

IMPERIAL RUSSIA AND THE ATLANTIC:
AN EXPLORATION OF IMPERIAL RUSSIA'S NAVAL STORES TRADE WITH
GREAT BRITAIN, FRANCE, AND COLONIAL AMERICA FROM 1553-1783

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ABSTRACT

ABBI NOEL MOLZAHN: Imperial Russia and the Atlantic: An Exploration of Imperial Russia's Naval Stores Trade with Great Britain, France, and Colonial America from 1553-1783

(Under the direction of Dr. Louise McReynolds)

This thesis incorporates Imperial Russia into New Atlantic History via its naval stores trade with Great Britain, France, and Colonial America from 1553-1783. Since naval stores such as timber, cordage, tar, pitch, turpentine, hemp, and rosin were used to construct and maintain ships, a comparative analysis of the above three powers' domestic production levels of naval stores with their overall importation levels from Imperial Russia provides a solid basis from which to reevaluate Imperial Russia's relationship not only to the Atlantic Community, but also to one of the most important events in Atlantic history, the American Revolution. Upon doing so it becomes strikingly apparent that all three powers were significantly dependent upon Imperial Russia for naval stores. This demonstrates that Imperial Russia was an integral member of the Atlantic community as well as an influential player in the American Revolution, especially due to its Armed Neutrality Act of 1780.

DEDICATION

To my loving parents and grandparents

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Imperial Russia and the Atlantic: An Exploration of Imperial Russia's Naval Stores Trade with Great Britain, France, and Colonial America from 1553-1783

For centuries Imperial Russia has been treated within scholarship as a rising power on the distant European horizon completely separate from the Atlantic sphere. In recent years, however, traditional notions of what constituted the Atlantic community have greatly expanded thanks to new Atlantic history. Through innovative and interdisciplinary approaches historians have demonstrated that the Atlantic community was not in fact defined by imagined boundaries on a map, but was intricately woven together through the diverse exchange of peoples, cultures, and commodities across the Atlantic. Robert Griffin argued in *A Plea for a New Atlantic History* that historical subjects themselves even comprehended “the Atlantic as an integrated space” rather than along the “national, imperial, racial, and ethnic lines” historians have imposed on it.¹ Thus by exploring what *tied* the Atlantic community together instead of what divided it, a more accurate, richly complex, and multi-regional history of the Atlantic comes to life. Since naval stores such as timber, cordage, tar, pitch, turpentine, hemp, and rosin used for making and maintaining ships were the very commodities which made the Atlantic world turn round and tied it together, an examination of Imperial Russia's naval stores trade with Great Britain, France, and Colonial America from 1555 to 1783 provides a perfect venue through which to incorporate Imperial Russia into this emerging discourse and

¹Robert Griffin, “A Plea for a New Atlantic History,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 68, no. 2 (Apr., 2011): 237.

more importantly reevaluate its relationship not only to the Atlantic Community, but also to one of the most important events in Atlantic history, the American Revolution.

In the past scholars such as Herbert Kaplan, Paul Bamford, and Joseph Malone among others have examined the relationship between naval stores and the individual development of Great Britain, France, and Colonial America's sea power. This work, however, analyzes their studies collectively in concert with related archival materials in order to compare the domestic production levels of naval stores of these three powers with their overall importation levels from Imperial Russia. Based on this comparative analysis the degree to which Imperial Russia facilitated their maritime development and by direct extension their maritime operations during the American Revolution can be determined. Upon doing so it becomes strikingly apparent that all three powers were significantly dependent upon Imperial Russia for naval stores. As early as the sixteenth century Great Britain came to rely on Imperial Russian naval stores as its aspirations began to outstrip the resources of its modest island. France followed in the seventeenth century due to severe deforestation and Colonial America in the eighteenth century due to the poor quality of its own naval stores and lack of a large scale industry for manufacturing sailcloth. The fact that Imperial Russia enabled all three powers to develop their maritime capabilities to a considerable degree is extremely important for it demonstrates the extent to which Imperial Russia was an integral member of the Atlantic community. Moreover, by situating this comparative analysis within the broader historical context of the time it becomes evident that Imperial Russia not only had a hand in the general maritime establishment of the Atlantic, but was also a highly influential

player in shaping the dynamics of Atlantic politics since it materially enabled all three powers to pursue their political objectives in the age of sail.

Without naval stores Great Britain and France lacked the ability to develop and maintain their illustrious merchant fleets and formidable navies needed to strengthen their empires and protect their colonies from the covetous eyes of neighboring nations. As the American Revolution unfolded, Imperial Russia critically enabled all three powers to maintain and conduct their maritime operations throughout the war. In light of the commercial and political impact Imperial Russia's naval stores had on the American Revolution, the importance of its Armed Neutrality Act of 1780, which protected the right of neutral nations to trade naval stores with powers at war during the Revolution, must also be reevaluated. Although the Act has largely failed to attract substantial scholastic attention, scholars such as Isabel de Madariaga and Nikolai Bolkhovitinov reexamined it throughout the middle to late twentieth century in hopes of shedding historical insight onto Russo-Atlantic relations against the backdrop of the Cold War.

Despite their consensus that the Act added to Great Britain's troubles, none of their works developed this conclusion beyond the general premise that it restrained Great Britain's diplomatic options with Imperial Russia, restricted their maritime conduct, and negatively implicated their relations with the Dutch. It was not until 1995, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, that the Act came to be loosely examined in relation to economic terms by Herbert Kaplan. Although Kaplan focused solely on British-Russian trade relations to the exclusion of all other powers involved in the American Revolution and therefore concluded that the Act ultimately failed to "influence a set of advanced European entanglements in the distant Atlantic arena," his study nevertheless laid the

ground work for the Act to be investigated through a new prism, that of its commercial impact on the maritime development and naval operations of the belligerent powers during the American Revolution which this work centralizes on.² By collectively determining the state of Great Britain, France, and Colonial America's dependency on Imperial Russia this work not only contradicts Kaplan's conclusion, but helps demonstrate the degree to which the Act negatively implicated Great Britain as de Madariaga and Bolkhovitinov concluded. With all three powers dependent on naval stores from Imperial Russia, the Act significantly undermined Great Britain's ability to attain victory by ensuring the continued delivery of naval stores to their Colonial American and French enemies. Thus, by incorporating Imperial Russia into the heart of New Atlantic history via its naval stores trade, the Russo-Atlantic paradigm is cast aside and Imperial Russia emerges not only as a member of the Atlantic community, but also as an influential player in the American Revolution.

Imperial Russia's Naval Stores Trade, 1553-1776: Great Britain and Colonial America

Throughout the sixteenth century European powers pushed beyond their borders to forge new economic enterprises. Exotic markets in the East tantalized European nations hungry for commercial expansion, driving numerous explorers to traverse the globe looking for a Northwest Passage to the Orient. In search of this waterway a small contingent of English diplomats and merchants anchored in the cold waters of Archangel, Russia in 1553. Although Imperial Russia failed to offer England immediate riches, its

²Herbert H. Kaplan, *Russian Overseas Commerce with Great Britain: During the Reign of Catherine II* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1995), xxv.

natural abundance of naval stores was a promising market to tap into since England's maritime appetite was beginning to outpace the resources of its modest island. Being the first to discover this raw market, England received exclusive commercial trade rights within Imperial Russia enabling it to monopolize the acquisitions process and thereby ensure that it received the best naval stores available for its own use, which became particularly important as other European powers began turning to Imperial Russia for naval stores to facilitate their imperial and maritime expansion as well.³ Although this trade arrangement gave England the upper hand over its European counterparts, the security of long term self-sufficiency was nevertheless preferred over commercially favorable terms of trade. Therefore, at the onset of the seventeenth century England sought to remedy its growing reliance on Imperial Russian naval stores by developing a naval stores industry in its freshly planted North American colonies.

The colonists' fear of Indians, lack of horses to transport timber, and claims that the "trees were too scattered" to make the trade worthwhile for the labor involved, however, hampered the colonials' incentive to develop a naval store industry and continued to diminish as the tobacco market began to soar.⁴ Hence Great Britain's dependence on Russian naval stores continued to increase. As political tensions in Europe amplified against the backdrop of continuous efforts among European powers to strengthen their empires and enhance their maritime capabilities in order to expand their

³Peter Putnam, *Seven Britons in Imperial Russia, 1698-1812* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), 95.

⁴Sinclair Snow, "Naval Stores in Colonial Virginia," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 72, no. 1 (Jan., 1964): 76-78.

empires abroad through colonization, default dependence on Imperial Russia became unacceptable as both the production and supply of naval stores to Great Britain became endangered.⁵

Frequent eruptions of war between Imperial Russia and its leading naval stores competitor, Sweden, repeatedly hindered its ability to maintain steady production levels of naval stores while ongoing power struggles and territorial conflicts throughout the rest of Europe increased demand for them. As a result, the acquisition price of naval stores dramatically increased and European powers desperate for naval stores began seizing those in transit to other nations for their own maritime use.⁶ From a national defense standpoint it was clear that Great Britain could no longer afford to depend on foreign naval stores since any outbreak of war in Europe could easily jeopardize its supply, thereby leaving it in want of the very resources it would need most to wage war and with even tighter purse strings to conduct one.⁷ Thus, as King George I sent Great Britain's

⁵English parliament noted that "any difference" between the Northern Crowns could "easily obstruct" their passage into the Sound. Moreover, during military conflict between the Northern powers the transportation of naval stores became jeopardized since no provision was "made for certificates of property homeward bound" to England in its commercial treaties with the Northern powers. This meant that it would be difficult for merchants "to prove" the stores on board belonged to England rather than one of the powers involved in the Northern conflict and therefore liable to confiscation. From Great Britain, Board of Trade, *Journal of the Commissioners for Trade and Plantations* (London: His Majesty's Stationary Office, 1952), 2:119 and Reasons Humbly offered for passing the Bill for Enlarging the Trade to Russia, 1698.

⁶Justin Williams, "English Mercantilism and Carolina Naval Stores, 1705-1776," *The Journal of Southern History* 1, no.2 (May 1935): 172. As a result of inflated prices for naval stores, England annual deficit rose to 200,000 pounds. Also see the appendixes for graphs charting the rise and fall of naval store prices from 1694-1770 in Joseph J. Malone, *Pine Trees and Politics: The Naval Stores and Forest Policy in Colonial New England, 1691-1775* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1964), 148-150.

⁷Ibid.

fleet to protect its commercial interests in hostile European waters, parliament resumed efforts to push colonials to develop naval stores for them.

The high freight cost and slow delivery time of stores exported from the colonies across the Atlantic, however, placed colonial merchants at an immediate disadvantage to their Baltic rivals whose close proximity to Great Britain meant lower freight cost and faster delivery time. This in turn caused British merchants to give “priority to those [stores] from the North” which undercut the potential profit of colonial traders.⁸ Thus, by the onset of the eighteenth century British trade commissioners reported that colonials would “not make it their business to provide such Goods...unless they have a prospect” and can “be secure of Gaine” in the form of monetary incentives. Eager to reduce their reliance on foreign stores, parliament endeavored to even the playing field by creating a series of incentive acts. While some abolished all import duties on colonial naval stores, others established premiums for imported tar and pitch from the colonies and allotted up to “ten thousand pounds in the whole, for and towards the subsistence and employment of a number of skillful people, and for the furnishing of...good and profitable designs of raising such naval stores from the growths and products” of colonial plantations.⁹ These incentives were largely successful and by 1725 the colonies became Great Britain’s “principal source” of tar and pitch.¹⁰ Given the nature of Great Britain’s military and

⁸“Report Concerning Naval Stores Trade in the Colonies,” *Documenting the American South: Colonial and State Records of North Carolina* (The University Library of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2004), 1:598-99, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/document/csr01-0304>.

⁹Snow, “Naval Stores in Colonial Virginia,” 82, and *Anno Regni: Magna Britannia, Francia, & Hibernia Octavo*. Printed by the Assigns of Thomas Newcomb, and Henry Hills; Printers to the Queen’s most Excellent Majesty, 1710.

¹⁰Williams, “English Mercantilism and Carolina Naval Stores, 1705-1776,” 175.

commercial aspirations as a formidable power, however, the quality of its naval stores was critical and colonial stores particularly tar and timber did not always meet its standard requirements.

In fact, as early as 1705 British merchants began “praying” that proper persons “well skilled in the making tar, raising and curing hemp, etc.” would be sent to the colonies in order “to direct and instruct the inhabitants in the manufacturing of those commodities” and therefore enhance their quality.¹¹ By 1707, the Surveyor General overseeing colonial production of naval stores was so dissatisfied with the quality of tar produced by the colonials, he himself issued specific instructions for making it, stating that “I hope none will plead ignorance for the future; and that no sand, leaves, grass, or anything but pure tar” will be produced so that colonial naval stores might in “some measure regain a reputation, which at present..[it] has lost.”¹² Despite these instructions, a large enough quantity of colonial stores continued to contain “dirt, sticks, water, and other foreign matter” that British merchants not only tended to believe colonials had “deliberately added” them to increase the product’s bulk and thus its price at market, but fervently pushed for the creation of strict inspection laws which were implemented from 1717 on.¹³ Nevertheless, the quality of colonial tar failed to match that of its Baltic rivals leading Great Britain’s Ambassador to Russia to request a direct account “of the method

¹¹Great Britain, Board of Trade, *Journal of the Commissioners for Trade and Plantations* (London: His Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1952), 2:183.

¹²John Bridger, “Information and Directions for the Making of Tar: And Choice of Trees for the Same, as in Finland &c.,” (Boston: B. Green, 1707), 1-2.

¹³*Ibid.*, 88.

used for making tar in the czar's dominions" so that it might be applied in the colonies.¹⁴ Baltic methods, however, proved to be more time consuming as well as less productive in North America due to climatic differences and the general lack of procurement specialists in the colonies. Hence colonial merchants and officials alike worked to repeal such decrees warning that "unless a bounty be continued upon tar made from fallen trees," the colonial method of production, then "the importation of tar from America will entirely cease."¹⁵ In spite of such advice, Great Britain retained its policies and by 1730 colonial production of tar and pitch sharply declined causing a relapse in their previous dependence on Imperial Russia for such stores.¹⁶

Although North and South Carolina possessed an abundance of *Pinus Palustris* or longleaf pine, which largely met the Royal Navy's requirements for height, circumference, durability, and flexibility, the majority of colonial timber throughout the rest of the colonies, spare New Hampshire and Maine, did not.¹⁷ Therefore, Great Britain attempted to maximize this limited supply of usable timber for its Royal Navy by legally restricting colonials from implementing it for their own use. As the colonial commercial shipbuilding industry came into full swing during the eighteenth century, however, colonials began consuming the "few masts" and timber supplies "seized for His

¹⁴Williams, "English Mercantilism and Carolina Naval Stores," 182.

¹⁵Great Britain, *Journal of the Commissioners for Trade and Plantations*, 5:140.

¹⁶Great Britain, *Journal of the Commissioners for Trade and Plantations*, 2:308, and Williams, "English Mercantilism and Carolina Naval Stores," 184.

¹⁷R. J. B. Knight, *Shipbuilding Timber for the British Navy: Parliamentary Papers, 1729-1792* (Delmar, New York: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1993), 18.

Majesty's use" for their own maritime development.¹⁸ When complaints of the "difficulties in preserving such trees as are proper for masting of ships from the inhabitants of New England" reached parliament, they ruled that colonials were no longer just restricted from "cutting down and converting to private use such trees as are or may be proper for the service" of the Royal Navy, but that they would also be severely prosecuted and fined if caught doing so.¹⁹ While Great Britain struggled against colonial inhabitants to protect its timber supplies, it simultaneously worked to ensure that colonials involved in the procurement and shipping process maintained the choice timber's original quality.

Nevertheless, the colonies' "slash-and-dash habits" not only slowed the speed of production, but greatly reduced the timber's quality making it a poor alternative to Imperial Russia's timber which was skillfully prepared by water-powered mills and therefore retained its original quality.²⁰ Desperate to break its dependence on Imperial Russia, Great Britain worked "to prevent the exportation of unmerchantable commodities" from the colonies by demanding "several material improvements in the packing and shipping of naval stores" and offering additional monetary incentives to

¹⁸Great Britain, *Journal of the Commissioners for Trade and Plantations*, 4: 315.

¹⁹Great Britain, *Journal of the Commissioners for Trade and Plantations*, 6:57, and Leonard Woods Labaree, *Royal Instructions to British Colonial Governors, 1670-1776* (New York and London: D. Appleton-Century Company, Incorporated, 1935), 2:593.

²⁰Arthur R. M. Lowe, *Great Britain's Woodyard: British America and the Timber Trade, 1763-1867* (Montreal and London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1973), 25. The phrase "slash-and-dash habits" refers to the chopping down and preparing of timber by ax implements which was a more primitive preparation process than the water-powered mills of Baltic which created more refined and smooth end products, particularly of plank wood.

encourage colonials to do so.²¹ In the meantime, Great Britain had to continue securing these stores from Imperial Russia, which by that time had virtually monopolized the export trade through military victory over Sweden in 1721 and territorial expansion and now held “sway over all the important east Baltic mast and timber ports.”²² By the mid-eighteenth century, Great Britain’s reliance on Russian stores increased all the more for as territorial friction over colonial possessions in North America intensified between Great Britain and its long standing rival France, it needed to enhance its maritime capabilities in order to transport both troops and supplies across the vast Atlantic Ocean.

As these tensions erupted into war with France in 1757, Great Britain was forced to rely almost entirely on Russian stores to maintain its merchant fleet of over “7,600 ships” and enlarge its naval fleet from “150 [ships of the line] in 1755 to 270 in 1761” to better conduct the war effort.²³ Although this growing demand greatly benefited Imperial Russia bringing about the creation of over 335 new enterprises between 1742 and 1762, Great Britain’s financial expenditure amounted to 5,000,000 rubles yearly.²⁴ Ironically, the colonies dramatically amplified Great Britain’s dependence on Imperial Russia rather than helped to alleviate it as they were intended to do in the first place. Although Great

²¹Ibid., and “Letter from William Tryon to Wills Hill, Marquis of Downshire,” *Documenting the American South: Colonial and State Records of North Carolina*, 3:526, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/document/csr08-0194>.

²²Paul Walden Bamford, *Forests and French Sea Power: 1660-1789* (Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1956), 138.

²³A. G. Cross, *Great Britain and Russia in the Eighteenth Century: Contacts and Comparisons* (Massachusetts: Oriental Research Partners, 1979), 146-8.

²⁴Cross, *Great Britain and Russia in the Eighteenth Century: Contacts and Comparisons*, 146-8, and W. F. Reddaway, “Macartney in Russia, 1765-1767,” *Cambridge Historical Journal* 3, no.3 (1931): 274.

Britain was tired of being eaten “yearly out of pocket” by Imperial Russia, Great Britain nevertheless appreciated the choice benefits involved in trading with it.

After partitioning Poland in 1763, Imperial Russia officially gained strategic control of the “Belorussian trade with the Baltic and Black Sea.”²⁵ This was particularly important to Great Britain since it meant that they now had more ready access to Polish Danzig timber, which had long been considered the best alternative timber to their own which was rapidly depleting and was not found in sufficient quantities in the colonies. It also granted them access to even higher quality hemp and flax. Throughout the seventeenth century English and Scottish merchants had perceived “Russian hemp and flax” to be “inferior” to that of Poland’s.²⁶ Since both of these raw materials were vital for maritime development because they were used to make sailcloth and roping, British markets began consuming “over two-thirds of Russia’s yearly exports of hemp and over half her exports of flax.”²⁷ With Great Britain taking in such considerable quantities of these commodities from Imperial Russia, however, their own hemp and flax manufactures became concerned that they could not effectively stay afloat, particularly since they were already trying to compete against colonial manufacturers who could sell their hemp and flax “so much cheaper” than English merchants due to parliamentary

²⁵John P. LeDonne, *The Russian Empire and the World 1700-1917: The Geopolitics of Expansion and Containment* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 43-6.

²⁶Cross, *Great Britain and Russia in the Eighteenth Century*, 167.

²⁷M. S. Anderson, *Great Britain’s Discovery of Russia 1553-1812* (New York: St. Martin’s Press Inc, 1958), 125.

incentives.²⁸ As a result, English merchants petitioned the government to put an end “to the Growth” of the colonial hemp and flax industry and by 1764, “the raising of Flax and Hemp except for the consumption of the colony” was largely prevented.²⁹ Without Great Britain’s approval to develop a substantial colonial hemp and flax industry the colonies could not manufacture sailcloth and cordage on a large scale themselves. Therefore, they would not only be forced to import sailcloth from Great Britain, but also purchase it from them at a much higher price than it was originally acquired at from Imperial Russia, since British merchants sought to turn a profit for the trans-Atlantic voyage.

In hopes of bypassing these additional charges, the colonies began importing Russian stores from the Dutch the following year in 1765, which directly undermined Great Britain’s attempt to restrict foreign trade to the motherland and colonies and maintain a favorable balance of trade via the mercantilist system.³⁰ When Great Britain responded by enforcing its navigation laws more strictly, colonial frustration at the trade restrictions placed upon them amplified all the more, provoking them to defy Great Britain by sailing straight to Imperial Russia to attain large quantities of naval stores themselves.³¹ The fact that colonials were “hardly distinguishable from British”

²⁸Leo Francis Stock, *Proceedings and Debates of British Parliaments Respecting North America* (Washington, D. C.: The Carnegie Institute of Washington, 1924), 2: 414.

²⁹“Letter from Arthur Dobbs to the Board of Trade of Great Britain,” *Documenting the American South: Colonial and State Records of North Carolina*, 4:1029-30, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/document/csr06-0309>.

³⁰Reddaway, “Macartney in Russia,” 271.

³¹Norman E. Saul, *Distant Friends: The United States and Russian 1763-1867* (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1991), 3.

merchants made it easy for them to skirt around Great Britain and import naval stores and “most importantly large quantities of...sailcloth to equip” their vessels from Imperial Russia.³² As a result, Russia’s naval stores trade not only transformed into a commercial venue through which the colonies were asserting their political defiance of British rule, but it instrumentally helped to exacerbate pre-Revolutionary political tensions between the two powers and materially empowered Colonial America to develop the very maritime capabilities it would use to wage the American Revolution. Ironically, as Colonial America sought to break its commercial bondage to Great Britain via Imperial Russia, Great Britain simultaneously revved up efforts during the second half of the eighteenth century to break its commercial bondage to Imperial Russia via Colonial America since deforestation had dramatically increased its dependence on Imperial Russia.

A Report from the Committee appointed to consider how His Majesty’s Navy may be better supplied with Timber stated in 1771 that “there is a great scarcity of timber in the Kingdom, particularly in the counties of Sussex, Surrey, Hampshire, Berkshire, Essex, Suffolk, Norfolk, and Kent from whence they had been used to draw their supplies; and which counties are now almost drained.”³³ While the Naval Committee once again pressed colonials to enhance the quality of their naval stores industry and expand it, they simultaneously began laying the groundwork to replenish their own supply by “planting forests in waste lands” and enlisting all gentlemen owning a large

³²Saul, *Distant Friends*, 3.

³³Knight, “*Shipbuilding Timber for the British Navy*,” 18.

estate to “appropriate some part thereof for the use of timber only.”³⁴ Although they estimated that in just twenty years’ time colonial and domestic production of naval stores would far exceed any imports needed from Imperial Russia, they failed to realized that in less than five years the colonies would declare independence, thereby cutting them off from colonial naval stores and leaving them no time to replenish their own supply or break their dependence on Imperial Russia.³⁵ Hence, as the American Revolution unfolded in 1776 Great Britain was more dependent on Imperial Russia than ever before in its entire history. Its ability to wage maritime operations effectively across the vast Atlantic Ocean and reclaim its North American colonies hinged on the steady supply of naval stores from Imperial Russia.

Since Great Britain controlled the acquisitions process and possessed the most formidable navy in the world at that time this appeared to be an achievable task, particularly because the colonies lacked a formal navy to contest them on the open seas as well as a large scale munitions industry or seasoned military to combat them on land for any length of time. Moreover, upon declaring independence the colonies were immediately cut off from importing sailcloth from Great Britain and far less likely to be able to bring back stores from Imperial Russia since Baltic waters were now teaming with British fleets. While this led Great Britain to presume that victory was easily within its grasp, it strategically spurred the colonies to expand the theater of operations by bringing Great Britain’s long standing rival, France, into play on their side. In September of 1776,

³⁴Ibid., 23.

³⁵Ibid.

the colonies solicited France to send them “twenty or thirty thousand muskets and bayonets, and a large supply of ammunition and brass field pieces” by “convoy” across the Atlantic.³⁶ Eager to weaken Great Britain and deprive it of its prosperous colonies, France agreed to aid the colonies in an unofficial capacity and began “seriously building up its fleet” in order to transport these supplies and eventually military personnel to the colonies. To do so, however, France first had to purchase substantial amounts of naval stores from Imperial Russia, for just like Great Britain, France was almost entirely dependent on Russian stores, even though this had not always been the case.³⁷

Imperial Russia’s Naval Stores Trade, 1669-1776: France

For centuries France had been relatively self-sufficient in timber, utilizing its own domestic resources to power maritime expeditions, but by the middle of the seventeenth century this long term self-reliance left its timber reserves “exhausted.”³⁸ Although France formed a twenty-five year contract with their company *Campagnie du Nord* in Northern Europe to buy all the timber and masts they could from the Baltic in 1669 as a result of this depletion, it realized the importance of being self-sufficient and simultaneously worked to encourage the cultivation of naval stores in its North American

³⁶United States, Continental Congress, *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789*, ed. Worthington C. Ford et al. (Washington, D.C., 1904-37),5:815-816.

³⁷Donald Stoker, Kenneth J. Hagan, and Michael T. McMaster, *Strategy in the American War of Independence: A Global Approach* (London and New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2010), 84.

³⁸Walther Kirchner, *Commercial Relations Between Russia and Europe 1400-1800*, Vol. 33, *Indiana University Publications Russian and East European Series* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1966), 111.

colonies.³⁹ This strategy was not only similar to Great Britain's in design, but the causes behind its failure were also quite comparable. French colonials were reticent to change trades given the overriding success of existing ones, the lack of infrastructure needed to procure and transport timber effectively for export additionally called into question the industry's ability not only to make a substantial profit, but also one worth the efforts to create it, and those persuaded to take a chance with the trade lacked training in the proper cultivation techniques required to make the industry worth their while financially. Hence, colonial stores were repeatedly deemed "to be of mediocre quality" and "very badly prepared," unsuitable for the French Royal Navy's use.⁴⁰ Since this undercut the industry's export profits, colonials began to require "notoriously high" wages to make up for this financial loss.⁴¹ As a result, the French government already burdened by the exceptionally high freight cost of transatlantic shipments began exceeding their "annual grant of 8,000 livres" allotted for the development of colonial naval stores industry "by 50 percent."⁴² Thus, only three short decades after the colonial industry was initiated orders were given in 1699 "that no further exploitations be made in Canada."⁴³ In giving

³⁹Bamford, *Forests and French Sea Power*, 115.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 119.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 120.

⁴²*Ibid.*

⁴³*Ibid.*, 119-120.

this declaration France placed itself entirely at the “mercy of the Baltic nations” for the supply of naval stores.⁴⁴ As war broke out across Europe shortly thereafter, however, France was forced to use its remaining domestic naval stores to maintain its maritime operations since the supply of stores from Imperial Russia was severely impeded just as it had been to Great Britain throughout this time frame. Hence, by war’s end French domestic resources were even more depleted, thereby dramatically increasing France’s dependence on Imperial Russia. Eager to rectify its vulnerable state, France reversed its 1699 colonial naval stores policy, ordering “to invigorate the production of Canadian stores for the navy” in 1714.⁴⁵ Despite hopes that the industry would meet with greater success this time around, it continued to be plagued by the same issues as before with the “quality of the masts and timber” exported being found “generally unsatisfactory.”⁴⁶

While inspectors sent to determine the cause of this blamed it on the “incompetence of the persons” procuring them, colonials insisted that the “lack of transportation” was the “most persistent and damaging obstacle.”⁴⁷ For instance, masts cut and ready for transport from the colonies often had to wait four to five years to be exported since ships equipped to carry their tonnage were sent quite irregularly from

⁴⁴Kirchner, *Commercial Relations Between Russia and Europe*, 98.

⁴⁵Bamford, *Forests and French Sea Power*, 121.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 122.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 121, 122.

France. As a result, “the normal development of cracks, brittleness, and rot” was greatly accelerated thereby decreasing both the quality and lifespan of colonial timber exports.⁴⁸ This not only decreased potential profits and further discouraged colonials from entering in the trade, but caused France to stop importing masts for the navy’s use all together in 1731.⁴⁹

With the colonial naval stores industry proving to be fruitless, France rigorously began enforcing old domestic forest laws to ensure the most “desirable trees” in France were reserved for the Royal Navy’s use alone.⁵⁰ Although these laws were met with little to no resistance by French commercial shipbuilders in past centuries when resources were plenty, severe deforestation during the eighteenth century made illegal practices “commonplace.”⁵¹ As the government started to crack down on this, however, commercial shipbuilders were forced to employ left over resources deemed “useless to the navy” or pay the cost of importing stores from the Baltic which made shipbuilding “less economical” and caused the industry to dwindle down substantially which in turn contributed to the overall failure of the colonial naval stores industry.⁵² Thus, by the

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Ibid., 125.

⁵⁰Ibid., 163.

⁵¹Ibid. 75, 76.

⁵²Ibid., 77, 163.

middle of the eighteenth century France had no sufficient colonial alternative source for naval stores aside from Imperial Russia.

This was a particularly precarious position for France to be in since its rival, Great Britain, not only controlled the acquisitions process of naval stores in Imperial Russia, but frequently sent its fleets to protect its interests throughout the North and Baltic Sea and France was no match for Great Britain's maritime might. In hopes of avoiding any provocations with Great Britain during the acquisitions and shipment process, France opted to rely on Dutch merchants to pick up and deliver Russia's naval stores to them. This was a particularly promising alternative for two primary reasons. First, the tonnage capacity of Dutch vessels exceeded that of most powers, including France, which meant Dutch merchants could transport many times more naval stores in one vessel than the French could.⁵³ Second, following the third Anglo-Dutch War over commercial expansion in 1674, relations between the Great Britain and Holland were largely conciliatory. Therefore, just as France was increasingly in need of Imperial Russian naval stores, Dutch merchants were more easily able to extract and safely deliver a considerable quantity of them to France without provoking the British. As France and Great Britain battled over their colonial holdings in North America, however, this delicate trading system became a growing source of frustration to Great Britain.

Because France had "no naval stores" of its own, Great Britain realized France's ability to transport its troops and supplies across the Atlantic and therefore wage war

⁵³Isabel de Madariaga, *Russia in the Age of Catherine the Great* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981), 386, Isabel de Madariaga, *Britain, Russia, and the Armed Neutrality of 1780: Sir James Harris's Mission to St. Petersburg during the American Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), 176, and Bamford, *Forests and French Sea Power*, 61 and 165.

against it on both land and sea was largely because neutral nations such as Holland were strategically delivering the naval stores it needed to do so from Imperial Russia.⁵⁴

Although Great Britain acknowledged that naval stores were not “among those goods that in time of war are to be deemed contraband” and therefore were not technically liable to seizure, the ability of neutral nations to undermine its war efforts against France infuriated Great Britain. As the war escalated, Great Britain adopted a very aggressive maritime policy directed at neutral nations wherein neutral vessels laden with naval stores and suspected of being in route to France were subject to seizure immediately. While this weighed heavily on French war efforts, it significantly soured Great Britain’s relations with neutral nations especially Holland.⁵⁵ As a result, Holland’s political usefulness to France diminished, leading France to relieve the Dutch from their middleman position in the acquisitions and shipment process as the war came to a close in 1763 and begin dealing directly with Great Britain themselves for Imperial Russian naval stores.⁵⁶

Although this seemed like a relatively safe move to make during peacetime as well as financially savvy since it helped cut additional costs in the wake of monumental war debts, it ultimately left France completely at the mercy of British merchants to determine what quality naval stores it would receive. This had particularly grave consequences for

⁵⁴Leo Francis Stock, *Proceedings and Debates of British Parliaments Respecting North America* (Washington, D. C.: The Carnegie Institute of Washington, 1924), 1:13, 17-18.

⁵⁵Ibid., and Bamford, *Forests and French Sea Power*, 148.

⁵⁶Ibid, 143.

France as it endeavored to build up its fleets just over a decade later to aid the North American colonies.

Even though Great Britain had officially laid aside its aggressive maritime policy, it nevertheless remained keenly aware of the importance of depriving its enemies of naval stores during wartime. Therefore, as the colonies declared independence from Great Britain in 1776, British merchants vigilantly monitored the flow of naval stores to those powers most likely to aid the colonies against them. Thus, as France's demand for naval stores began to increase shortly after the Revolution unfolded, British merchants immediately suspected France of aiding the colonies against them and worked to ensure that France received extremely low quality stores from Russia.⁵⁷ Once again, Imperial Russia's naval stores trade transformed into a commercial venue for strategic political expression. While Colonial America used it to showcase its defiance of British rule before the Revolution erupted, Great Britain wielded its control over the acquisitions process to demonstrate its political frustrations against France. With France struggling to acquire the naval stores it needed to ship munitions and supplies to the colonies, the colonies in turn began taking action to attain these provisions directly from Great Britain in the meantime by dispatching their own vessels to prey on Great Britain's supply chain. Despite their lack of a formal navy, the colonies possessed a sizeable amount of commercial vessels. Moreover, given the fact that Great Britain's fleets were in a relative

⁵⁷Donald Stoker, Kenneth J. Hagan, and Michael T. McMaster, *Strategy in the American War of Independence: A Global Approach* (London and New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2010), 84, and Bamford, *Forests and French Sea Power*, 148.

state of disrepair at the onset of the American Revolution, the colonies' chances of successfully executing this privateering strategy appeared rather favorable.

The American Revolution, Imperial Russia's Naval Stores Trade, 1776-1783, and the Armed Neutrality Act of 1780

Having failed to consider the possibility of war with its American colonies an event likely to occur just over a decade after it had battled for them against France, funding once devoted to the maintenance of Great Britain's naval fleet during wartime was funneled into the development of its merchant fleet. Therefore, as the American colonies declared independence in 1776, Great Britain's men-of-war were "too old, too rotten, to ill-manned, and their masts and yards of too bad materials" to effectively combat "a great additional force" such as the threat posed by American privateers or the future incorporation of France and Spain's navies.⁵⁸ Given Great Britain's lack of sufficient naval power prominent colonial and French politicians reasoned that "if any one link" in Great Britain's supply "chain was struck off...their forces could not subsist."⁵⁹ Capitalizing on this vulnerability the Continental Congress encouraged American ships to target Great Britain's susceptible commercial and naval fleets, establishing an official decree for such operations on April 13, 1776.

In response to this Congressional ordinance, numerous privateers dispersed across the seas to "subdue and take, all ships and other vessels, belonging to the inhabitants of Great-Britain...by force of arms" to acquire those goods which would "be employed

⁵⁸"The Revolutionary Diplomatic Correspondence," *A Century of Lawmaking for a New Nation: U.S. Congressional Documents and Debates, 1774-1875* (Library of Congress, 2003), 3:5.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*

against the colonies” such as munitions and naval stores.⁶⁰ An article from the New Jersey Gazette posted that men were “as plenty as grasshoppers in the field” of privateering, capturing nearly “three hundred and forty-two” British vessels alone in 1776 and over “four hundred and sixty-four vessels” in 1777.⁶¹ Connecticut’s Norwich Packet stated that the “prodigious wound” inflicted upon British trade in the West Indies alone that same year was “computed in England [to be] a million and a half sterling.”⁶² Moreover, following the colonies’ victory against the British at Saratoga, New York in 1777, France officially allied with them in their war for independence from Great Britain in 1778 with Spain joining in 1779. As a result, Great Britain now had to protect its supply lines from all three powers as well as obstruct the flow of munitions and naval stores to France and Spain in addition to the American colonies.⁶³ It was a daunting, if not impossible, task, especially given the current state of Great Britain’s fleets.

Outraged by the “unprovoked aggression” of France and Spain against it in what it considered to be a private war and desperate to attain victory in an ever expanding area

⁶⁰United States, Continental Congress, “Instructions to the Commanders of Private Ships or Vessels of War which Shall Have Commissions or Letters of Marque or Reprisal, Authorizing them to Make Captures of British Vessels and Cargo” (April 3, 1776), *Documents from the Continental Congress and the Constitutional Convention 1774-1789* (Library of Congress, 2000), and Gardner W. Allen, *The Naval History of the American Revolution* (New York: Russell and Russell, Inc., 1962), 1: 289.

⁶¹Extract of a Letter from a Seaport-Town, in Massachusetts-Bay. The New Jersey Gazette (Burlington, New Jersey: 1779, June 9), and Allen, *The Naval History of the American Revolution*, 1:181, 149, 363, and 2: 488.

⁶²Norwich Packet and the Connecticut, Massachusetts, New-Hampshire, and Rhode-Island Advertiser. 4, iss. 193 (Boston, Massachusetts: Monday June 2 to Monday June 9, 1777), 3.

⁶³Stoker, Hagan, and McMaster, *Strategy in the American War of Independence: A Global Approach*, 76.

of operations on the high seas, Great Britain immediately revived its aggressive maritime policies against neutral nations in 1778.⁶⁴ Therefore, all neutral vessels in route to provide its enemies with the naval stores they needed to conduct and maintain maritime operations against Great Britain once again became subject to seizure. Great Britain further augmented this policy by employing a “declared” blockade in hopes that neutral powers would not even consider running the risk of delivering stores to its enemies because any vessels known to be anchoring across “whole stretches” of its enemies’ coastline, regardless of whether or not the coasts were actually “cut off” from all traffic, would be “unrelentingly seized.”⁶⁵ Despite such broad sweeping regulations, however, Great Britain was fully aware of how “porous” these blockades actually were due to the decrepit state of its fleets and therefore attempted to hide its true vulnerability behind this aggressive rhetoric while simultaneously working to develop its follow through.⁶⁶

In an effort to match the combined strength of France, Spain, and the colonies’ maritime capabilities and effectively enforce its maritime policies, Great Britain began a “massive naval construction” program, with over “87 percent” of all masts imported to Great Britain during the American Revolution coming from Russia.⁶⁷ Due to its rapid

⁶⁴Reply of the Court of London to the Declaration of the Empress of Russia. April 23, 1780. *The Armed Neutralities of 1780 and 1800*, 282.

⁶⁵Carl Bergbehm in *The Armed Neutralities of 1780 and 1800*, 15, and Friedrich Heinrich Geffcken in *The Armed Neutralities of 1780 and 1800*, 101.

⁶⁶Stoker, Hagan, and McMaster, *Strategy in the American War of Independence*, 83.

⁶⁷Cross, *Great Britain and Russia during the Eighteenth Century*, 183, 176, and Kaplan, *Russian Overseas Commerce with Great Britain*, 107.

fleet construction, Great Britain's ability to enforce its maritime policies dramatically increased, thereby making naval store shipments to the colonies and France "a near impossibility," leaving these much needed provisions to lie rotting in neutral "way-stations" or in the holds of ships unwilling to disembark for fear of running the British gauntlet.⁶⁸ This was a particularly dire situation for the colonies and France since they were already struggling to acquire naval stores before Great Britain implemented these policies.

Due to the labor shortage brought on by the war the colonies' naval stores industry became severely undermanned and was therefore increasingly unable to produce naval stores at the same rate at which they were being consumed for colonial privateering operations.⁶⁹ Moreover, when colonial ships attempted to transport available naval stores to the other colonies in need of them they were under constant threat of being burned by British troops or apprehended by Great Britain's fleets even before they reached the ocean.⁷⁰ Thus, just a year after declaring their independence from Great Britain, colonial naval stores were growing so scarce and being preyed upon by the British that Continental Congress ordered them to be "removed to places of security with all possible

⁶⁸Bamford, *Forests and French Sea Power*, 153.

⁶⁹Richard Buel Jr., *In Irons: Britain's Naval Supremacy and the American Revolutionary Economy* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 81-82.

⁷⁰Robert G. Albion and Jennie Barnes Pope, *Sea Lanes in Wartime: The American Experience 1775-1942* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1942), 61.

expedition.”⁷¹ Furthermore, anyone found attempting to “willfully and maliciously burn or destroy” naval stores was condemned to “suffer death without benefit of clergy.”

Despite the risk of being captured by Great Britain, colonials were so desperate to acquire more naval stores that they began flying neutral “Dutch colors” from 1777 on to “put in at St. Petersburg, pick up iron, hemp, and ships’ masts, and only after they reached the comparative safety of the high seas replace their flag with the American flag.”⁷² Thus, as Great Britain implemented its policies the colonies were in even greater need of naval stores.

By 1779, the colonies complained to France that “our coasts have long been, and still are, so infested by the enemy’s cruisers, that our commerce has been greatly injured,” and “for want of naval stores, our maritime exertions have been less extensive than they otherwise would have been.”⁷³ Although they requested that France furnish them “with these necessary supplies,” France could not readily oblige because it was already struggling in vain itself to acquire naval stores and develop its fleets since British merchants, who were simultaneously “engaged in supplying the British navy,” continually ensured that France received the poorest quality stores, “unfit” for its naval

⁷¹ “Resolution by the Continental Congress concerning the removal of military supplies and naval stores from Wilmington,” *Documenting the American South: Colonial and State Records*, 11:754-755, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/document/csr11-0685>, and United States, *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 9:777.

⁷²David M. Griffiths, “American Commercial Diplomacy in Russia, 1780-1783,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 27, no.3 (Jul.1970):392-395.

⁷³United States, *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 14:738.

needs.⁷⁴ In fact, out of a shipment of five hundred masts purposed for France, but never allowed to arrive there, only two hundred and ten of them were even deemed to be acceptable for use when surveyed at port.⁷⁵ While Great Britain's aggressive maritime policies and its increasing ability to enforce them meant that Russian naval stores would now on the whole be even harder to attain, they were also in even greater threat of being apprehended with force out of desperation because all powers involved realized that the "balance of opposing naval forces" was "so close that a dozen ships of the line were enough to make a crucial difference" in the war.⁷⁶

Thus, by July of 1778, eight British vessels laden with Russian naval stores sailing throughout the North Sea were "stripped" by colonials of all their goods and the cargo and dispatched immediately to "either France or America."⁷⁷ Shortly after, Russia's merchant vessels, "proceeding from Archangel to London," were seized alongside many other "Dutch vessels."⁷⁸ While Imperial Russia could rationalize colonial capture of British ships and cargo as natural extensions of the war, the unwarranted seizure and

⁷⁴Bamford, *Forests, and French Sea Power*, 151-152.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, 153.

⁷⁶Jonathan R. Dull, *The French Navy and the Seven Year's War* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 249.

⁷⁷David M. Griffiths, "An American Contribution to the Armed Neutrality of 1780," *Russian Review* 30, no.2 (Apr., 1971): 165.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, and W. P. Cresson, *Francis Dana: A Puritan Diplomat at the Court of Catherine the Great* (New York: Lincoln Mac Veagh the Dial Press, 1930), 108.

threatening of its own merchant fleet and those of other neutral powers, which were laboring to deliver stores to them despite British threats, greatly alarmed Imperial Russia. The seizure of “two ships freighted with Russian grain” later that same year by Spain only served to compound Russia’s growing indignation at such belligerent maritime conduct.⁷⁹ Nevertheless, the colonies and France continued such operations and by the close of 1779 Imperial Russia was determined to put an end to such affronts, sending a squadron into the Baltic Sea to protect its “commerce and navigation effectually; and to expel from those parts all cruising vessels of any nation whatever without exception.”⁸⁰

Despite this obvious effort on the part of Imperial Russia to protect its trade, Great Britain nevertheless fired upon Dutch warships shortly after and seized their convoys sailing for the “Indies and Mediterranean” with Russian naval stores. Outraged by these actions Imperial Russia advised its squadrons “that if any English vessels attempt to stop a vessel carrying the Russian colors,” they were “to be treated as pirates.”⁸¹ It was clear Great Britain had created an “everlasting and dangerous thorn” in its relationship with Imperial Russia which invoked great concern throughout Great Britain that Russia might be even begin to work in “conjunction with her present enemy”

⁷⁹Geffcken, *The Armed Neutralities of 1780 and 1800*, 102.

⁸⁰London byline, *Pennsylvania Packet*, Nov. 27, 1779.

⁸¹*Ibid.*

in which case Great Britain would most likely “be invaded from the North and South.”⁸² Moreover, if Russia decided to cease trading with Great Britain as a result of such affronts, it realized its fleets would “perish for want of naval stores.”⁸³ Although Russia knew it held in its hand the ability to break Great Britain’s back should it refuse to trade with it, Russia also realized it could not afford to so daringly bite the hand which fed its income. Russia’s 1766 Commercial Treaty with Great Britain, however, provided the necessary political leverage to contest the commercial “limitations” impressed upon it as well as other neutral nations by Great Britain’s maritime policies, but within legal bounds that Great Britain itself had prior agreed to thereby ensuring continued profits from British trade.⁸⁴

Despite Great Britain’s efforts to downplay its dependence on Russian naval stores during the renewal process of its previous commercial treaty with Imperial Russia in 1766 by relaying that “the same articles” were “being imported from America,” Russia was well aware its stores were far superior in both quality and quantity, as was Great Britain.⁸⁵ Therefore, although Great Britain was reticent to incorporate Articles 10 and 11 into the renewed treaty because naval stores were blatantly excluded from the list of

⁸²Putnam, *Seven Britons in Imperial Russia*, 228, and London byline, Letter XI, Pennsylvania Packet, Oct. 19, 1779.

⁸³London byline, Letter XI, Pennsylvania Packet, Oct. 19, 1779.

⁸⁴Cresson, *Francis Dana*, 107.

⁸⁵London byline, Pennsylvania Gazette, Apr. 17, 1766.

contraband goods, which was seen as a potential way “for Russia to trade with Britain’s enemies” during war, Great Britain nevertheless agreed to ratify them in order maintain its hold on Russian naval stores.⁸⁶ Refusal to submit to the articles would have made Great Britain “vulnerable to the machinations of other nations” thereby leaving the “field wide open for its competitors” to initiate trade with Russia in its stead.⁸⁷ Moreover, since the cost of losing its coveted access to Russian naval stores would undoubtedly leave its “navy seriously weakened,” Great Britain bent its traditional policy stance in order to protect relations with Russia and by direct extension its own power.⁸⁸ By 1780, however, these articles outfitted Russia with the ability to dramatically undermine Great Britain’s naval superiority during the American Revolution and thus, their overall ability to attain victory due to Great Britain’s abject dependence on Russian naval stores.⁸⁹

On February 28, 1780 Russia submitted the Armed Neutrality Act to the Courts of London, Versailles, and Madrid boldly asserting that “neutral vessels may navigate freely...along the coasts of the nations at war,” except for those ports where “the attacking power has stationed its vessels sufficiently near and in such a way as to render

⁸⁶Kaplan, *Russian Overseas Commerce with Great Britain*, 39.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, 41.

⁸⁸Anderson, *Great Britain’s Discovery of Russia*, 126.

⁸⁹Cross, *Great Britain and Russia in the Eighteenth Century*, 150, and Griffiths, “An American Contribution to the Armed Neutrality of 1780,” 164-172.

access thereto clearly dangerous.”⁹⁰ This definition of a blockade clearly challenged Great Britain’s “declared” blockade which prohibited trade along whole sections of the coastline, regardless of whether they were capable of enforcing the blockade or not. Being well aware of the porous nature of British blockades, Russia had just granted all neutral powers the right to capitalize on these unguarded stretches to capitulate trade relations along North American and French shores.⁹¹ Even more detrimental to Great Britain’s war efforts was Russia’s submission that the definition of contraband was to be defined by what was “enumerated in the 10th and 11th articles” of Russia’s 1766 “treaty of commerce with Great Britain,” meaning naval stores were protected cargo.⁹² By establishing this definition, Russia had keenly enacted Great Britain’s own agreement to undermine its current monopoly of the seas. Although Russia would later tell British authorities that it intended for each neutral power to define contraband by their own individual treaties with Great Britain, it had conveniently failed to make that specification in the Act. Instead, having previously stated that the declaration’s principles were decrees which “every nation” was “entitled to rely” on and to which all belligerent powers could “not ignore,” Russia had implicitly argued that all powers should therefore be able to

⁹⁰“Declaration of the Empress of Russia Regarding the Principles of Armed Neutrality,” *The Armed Neutralities of 1780 and 1800*, 274.

⁹¹De Madariaga, *Britain, Russia, and the Armed Neutrality of 1780*, 14.

⁹²“Declaration of the Empress of Russia Regarding the Principles of Armed Neutrality,” *The Armed Neutralities of 1780 and 1800*, 274.

adopt all principles in the declaration, including its particular definition of contraband via Russia's 1766 treaty with Great Britain.⁹³

Realizing the impact such declarations would impose on belligerents, primarily Great Britain's ability to stop the much needed supply of critical naval supplies to the colonies and France, Russia warned in closing that a "considerable part of her maritime forces" were prepared to ensure these decrees were upheld, threatening to use force if provoked.⁹⁴ As such, Russia demanded that all belligerents were to "furnish their admiralties and commanding officers with instructions conformable" to these principles.⁹⁵ In effect, Russia masterfully exploited Great Britain's dependence on Russian naval stores to make sure it adhered to the Armed Neutrality Act, for should Great Britain disregard it, it knew full well Russia's commercial exports would likely be denied to it, yet Russia's ability to trade would largely remain untouched since both the colonies and France were equally as dependent on these exports from it. Contemporary colonials regarded Russia's Armed Neutrality Act as a definitive "stroke against England" from which it would not recover.⁹⁶

⁹³Ibid., 273.

⁹⁴Ibid., 274.

⁹⁵Ibid.

⁹⁶Leonard W. Labaree and J. Bell Whitefield, *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 32: 451.

Likewise encouraged by such proceedings, the Continental Congress immediately revised their “Instructions to the Captains and Commanders of Private Armed Vessels” on May 2, 1780, stating that all vessels were to “pay a sacred regard to the rights of neutral powers” and were under no “pretense” whatsoever to “take or seize any ship or vessels” assisting the colonies.⁹⁷ Moreover, they vowed to respect Russian “ships as the House of a Friend” and even dispatched, without an invitation, Francis Dana an American diplomat to the Court of Saint Petersburg, which clearly demonstrates just how favorable the Armed Neutrality Act of 1780 was deemed to be for Colonial America’s cause.⁹⁸ Consequently, colonials hoped that the Act would help awaken Great Britain “to a sense of her folly and infatuation, and recognize the independency of America and restore peace to Europe” since it could not likely attain victory against them now.⁹⁹ To Great Britain, on the other hand, Russia’s “infamous” Armed Neutrality Act dealt a considerable blow to their prestige.¹⁰⁰

Although Great Britain at first perceived the Act to be an empty threat given Russia’s modest maritime capabilities to enforce it, stating that “the lion is not hurtful when his teeth are drawn and his claws paired,” this soon changed as the “combined

⁹⁷United States, “Instructions to the Captains and Commanders of Private Armed Vessels which Shall Have Commissions or Letters of Marque or Reprisal” (May 2, 1780), *Documents from the Continental Congress and the Constitutional Convention 1774-1789* (Library of Congress 2000).

⁹⁸Labaree and Whitefield, *Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 476, and Cresson, *Francis Dana*, 148-9.

⁹⁹Boston byline, *American Journal*, Providence, Rhode Island Apr. 25, 1781.

¹⁰⁰London byline, *American Journal*, Providence, Rhode Island, Nov. 25, 1780.

fleets of Russia, Sweden, and Denmark...amounted to upwards of forty men of war which had put to sea” by the close of 1780.¹⁰¹ By July of 1781, their combined fleet had over “eighty-four ships of war in commission,” making it clear to all that Russia held “the whip” in hand.¹⁰² That same year the London Gazetteer printed a fiery piece questioning how Great Britain should respond to such injury as it was forced to see “a part of Russia’s fleet boldly anchoring in ports of a power which they mean to distress...not to mention the insolences of anchoring near British coasts while they are employed to convey stores to our enemies,” shall “we let them go forth to act against us; or shall we strike a sudden blow and show them and all the world, that we are not to be offended with impunity!” In closing, however, the writer solemnly concluded that Great Britain had “enemies enough to deal with already, without adding the northern powers to the number.”¹⁰³

By 1782, Portugal, the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, Austria, and Prussia had also joined the confederation. Although Dutch merchants were unable to join the confederation since Great Britain had timely declared war on them within days of the Declaration being sent out, fearing they might join, Dutch ships were nonetheless “transferred in large numbers to the Prussian or Austrian and Netherlands flags” which gave neutrals an even greater tonnage capacity to deliver stores to the colonies and

¹⁰¹Boston byline, Pennsylvania Evening Post, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, December 4, 1780.

¹⁰²William James, *The British Navy in Adversity; A Study of the American War of Independence* (Russell & Russell, 1970), 249.

¹⁰³London Gazetteer, September 21, 1781.

France under the protection of Russia's Armed Neutrality Act.¹⁰⁴ Despite Great Britain's refusal to make any formal commitment to the "League's interpretation of neutral rights," its "commerce raiding" nevertheless "declined markedly" with particular respect being granted to Imperial Russian vessels.¹⁰⁵ Furthermore, with Russian naval stores now effectively being transported to the colonies and France, Great Britain's ability to prosecute its maritime operations dramatically declined as well, prompting members of the confederation to "risk running the blockade" straight into American ports under the added protection of Russia's flag.¹⁰⁶

With naval stores now relatively able to be securely transported across open waters, Russian naval stores were exported in "great quantities" for the construction of ships to the colonies, France, and Great Britain.¹⁰⁷ In fact, by 1780, France and Spain had already been able to develop a "combined shipping tonnage approximately 25 percent greater than that of the Royal navy," which gravely contested British wartime efforts.¹⁰⁸

Thus, the Armed Neutrality Act of 1780 instrumentally affected the outcome of the

¹⁰⁴De Madariaga, *Russia in the Age of Catherine the Great*, 386, and de Madariaga, *Britain, Russia, and the Armed Neutrality Act of 1780*, 176.

¹⁰⁵H. A. Barton, "Sweden and the War of American Independence," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 23, no. 3 (Jul., 1966): 425.

¹⁰⁶Saul, *Distant Friends*, 13.

¹⁰⁷Nina N. Bashkina and Nikolai N. Bolkhovitinov, *The United States and Russia: The Beginnings of Relations 1765-1815*. (United States: Department of State, 1979), 54.

¹⁰⁸Stoker, Hagan, and McMaster, *Strategy in the American War of Independence: A Global Approach*, 76.

American Revolution since it not only effectively ensured the supply of much needed naval stores to the colonies and France, but also severely undermined Great Britain's ability to prosecute the war against them as a result. Hence Great Britain's control of the seas and therefore its ability to attain victory had been unremittingly undermined by the only power upon which it was dependent, Russia. Thus, by examining Imperial Russia's naval stores trade with Great Britain, France, and Colonial America, the powerful and often forgotten role Imperial Russia had in impacting the maritime development and naval prosecution of all three powers comes to life with Imperial Russia emerging as an integral member of the Atlantic community as well as an influential player in the American Revolution.

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