfully dethroned, had been favorably disposed towards Freemasonry. Equally, her political rival and personal enemy, the Grand Duke

**Paul, was a prominent Freemason. Further, since the break with England, Russian Freemasonry had come under the influence of German Freemasonry, of which Frederick the Great, the archenemy of Catherine, was a dominant figure. To Catherine, it must have seemed that everyone she disliked intensely was a Freemason.**

**Novikov was arrested but never tried and was sentenced by imperial decree to detention in the fortress of Schlüsselburg for 15 years. He was released when Paul became emperor in 1796, but retired from public life in disillusionment to study mysticism. He never could engage fully in Moscow's literary world again.**

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