Potemkin's Brilliants: A Note on Russia's Role in the Early Modern Diamond Trade

George E. Munro
Virginia Commonwealth University
gmunro@vcu.edu

Abstract:
Prince Grigorii Aleksandrovich Potemkin's love of diamonds is well established. This article discusses several episodes in his life involving those gems, exploring their sources from discovery in the earth (India and Brazil) to their coming into the prince's possession, and also references two other cases of consequential diamond loving in eighteenth-century Europe. Diamonds could represent much more than simply expensive embellishments.

Keywords:
Prince Grigorii Potemkin, Empress Catherine II, Tauride Palace, Count Grigorii Orlov, diamonds, Ivan Lazarevich Lazarev, Henry Hope, Richard Sutherland, Count Heinrich von Brühl, the Diamond Necklace Affair, Alessandro Cagliostro, Queen Marie Antoinette

On April 28, 1791 (O. S.; May 9 N. S.) one of eighteenth-century Europe's most lavish celebratory evenings took place in St. Petersburg, Russia, in the newly erected classical Tauride Palace near the city's eastern limit.[1] The reason for the celebration was to revel in the recent capture of the Ottoman Turkish fortress of Izmail by Russian troops under the immediate command of General Alexander Vasil'evich Suvorov.[2] According to protocol, the guest of honor at the 1791 celebration was the crowned head of the empire of all the Russias, Catherine II Alekseevna. But the organizer and principal honoree of the fête was the man after whom it—The Tauride Palace—was named: the empress's one-time lover and closest advisor, vicegerent of New Russia and overall commander of Russian troops fighting the Turks, His Serenissimus Grigorii Aleksandrovich Potemkin, Prince of Tauris.[3]

[1] One of the more detailed eyewitness accounts comes from Count Curt Stedingk, the Swedish ambassador to Russia at the time, who commented particularly on the lavish decorations for the evening. Curt Bogislaus Christophe, Comte de Stedingk, *Un Ambassadeur de Suède à la cour de Catherine II; feld-maréchal Comte de Stedingk; choix de dépêches diplomatique, rapports secrets et lettres particulières de 1790 à 1796.* Ed. Comtesse de Brevern de la Gardie (Stockholm: Norstedt, 1919).

[2] See Andrei Zorin, "Eden in the Tauride Palace: Potemkin's Last Project," in *By Fables Alone: Literature and State Ideology in Late Eighteenth- and Early Nineteenth-Century Russia*, trans. Marcus C. Levitt, Nicole Monnier, and Daniel Schlafly (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2014), 121-154; Alisa Gayle Mayor, "Death of a General: Visions of G. A. Potemkin's Might and Frailty in G. R. Derzhavin's 'Opisanie prazdnika v Tavricheskom dvortse' i 'Vodopad,'" *New Zealand Slavonic Journal* (1998): 21-33. For an examination of this spectacle, see Richard S. Wortman, *Scenarios of Power: Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy*, vol. 1, *From Peter the Great to the Death of Nicholas I* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 143-146. Potemkin himself asked the poet Gavriil Derzhavin to pen a description of the evening, resulting in one of the most comprehensive eye-witness accounts. See Gavriil Romanovich Derzhavin, "Opisaniia torzhestva v dome kniazia Potemkina po sluchaiu vsiatiia Izmaila," in *Sochineniia*, ed. Ia. Grot, vol. 1 (St. Petersburg: Imperatorskaia Akademiia nauk, 1864), 264-284.

[3] For the most comprehensive English-language biography of Potemkin, see Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Prince of Princes: The Life of Potemkin* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2001). Also see, George Soloveytchik, *Potemkin: Soldier, Statesman, Lover and Consort of Catherine of Russia* (New York: W. W. Dutton, 1947).

The event, two months in the planning, had been well-advertised throughout the city by broadsides affixed to lamp posts and announcement boards, ensuring that a crowd of thousands of the uninvited middling and simple folk would be gathered in front of the newly completed palace as the guests—particularly the empress—arrived. The broadsides further informed the populace that as usual free gifts of prepared and semi-prepared foods (up to hams and sides of beef), beverages including bottles of wine, and other remembrances would be distributed upon the empress's arrival. One of the most stunning pieces of swag reportedly given out to the lucky party goers that evening was diamonds (*diamont*). Diamonds in eighteenth-century Russia comprised two sorts: uncut (*almazy*) and faceted (*brillianty*). The distinction is important because faceting—cutting—a stone added significantly to its value.[4] According to eye-witness reports, each guest upon entering the palace was invited to ladle out into his or her purse a teaspoonful of uncut diamonds (*almazy*) from a sterling silver punchbowl standing on a small table near the front entry.

Almaz party favors were but a small part of the program Potemkin had prepared for the empress that evening. There were ballets. There was singing and dancing. There were fireworks. But such largesse was typical of Potemkin. Whether in fact diamonds actually were distributed with such profligacy among the guests is not the point. The story was fully credible to people who knew Potemkin. But the gesture raises a couple of questions that have been nagging at me ever since I first heard a verbal recounting of this story (years earlier I had read of it in "eyewitness" accounts) while on an informal tour of the Tauride Palace led by the building's chief curator in the early 1990s, while the building was in the process of being transitioned from a property of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union to something else.

The first and most obvious question is where did all those gemstones come from? Russia today is a major supplier of the world diamond industry, since the opening of the open-pit Mirnyi mine near Iakutsk in Siberia at the start of the 1960s, and a discovery in 2019 confirmed that Russia has a far greater supply of unmined diamonds than any other country in the world. But as far as I know, only one diamond had been found in Siberia (or anywhere in Russia for that matter) prior to 1791. That was in 1734. The gem quickly made its way to St. Petersburg to the bijouterie collection of Anna Ioannovna, the empress at the time. The second question is, why diamonds? What deeper meaning might the use specifically of uncut and unpolished diamonds have for eighteenth-century Russian audiences, like the lucky guests who attended Potemkin's celebration of the conquest of Izmail?

Imperial Russia's Place in the Global Diamond Trade

[4] For example, the more than four thousand diamond stones in the diadem fashioned to crown Catherine II at her coronation in Moscow in September 1762 (only 2,500, according to Richard Wortman), were *brilliants,* along with 75 large pearls and 5012 other precious gems. See Wortman, *Scenarios of Power*, vol. 1, 115. A. E. Fersman states that the Imperial Crown worn by Catherine II in 1762 was adorned with 4963 stones (2858 carats in all). See A. E. Fersman, *Russia's Treasure of Diamonds and Precious Stones*, part I (Moscow: The People's Commissariat of Finances, 1925), 25. In his memoirs, the diamond jeweler Jérémie Pauzié (1716-1779), who worked on the imperial crown, describes this opulent artifact. See Jérémie Pauzié, "Zapiski pridvornogo bril'iantshchika Poz'e," ed. & trans. A. A. Kunik *Russkaia starina* 1 (1870), 112-115. Not coincidentally, Catherine gave the name *Brilliante* to one of her favorite horses, the one she is depicted riding in Vigilius Eriksen's portrait of her in the uniform of the Preobrazhenskii guards' regiment. For a discussion of this painting, entitled *Catherine Astride Brilliante* (1762), which still hangs in Peterhof Palace near St. Petersburg, see Erin McBurney, "Art and Power in the Reign of Catherine the Great: The State Portraits" (PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 2014), 27-28.

Diamonds have long been valued for three qualities: their hardness, their sparkle, and their rarity. They have been associated in popular lore with ancient Egyptians, Hebrews, and Greeks, although most likely because of mistranslations of terms referring to some other precious stones. A few artifacts have been found from the days of the Roman Empire that make it clear that by then a small number of uncut and unpolished stones were used in jewelry. The Romans established trade connections with the Indian subcontinent, the only place where diamonds were found in nature at that time and for centuries afterward. With the collapse of the Roman Empire and its associated trade networks extending into Asia, new diamonds disappeared from Europe until no earlier than the fourteenth century, when Venetians reestablished commercial contacts. Diamonds were rare, which contributed mightily to their value. Only royalty and the wealthiest nobility could afford them. Even at that, Europeans did not see the stones of the best quality, which India kept for itself.

India may have known the art of polishing stones from earlier centuries, but the art was not developed in Europe until the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Only another diamond can cut a diamond and only diamond dust can polish a diamond. The art of cleaving diamonds was developed by the sixteenth century in Florence and other Italian cities and two or three shapings emerged as the most popular, particularly the "Rose" and "Baguette." After the Renaissance, when northwestern Europe replaced Italy as the center of wealth on the continent, the diamond-cutting trade shifted to such cities as Antwerp, Bruges, and Paris. As in Italy, the diamond-cutting skill was generally excluded from craft guilds, which among other things opened it to Jews, who were being or had been driven out of the Iberian Peninsula, generally resettling in northwestern European cities. As the diamond cutting profession developed, Jews, first Sephardim and later Ashkenazim as well, slowly began to predominate, in no small measure because of their family contacts in numerous cities. This at least was the pattern in western Europe. The supply of diamond stones from India was from the early seventeenth century principally in the hands of the Portuguese operating from Goa on India's west coast. Starting somewhat later, England's East Indies Company, operating from Fort St. George (Madras, modern-day Chennai) on the east coast, dominated the trade from the later seventeenth century.

Diamonds came into greater prominence in Europe in the eighteenth century than ever before. That was a result in part of European penetration starting in the seventeenth century into those places in India were diamonds were found. The French, English, and Portuguese were the principal imperial powers involved. The Portuguese also discovered diamonds in Brazil in the eighteenth century. Imperial Russia, on the other hand, had contacts with other players in the global diamond business. From at least the early eighteenth-century Armenian merchants based in Persia traded in Russia in products from India. The principal goods were textiles, but jewelry was also included in the types of goods offered. Precious and semiprecious stones were small and easy to smuggle if there were laws against trading in them. A small leather bag containing gem stones, easily hidden, could potentially bring enough profit to sustain a merchant for several years. Indian merchants dealing in precious stones had an interest in controlling supply and thereby keeping prices high, but there is no way of knowing how much illegal trade existed. It must have been considerable, judging from the difficulty of tracing the origins of many of the gems that ended up in Russia.

The Orlov Diamond

One particular stolen stone can be traced, although it did not come to Russia directly from India. Its provenance may in some measure have helped nurture Prince Potemkin's captivation by *almazy* and *brillianty*. Known as the "Orlov diamond," it is now part of the imperial scepter of the Romanovs and housed in the diamond fund of the Kremlin armory (*Oruzheinaia palata*) in Moscow. The stone (although partially faceted [180 facets] is termed an *almaz* in Russia, not a *brilliant*), which was apparently initially only a portion of an even larger stone, can be likened in size and shape to a half-sized chicken egg. In its present form it is just under two hundred carats in weight. It was mined sometime early in the seventeenth century in the Golconda sultanate, the richest site of diamonds on the subcontinent. Early in the second half of the century it came into the possession of the Moghul rulers of Northern India, passing into the ownership of Kadishah Aurangzeb, after, he overthrew his father Jahan I (the builder of the Taj Mahal), in 1658. The first description of the stone comes to us from Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, a French jeweler who traveled five or six times to India in search of gems to buy.[5] He was given permission in 1665 to look at and describe the royal jewels. Following Aurangzeb's death in 1707, the Moghul state quickly lapsed into weakness. In 1738 it was overrun by Persia's Nadir-Shah and Delhi's finest treasures removed to Persia, the diamond presumably among them. It then disappeared from view for a short period of time. More than likely it was stolen during the several palace coups around the time of the murder of Nadir Shah in 1748 and repurposed.

The fate of the diamond over the next few years is more the stuff of legend than history. Another Frenchman, Louis Dutens, garbled what happened next to the gem in a book published in 1776, reprinted with additions in 1780.[6] That version was corrected by the nineteenth-century English geographer Edward Streeter.[7] In the complex of Sri Ranganathaswamy temple at Srirangam in southern India (Tamil Nadu) the diamond was twinned with another as the two eyes of an image of the deity Maha Vishnu. In the early 1750s, so goes the legend, a grenadier deserter from a French military detachment contesting influence and power with the British, learned of two priceless diamonds serving as eyes of the statue. Christians were not allowed into the innermost parts of the temple complex, so the Frenchman assumed the identity of a Brahmin and in time was granted access as a night watchman. Availing himself of the opportunity, the disguised grenadier gouged out the one eye and fled, finding refuge with a British army unit not far away. He is supposed to have made his way to Madras (Chennai), where he sold the gem to a British sea captain. After arriving in London, the captain resold it to Khojeh Raphael, a Jewish merchant from Persia, who took it to Amsterdam. Russian-language sources say it was then sold to the Armenian-Persian merchant Grigorii Shafras in 1768, who placed it in an Amsterdam bank.[8] Five years later, he sold it to his wife's nephew, the Armenian-Persian gem merchant and

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[5] Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, *Nouvelle relation de l'interieur du Serrail du grand seigneur. Contenant plusieurs singularitez qui jusqu'icy n'ont point esté mises en lumiere* (Paris: Chez Olivier de Varennes, 1675).

[6] Louis Dutens, born into a Huguenot family in the southwest of France, began his career in England. Returning to France he was posted to the duchy of Savoy (Turin) as a diplomat. A prolific writer, he later was the first translator into French of Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. His book, referring to what became known later as the Orlov diamond, was *Des pierres précieuses et des pierres fines, avec les moyens de les connaître et de les évaluer* (Paris: F. A. Didot & Du Bure, 1776).

[7] Edwin W. Streeter, *The Great Diamonds of the World: Their History and Romance* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1882): 103-115.

[8] Stefano Papi, "The Romanov Diamonds: History of Splendour," in *Diamonds across Time*, ed. Usha R. Balakrishnan (London: The World Diamond Museum, 2020), 259, 263.

court jeweler Ovanes Egiazarian (known as Ivan Lazarev in Russian), who almost immediately resold it to Grigorii Orlov for 400,000 rubles, payable over seven years. The latter, who had fallen from favor with Catherine II in 1772, hoped with the diamond (according to this version of the story) to win back the heart of the empress. Another interpretation says Catherine herself was the actual buyer, using Orlov as middleman to make the purchase on her behalf. In any event, Orlov presented the gem, thenceforward to be connected with his name, to Catherine on her name day, November 24/December 5, 1773. Rather than adorning herself with the huge gemstone, Catherine had it incorporated the following year into a newly devised scepter as symbol of imperial power. Orlov did not regain favor. The scepter was used in the coronation of Emperor Paul in 1797 and in all subsequent coronations.

Alexander Vasilchikov replaced Orlov as official favorite, but earlier in 1773, Grigorii Potemkin had returned to St. Petersburg briefly as a well-decorated war hero. He was back in the field with his army shortly thereafter, but near the end of the year Catherine invited him to come more permanently to the capital. He arrived at the end of 1773 or the very beginning of 1774, just after Grigorii Orlov's last effort to regain favor was played out. Potemkin had to be well aware of the reasons Catherine had invited his return, but initially he played coy, largely retreating into a semi-monastic existence in the monastery of St. Alexander Nevskii. By February he and Catherine were lovers, and by April he had unseated Vasilchikov as official favorite. Catherine told him in a letter written on March 1, 1774, that she would let him into the Diamond Hall that afternoon, the room adjacent to her apartments in the Winter Palace where the imperial jewels were housed.[9] Did this probable first visit awaken in him a deeper desire to have his own collection of those precious stones? Or, given his known spirit of generosity, did it open to him another possible route for impressing people with his largesse, should he be able to acquire a suitably large number of stones on his own?

Potemkin's bad relations with the Orlov clan were well known. One explanation for the loss of sight in one of his eyes is that it was gouged out in an earlier fight with Aleksei Orlov. If Grigorii Orlov had made in 1773 such an extravagant gift of a huge diamond to the empress (it is the third largest faceted diamond in Europe), what might the open-handed and generous Potemkin do? One of Potemkin's potential contacts for acquiring diamonds was the same Ivan Lazarev who had peddled the Orlov diamond.[10] Born in the Armenian quarter of Isfahan in 1735, Lazarev moved to St. Petersburg as a young adult, quickly cultivating powerful persons. Through Orlov's influence he was named court jeweler in 1764. Lazarev gained permission from Catherine II to build an Armenian orthodox church on Nevskii Prospect, for which purpose Lazarev hired the architect Iuri Felten (Georg Veldten). The Armenian church of St. Catherine to this day graces Nevskii 40, having been returned to the Armenian church after the end of the Soviet Union. Lazarev also built the Raising of the Cross church in Moscow. He purchased the suburban estate of Ropsha from Admiral Ivan Chernyshev for 12,000 rubles and remodeled the palace (hated by Catherine) which had been the favorite of Peter III and where that unhappy emperor's life came to an end. When the Orlovs passed out of favor in the 1770s, Lazarev strengthened his attachments with other magnates. He paid a considerable sum to win a place for his son on Potemkin's staff and also curried favor with Alexander Viazemskii, Alexander Bezborodko, and

[9] Douglas Smith, ed. and trans., *Love & Conquest: Personal Correspondence of Catherine the Great and Prince Grigory Potemkin* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2004), 21.

[10] "Ivan Lazarevich Lazarev," *Russkii biograficheskii slovar'*, vol. 10 (St. Petersburg: Imperatorskoe russkoe istoricheskoe obshchestvo, 1914), 36

the Vorontsovs. He was one of the wealthiest individuals in Russia, and with his contacts reaching into the Armenian merchant community in India, a likely source for at least some of the gem stones that came into Potemkin's hands.

Potemkin's Diamonds

There is another large stone that for a time was known as the "Potemkin Diamond," although since the 1850s it has been associated with Empress Eugenie of France, the wife of Louis Napoleon III. It originated not in India but in Brazil. Diamonds began to be found in abundance around 1730 in Bahia district. Thirty years later this stone was mined in the Minas-Gerais [general mines] district north of Rio de Janeiro. The roughly shaped diamond, weighing just under a hundred carats before cutting, was quickly shipped to Lisbon and from there to Amsterdam. The exact details of its provenance are disputed, but after cutting it weighed fifty-one carats and had a light blue tint. Catherine II purchased it. Rather than having it set, she wore it in her hair as an adornment. It appears in more than one of her portraits and seems to have been a favorite jewel.[11] Following the annexation of the Crimean khanate in 1783, Catherine bestowed the gem on Grigorii Potemkin as one of many gifts recognizing his role in that imperial acquisition. Prior to the French Revolution many men high in European society dressed more flamboyantly than thereafter, none more than Potemkin. As Catherine had worn the diamond in her hair, so Potemkin used it variously to adorn hats and capes. It very likely was one of the gems in his hat at the great evening fest in April 1791 in the Tauride Palace.[12]

Potemkin also purchased diamonds in quantity from western European sources. Sebag Montefiore in his biography of Potemkin references a bill he calls "typical" from a French jeweler named Duval in 1784 that included two diamonds of 5.3/8 carats for 600 rubles, ten diamonds of 20 carats for 2200 rubles, thirteen diamonds of 14.5 carats for 912 rubles and another twenty-eight diamonds of 14.5 carats for 725 rubles.[13] A bill from the banker Pierre Tepper in Warsaw in 1788 included among other things two gold snuff boxes engraved with diamonds, a clock encrusted with diamonds, and a faceted diamond "souvenir." Potemkin bestowed all kinds of diamonds on his nieces; when the French artist Vigée Lebrun met one of them in Naples, she wrote that her jewelry box "was the richest she had ever seen."[14] The French ambassador to Russia, Louis-Philippe, Comte de Ségur, once visited Potemkin at home and found him dressed in "a gorgeous suit in which every seam was embroidered with diamonds."[15] Potemkin also kept a large assortment of diamonds with him wherever he was, holding them in a small box dedicated to that purpose.[16] When he was not wearing them, he reportedly enjoyed looking at them, or

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[11] The most specific information about the diamond's origin and early provenance can be found in Esmeraldino Reis, "Os grandes diamantes Brasileiros," *Boletin* No. 191 (Rio de Janeiro: Ministerio da Agricultura, Departamento Nacional da Produção Mineral, Divisão de Geologia e Mineralogia, 1959), 33.

[12] Much of the information in this and the preceding paragraph, as well as subsequent discussion of this diamond, is drawn from "Almaz Potemkin i brilliant Imperatritsy Evgeniia," *Russian Interest*, June 4, 2024, https://russianinterest.ru/content/almaz-potemkin-i-brilliant-imperatricy-evgenii.

[13] Montefiore, *Prince of Princes*, 337. His source was an unpublished letter from C. D. Duval to Potemkin housed in the Russian State Archive of Ancient Acts (RGADA), fond 11, opis' 1, ed. khr. 946.

[14] Montefiore, *Prince of Princes*, 337.

[15] Montefiore, *Prince of Princes*, 338.

[16] Jean-Henri Castéra, *The Life of Catharine II, Empress of Russia. With Eleven Elegant Portraits*, 4th ed., vol. 2 (London: A. Strahan, for T. N. Longman and O. Rees, 1800), 304.

actually playing with them. It was said that he could sit for hours sifting the stones through his fingers, from hand to hand, or arranging them on a board in various patterns together with other gems from his private collection. It seems to have helped clear his mind to admire and play with his gemstones, and perhaps also helped him work out tactical solutions to problems of governance, administration, and military command, if not of the heart.

Shortly following the grand party in April 1791, Catherine sent Potemkin back to his army command in the south, denying him his request to remain at her side in the capital city. While on route, Potemkin fell ill in early October and died in a small copse by the side of the road. His collection of diamonds and other bijouterie fell by inheritance to his favorite niece, Alexandra Engelhardt Branicki, who, among other episodes in her life, had been his mistress in earlier years. After her death. the so-called Potemkin diamond passed to her daughter, Ekaterina Bagration, who had been the ill-suited wife of the famous general mortally wounded at the battle of Borodino. Late in her life, perhaps as her spendthrift ways were catching up with her, Bagration sold the Potemkin diamond to Emperor Napoleon III of France, who sought it as a gift for his bride, Empress Eugénie, for whom the diamond has since been named. After losing the Franco-Prussian War and being forced into exile, Napoleon III and his family found themselves short on resources. The former empress offered the diamond for sale at Christies, where it was purchased by the Gaekwad of Baroda, India, Malhar Rao. The diamond remained in that family's hands for more than a century but apparently has changed ownership recently and is now held by a wealthy and anonymous Russian buyer.

Potemkin had other sources of the precious stones as well. His personal banker for international matters starting in the early 1780s was Richard Sutherland. Born in Russia, Sutherland was the son of a Scottish shipwright who entered Russian service during the reign of Anna Ioannovna, first in Arkhangel'sk and then in St. Petersburg. Of the elder Sutherland's children, Richard stayed in Russia to make a career as a commodities merchant, while Alexander Hendras Sutherland relocated to London in the same line of work. Through Potemkin's influence Catherine II named Richard Sutherland court banker in 1785, which meant he was to handle all government contracts abroad, military and civilian.

Among the principal correspondent banks utilized by Sutherland was Hope and Company of Amsterdam, run at the time in the main by Henry Hope.[17] Following a financial crisis in 1762-1763 in the Netherlands associated with the end of the Seven Years' War, London merchant bankers had replaced most of the Amsterdam commercial banks as the world's leading institutions of the type. Several of the largest firms in Amsterdam collapsed entirely. The largest remaining firms were those of Hope and Company and Muilman Brothers. Trying to expand the firm's activities, Hope and Company attempted in 1775 to gain the concession from the Portuguese government for supplying Brazilian diamonds to Europe but failed. The company however did maintain a substantial business in diamonds passed from London, to which they arrived from both India and Brazil, to Amsterdam, generally through the London firm of

[17] Henry Hope was born in 1735 in Boston to one of three brothers from Rotterdam. His father emigrated to Massachusetts early in life. In the meantime, the other two brothers moved their merchant house to Amsterdam. When Henry reached thirteen years, his father purposed to send him to England for "finishing." In London he was apprenticed to the firm Gurnell, Hoare, Harman & Co from 1752-1760, a firm that did considerable business with Portugal and Russia. On his uncles' invitation, he left London for Amsterdam in 1762, remaining there permanently and eventually running the family business. See Marten G. Buist, *At spes non fracta: Hope & Co. 1770-1815: Merchant Bankers and Diplomats at Work* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974).

Gompertz.[18] From the mid-1770s Hope and Company became more and more involved in the diamond trade. For fifteen years until the early 1790s, Hope and Company served as Gompertz's diamond agent in Amsterdam.[19] It could be noted that the relationship seems to have come to an end around the time of Potemkin's death.

Hope was the principal *negociant* in Western Europe used by Russia's court banker, Richard Sutherland, to handle international financial transactions for the empire. In addition, when it became necessary to borrow money abroad to finance Catherine's second war with Turkey and, a few years later, the second partition of Poland, it was Hope that generated the loans.[20] Indeed, Hope and Company lent money to most of the crowned heads of Europe, including Gustavus III of Sweden, Frederick William II of Prussia, Stanislas Augustus of Poland, Joseph II and Leopold II of Austria, Pedro III and Joao VI of Portugal, as well as Catherine II of Russia. For that matter, after the turn of the century it was Henry Hope (the firm then called Baring and Hope following the merger of Hope and Company with Baring Brothers & Co, to form the world's largest financial institution) who financed the Louisiana Purchase by the young United States of America, the largest-ever sale of land.[21]

By far the vast majority of the quotidian business Hope and Company engaged in with Russia had to do with naval stores and commodities: sailcloth, deals, textiles (ravenducks, drills, fleems), hay, seeds, flowers, bushes, trees, masts and spars, and bills of exchange. Thus, it was more than a little out of the ordinary to read in a letter of May 22, 1789, from Hope and Company to Richard Sutherland, court banker:

> We make note of your order at Prince Potemkin's desire for a Rose colour'd diamond say Brilliant of the best quality not to exceed twelve carats in weight, well stretched, not thick and, if not to be got of that weight, then from 12 to 6 carats, and if no Rose colour is to be had (which we much fear will be the case) then any other but white. We shall try the market between this & next post, & then inform you if we have any hope of being able to execute the order.[22]

In the following letter to Sutherland, dated May 26, Hope provided some inside information about diamonds. He wrote that his broker, whom he termed the preeminent in that trade, had assured him that no rose-colored diamond existed anywhere in the world above four, five, six, or seven grains, and those, if perfect, would be worth four times the value of the finest white diamond of the same size. Yellow or yellowish diamonds and green or greenish ones were not

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[18] Background information is drawn from Gedalia Yogev, *Diamonds and Coral: Anglo-Dutch Jews and Eighteenth-Century Trade* (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., 1978).

[19] Yogev, *Diamonds and Coral*, n. 10, 323-324.

[20] On the financing of the second partition, see George E. Munro, "Paying for Poland's Partitions," *Journal of Baltic Studies* 20:4 (Winter 1989): 327-336.

[21] Herbert H, Kaplan, "Commerce, Consumption, and Culture: Hope & Co. and Baring Brothers & Co. and Russia," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* CXLII, 2 (June 1998): 262-282.

[22] Russkii gosudarstvennyi istoricheskii arkhiv (hereafter RGIA), fond 602, opis' 1, delo 152, list 84 ob. Incidentally, the next paragraph in the letter conveyed Hope's delight that a portrait of Catherine II painted for him (attributed to Alexander Roslin, although I strongly doubt the attribution) was finished and would be conveyed to Amsterdam with the next ship. That portrait now hangs in Hillwood Estate, Museum and Gardens in Washington, D.C., apparently having been purchased by Marjorie Merriweather Post in the 1930s from a second-hand art shop in the Netherlands.

that rare, but a perfect color of any size was extremely rare. Diamonds that had a deep cast of any color were helped by the foil on which they were set. Hope thought that there might be one or two in Amsterdam that he could send to Sutherland with the option to be returned if not found suitable. Meanwhile Hope noted that he was in possession, on commission, of "the finest white Brilliant and the most perfect in water, shape & proportions that can exist," weighing only seventy-two grains (eighteen carats). He thought it could be had for 55,000 Dutch guilders, although the owner was insisting on 60,000 and had refused an offer of 50,000. A faceted diamond of that size and quality could only be placed on an extraordinary occasion and if sought for. He did not think there was an equivalent stone anywhere. It was of a beautiful oval form, finely spread, and no thicker than was necessary to give it all the fire a diamond could contain.[23]

On May 29, Hope's subsequent letter informed Sutherland that he had sent that same day, under separate cover, a very fine yellow or straw-colored "Brilliant," perfect and well spread, weighing thirty-eight grains or nine and a half Carats. It was bought on option for 6000 guilders and together with insurance billed at 6153 guilders and 1 stuiver. Payment was to follow if the diamond was suitable. Otherwise, the owner would take it back at a cost of one hundred guilders, to which Hope would add the premium and insurance to St. Petersburg and back. Hope added that he did not anticipate a refusal, as the diamond was extremely inexpensive and had originally been sold for near twice the price offered to Sutherland.[24]

The negotiation dragged on well into the summer. More than a month later a letter of July 7 refers to a different "Brilliant," one of 18 carats, which Sutherland had informed Hope he would have little expectation of selling. It is unclear whether Potemkin might have been the buyer Hope had in mind. Three days after that Hope wrote:

> We are glad to see the straw-coloured Brilliant had got safe to your hands—that you had noted the price & conditions--& sent it to Prince Potemkin & that you expected in three weeks to learn if he will accept it or not. We shall await his determination, meanwhile we are obligated to you for mentioning the weight of the diamond presented to that Prince by Her Imperial Majesty.[25]

The next mention of the "Brilliant" comes in Hope's letter of August 14 regarding "your debit F6153.1—amount of a Brilliant sent you the 29th May last, & for which we shall credit you in New Account if it be returned within the stipulated time, but we flatter ourselves it will be approved by Prince Potemkin, & the Cost remain at your debit." The terms Hope had set when the diamond was consigned were that Prince Potemkin would decide within a period of three weeks whether he wanted to purchase it. Given eighteenth-century sailing times, seventeen days was the maximum to be expected for a voyage from Amsterdam to St. Petersburg, which means the diamond would have arrived no later than the middle of June. Six weeks from then would fall at the end of July. Had Sutherland transmitted Potemkin's response in late July, Hope should have received it by August 14, the date when the above reminder was inserted into a letter. Prince

[23] RGIA, f. 602, op. 1, d. 152, ll. 86-86 ob. Hope's diamond broker was Ruben Keyser, who was used by all non-Jewish houses in Amsterdam engaged in the diamond business. Yogev, *Diamonds and Coral*: 324, n. 10. A ruble at the time contained 18 grams of silver and a guilder 9.67 grams, so prices in rubles were almost twice those in guilders.
[24] RGIA, f. 602, op. 1, d. 152, ll. 87 ob.-88.
[25] RGIA, f. 602, op. 1, d. 152, l. 107 ob.

Potemkin apparently was not responding to the terms set in Hope's consignment of the "Brilliant."

One final plaint was to issue from the Amsterdam firm in a letter of September 25: "We beg to know Prince Potemkin's determination the soonest possible about the Brilliant, as the Seller is very impatient either for payment, or its restoration with the stipulated indemnification."[26] That was the statement in the formal business letter from the firm. In an enclosed private response from Henry Hope himself directly to Richard Sutherland we read: "Prince Potemkin's Brilliant is paid for. It is usual to pay for such objects or to send them back by return of post. We got a fortnight, nay three weeks grace, & not being then returned we were obliged to pay for it, & of course it remains at your debit."[27]

The last reminder regarding payment came in Hope's next letter, of September 29: "We reminded you that Prince Potemkin's Brilliant was long ago paid for, & remained at your debit."[28] Grigorii Potemkin had a reputation among his creditors within Russia of not consistently paying his debts. In this case he seems to have stiffed a major overseas creditor as well. He was by no means alone among Russian magnates in the eighteenth century for purchasing jewels on credit and never paying the bill.[29] But what use did Potemkin intend to make of the "Brilliant"? What was its fate? It is unlikely he intended to make a gift of it to the empress to compete with the diamond Orlov had gifted her sixteen years earlier. Despite its rarity, this gemstone was simply too small and too insignificant to be assigned such a role. Did he intend to bestow it on another woman (perhaps one of his Engelhardt nieces) as part of a setting? Or did he intend to wear it himself? The straw-colored stone was too large to decorate a snuffbox (*tabakerka*), however fashionable and widely used that item was at the time as a small sign of favor. I have looked for a Brilliant of similar description in the Diamond Room of the State Hermitage Museum and may have found it as the principal stone in a setting, although that stone cannot be authenticated as to provenance.

Conclusion

Diamonds had an appeal, nay, a fascination not only because of their relative rarity and because they represented a concentration of immense wealth in one tiny object, but also because of their appearance. Look into them and they are bottomless. Brandished as decorations on sword hilts, hats, capes, bodices or doublets, and hair styling, not to mention as jewelry, they dazzled onlookers, especially when faceted from *almazy* to *brillianty*. Potemkin was not alone in his quest to acquire them, and the more exotic the better.

Of all the men in Europe who in the eighteenth century insinuated themselves onto the highest rungs of influence and even power, the one whose career most closely resembled that of

[26] RGIA, f. 602, op. 1, d. 152, l. 149 ob.
[27] RGIA, f. 602, op. 1, d. 152, l. 150.
[28] RGIA, f. 602, op. 1, d. 152, l. 151.
[29] Jérémie Pauzié complained in his memoirs of the many times he had failed to elicit payment for work he had done on credit for over-extended figures at court. See Pauzié, "Zapiski pridvornago bril'iantshchika," 41-127. In his memoirs, which were penned following his return home to Switzerland after thirty-five years in Russia, Pauzié also confessed to having frequently purchased smuggled gemstones, especially rubies and sapphires, brought to Russia with the caravans from China and profiting enormously thereby. It was Pauzié whom Lazarev replaced as court jeweler.

Grigorii Potemkin was Count Heinrich von Brühl, chief minister a few decades earlier to the duke of Saxony and king of Poland-Lithuania Augustus III.[30] Rising through the financial branches of administration, von Brühl eventually controlled the purse strings and more in both states. More than Potemkin, he was also a connoisseur of art, amassing a collection of some six hundred paintings that, incidentally, Catherine II purchased after his death, the beginnings of the great Hermitage collection. Whereas Potemkin counted on merchants and Russian diplomats to procure his art, von Brühl's agents in Italy included none other than Anton Raphael Mengs and Johan Joachim Winckelmann. Von Brühl also fancied diamonds and other gems, again amassing a fantastic collection. His gemstones received a comprehensive valuation following his death by Giovanni Battista Casanova, an artist in Saxon employ and the brother of Giacomo Casanova. Brühl's massive spending on the finer things in life eventually drove Saxony into bankruptcy. Potemkin was fortunate in that the Russian Empire had much deeper pockets and could afford his profligacy.

Both Catherine and Potemkin could not have been unaware of the huge scandal that erupted in France in 1785 over a diamond necklace supposedly ordered by Queen Marie Antoinette to be presented to her by Cardinal Louis de Rohan, prince-bishop of Strasbourg.[31] The necklace, almost too heavy to be worn and terribly overwrought, was never delivered to the queen but stolen, broken down, and many of the stones marketed in London by the husband of the woman who devised the entire plot, Jeanne de la Mothe de Valois.[32] The story of the necklace broke into the news in 1786 with the collective trial of several defendants: the de la Mothes, Cardinal Rohan, Nicole le Guay (who had played the role of the queen on a dark night in the Versailles chateau park), and the Sicilian mountebank named Giuseppe Balsamo, who called himself Count Alessandro Cagliostro and was the talk not only of Paris and France but of virtually all Europe. Among his earlier peregrinations around Europe, Cagliostro had been in St. Petersburg in 1779-80, ingratiating himself with Freemasons, selling various potions, and hoodwinking gullible people with his alchemy and odd metaphysical ideas.[33] Catherine was not impressed and even wrote two comedies poking fun at him and those who bought into his fantasies.[34] We do not know what Catherine and Potemkin might have said or written to each other with regard to the diamond necklace affair, because no letters between them apparently survive for 1786, the year when the trial was held.[35]

There may have been similarities between the diamond necklace affair, which rightly or wrongly eroded the reputation of Queen Marie Antoinette significantly, and Potemkin's relationship to diamonds. In both cases, diamonds were employed by people who initially were relative outsiders in their efforts to gain or retain access to the highest levels of power and prestige. In the case of the unfortunate Jeanne de la Mothe de Valois, it failed tragically if not comically. For Potemkin, diamonds represented both what had been won already and what could

[30] See Walter Fellmann, *Heinrich Graf Brühl: Ein Lebens- und Zeitbild* (Leipzig: Kohler & Amelang, 1989).

[31] The most recent full treatment of the Diamond Necklace Affair is Jonathan Beckman, *How to Ruin a Queen: Marie Antoinette and the Diamond Necklace Affair* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 2014).

[32] A drawing of the necklace may be seen in Penny Proddow & Marion Fasel, *Diamonds: A Century of Spectacular Jewels* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1996), 21.

[33] See V. R. Zotov, "Caliostro: ego zhizn i prebyvanie v Rossii. Istoricheskii ocherk," *Russkaia starina*, 12 (1875): 50-80; Evgenii Petrovich Karnovich, "Kaliostro v Peterburge," *Drevniaia i novaia Rossiia* 2 (1875): 184-200.

[34] "The Imposter" (*Obmanshchik*), first produced in 1786 at the Herrmitage Theater, and "The Deceived" (*Obol'shchennyi*).

[35] Nor is Caliostro mentioned in any of their few surviving personal letters from 1780.

help retain his enviable position. In both cases, diamonds eventually laid low both protagonists. De la Mothe's gambit was based from the beginning on trickery and mistaken identity. Potemkin for his part never hid his desire to acquire more and more precious stones, if only to give some of them away. But, in the end, after his death, his repeated failures to pay for them badly besmirched not only his own reputation but also the reputations of those like Richard Sutherland who were his regular suppliers. Potemkin and Sutherland both died in bankruptcy, revealed after their deaths, as did the fashioner of the diamond necklace in France, the firm of Boëhmer et Bassenge, never having received payment for it.[36]

Richard Sutherland and Grigorii Potemkin died within a day of each other in October 1791, the banker first. Potemkin left enormous debts, many of which also dragged down the Sutherland estate. A commission established to sort out the confused finances of both men cast aspersions on the fidelity and credit of Sutherland.[37] Hope, on the other hand continued to stand by the banker's reputation, refusing to concede that he had done anything amiss. Those men and women whom fortune and Prince Potemkin had blessed with diamonds (*almazy* and/or *brillianty*) were never asked to give them up, certainly not those who received only a few as party favors. Sometimes *felix fortuna iuvat*.

[36] The Rohan family eventually did make restitution to Boehmer's estate. Beckman, *How to Ruin a Queen*, 302.
[37] See Anthony Cross. "The Sutherland Affair and its Aftermath," *Slavonic and East European Review* 50:119 (April, 1972): 257-275.