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The Theme of the Issue:

**RUSSIA IN THE ARCTIC:
THE HISTORY OF EXPLORATION AND DEVELOPMENT
(ON THE 200TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE BIRTH
OF MIKHAIL KONSTANTINOVICH SIDOROV)**

FROM THE EDITOR

As does any historical event become associated with a certain social group or a particular individual, so is the 19th century history of the Northern Sea Route, Russia's Arctic maritime highway, associated with Mikhail Konstantinovich Sidorov. He was a merchant, goldminer and industrialist, philanthropist, and sponsor of numerous projects in the High North of the Russian Empire, especially in the Siberian Arctic. As was typical of the age, he himself participated in a number of voyages around the Arctic and Siberia, at one point noting the immense untapped natural wealth of these lands. Moreover, M.K. Sidorov was a stunt publisher – not less, a public relations expert, who enthusiastically promoted the idea of developing the North for the benefit of Russia and her people. This earned him the sobriquet “custos” or “patriot” of the North. This year we mark the 200th anniversary of his birth. Up to this day, there is not a single serious study on the history of the Northern Sea Route and the Russian Arctic in the latter half of the 19th century that does not address M.K. Sidorov's activities and projects. This applies to both Russian and foreign works, despite the latter oftentimes being deprived of an extensive usage of Russian literature and primary sources due to the existing language barrier. This level of attention and established consensus amongst academics on the important role that M.K. Sidorov played is not surprising. There are few individuals in the entirety of Arctic history that can boast the same level of fostered enthusiasm for exploration and development in this region as could M.K. Sidorov. His interests covered an immense spectrum – from transportation projects and resource extraction to establishing a Russian military presence in the Barents and Kara seas. He also focused on a series of philanthropic projects such as establishing navigation and seamanship schools for the children of Siberian indigenous peoples and the Russian peasantry.

M.K. Sidorov did so many things that it is frustratingly impossible to give him a concrete assessment. When one first becomes acquainted with him through historical literature and his countless reports and publications, one cannot be helped but to experience a surge of emotions. If you are a Russian or have sympathy for that country, you are stunned by patriotic fervor and readily agree to all that M.K. Sidorov says. In comes a feeling of deep awe and devotion, and, as if 150 years have not passed, you begin grumbling about the incompetence and sluggishness of Russian officials – after all, it was they that opposed all of M.K. Sidorov's brilliant ideas. The imagination is flooded with images of foreigners bent on snatching the Arctic and, especially, the Northern Sea Route from the Russians just as it had been proved that navigation in the Kara Sea was possible. This explains why M.K. Sidorov and his line were popular even among Soviet Marxist historians, who despite viewing the pre-revolutionary Russian capitalist class as backward and unprogressive, exploited the case of M.K. Sidorov as an example of an even greater backwardness in the Russian Imperial government. Recently, there has been, however, a reassessment of M.K. Sidorov and his activities. His overemphasis on the harm of foreign involvement in northern projects, especially the commercial expeditions of British and German merchants, has been examined through the lens of conspiracy theories. However, M.K. Sidorov's viewpoint is certainly not baseless. For his generation had first handedly witnessed the takeover of Russian mercantile shipping by foreign companies, moreover the



Crimean War (1853–1856) resulted in many Russians seeing the British as enemies. However, there certainly was no conspiracy of foreign shippers and local Russian officials to ruin the newly established shipping in the Arctic.

Perhaps M.K. Sidorov's greatest quality was his ability to imagine. He not only envisaged the important role that the Arctic would play in the development of the country, he, and this would not be an overstatement, envisaged the entire idea of the Northern Sea Route. This would be his brainchild. Certainly, there were many other of his contemporaries that shared this idea, however, before M.K. Sidorov there was no such concept. It was entirely imagined by him. However, creative thinkers and visionaries are known to be poor executors of their own ideas. Such was M.K. Sidorov. This is another reason for scholars to be critical of him. A look at many of his projects surprises one by their amateurism and haphazardness. It is truly a paradox how a person with such insight and knowledge of the Arctic and Siberia could make such incompetent proposals. On one occasion, M.K. Sidorov suggests chartering the SS Great Eastern to deliver cargoes to and from the Baydaratskaya Bay of the Kara Sea (!); as it turns, the reason for this was his sudden loss of interest in the entire Kara Sea scheme that he had been working on for almost two decades. Thus, instead of taking ships directly to the mouths of the rivers Ob' and Yenisey, he proposes to dig a network of canals in the Arctic and build a haven in the mentioned bay. Likewise, on more than one occasion M.K. Sidorov abandoned earlier projects, some of which, like the Kara Sea route, had already begun functioning.

With all this said, M.K. Sidorov deserves a special memento in the form of a biography – a proposal I would address to the community of polar historians. It certainly would be beneficial if this book is published in both Russian and English. As for now, the Institute of History of the Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences and Institute of Economics and Industrial Engineering of the Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences in Novosibirsk conducted a conference dedicated to the great man in commemoration of his 200th anniversary. The reports presented at this conference have been included into this volume of the Historical Courier journal. The papers, contributed by both Russian and foreign historians cover a wide range of topics, spanning, akin to M.K. Sidorov himself, from the merchant's biography and his projects and expeditions to his legacy in future Arctic projects, including those of the Soviet era.

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