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UROP Project Report Paper: The Role of Women in Enlightenment Russia's Intellectual Culture

Introduction

Since there would not be female academicians, scientists, or famous writers in Russia until the nineteenth century, women sometimes had more indirect, but just as important, effects on intellectual culture in the eighteenth. As women in the nobility developed their newly appointed public duties, they allowed future women to join intellectual culture more explicitly. Areas which my research revealed to have the greatest impact on their involvement were their connection within the imperial court to a female monarch that expanded autocracy; education reforms whose goal it was to create a new kind of educated, loyal citizen; their hosting of public gatherings; and their contributions to standardizing and developing the Russian language.

The Rule of Empresses

Peter the Great is the last direct male descendant of Mikhail (Michael) Romanov. When he died without settling the question of descent, one of the consequences was a succession of almost entirely female rulers for the next century until primogeniture was established by Paul I. Establishing how people felt about female rule gives us insight into how or if women's role in public life was gendered.

As one of the most renowned rulers of Russia and coming at the end of the eighteenth century, attitudes about Catherine II can tell us a lot about how Russians viewed female rulers --

and whether they questioned it at all. First, we need to address how Western Europe viewed her. Male contemporaries saw her positive characteristics as masculine and her negative ones as feminine. James Harris, envoy-extraordinary to St. Petersburg, described her “masculine force of mind” as well as her feminine “vanity” while the French diplomat Chevalier de Corberon found her contradictions “of courage and weakness, of firmness and irresolution” to be caused by the flightiness of woman.¹ Voltaire “took a delight” hearing that the Muslim Turks were “humiliated” by a woman.² Seeing women as the weaker sex makes her success against men emasculating more than anything else. Diderot contrasted the “worn-out rags” of her sex with the “masculine and patriotic designs, [...] the proper concern of monarchs”.³ Catherine was both admired and derided, but she was first and foremost seen as a woman in power. Her mistakes were to be assigned to her feminine nature while her executive accomplishments were that of a man’s.

Russian contemporaries were less likely to see either faults or greatness in their ruler’s femininity. While Paul I instated primogeniture in 1797, he cites that an “orderly” and “unchangeable” law of succession was needed to maintain “peace” and “security”.⁴ He did not address female rule in his statement or exclude women from the throne. His move could be out of spite for his mother, Catherine II, who he was concerned did not name him heir and whose policies he redacted often. Pavel Sumarokov, who wrote *Cherty Ekateriny Velikoi* (Characteristics of Catherine the Great), never mentions the word “woman” in his own character sketch--instead, he says, “rulers are either distinguished by their conquests or by their concern

¹ Meehan-Waters, 293-4.

² Meehan-Waters, 294.

³ Meehan-Waters, 294. Wilson similarly mentions another of Diderot’s descriptions: that she had “the soul of Brutus with the charms of Cleopatra” (181).

⁴ Meehan-Waters, 306.

for their subjects” as a framework to evaluate them.⁵ He does not define conquest or concern as gendered characteristics. The satirist N. I. Novikov never derides her for her femininity, and A. N. Radishchev’s 1790 work *Journey From St. Petersburg to Moscow*, which critiqued serfdom and governance in Russia, makes his “tyrant” male.⁶ If his ruler had been female, we could assign his critiques of the Empress to her gender; making him male dismisses this possibility. The poet and scientist Lomonosov describes empresses as the “model of the emperor, the warrior, the wrathful, the awesome” and the poet Derzhavin does not use sexual metaphors in a poem about Catherine II, but neuter imagery.⁷ Catherine’s contemporary Maria Theresa was painted in the West as a positive female ruler whose image was primarily a wife (officially co-ruler) and mother of 16 children. Though her positive characteristics were feminine, they were only seen as such since she did not break out of gender roles in a threatening way; for her, motherhood seemed to come first, and her competence as a ruler could always be assigned to her husband. Critics deviated from the Western trend in attributing fault to femaleness, while supporters failed to praise her maternal or feminine qualities like Maria Theresa. For whatever reason, Catherine II and the other Empresses were treated as individuals. I believe this is more likely to do with reforms (especially within court life) coinciding with an increase in the monarch’s power through autocracy than through viewing the monarch as a neuter figure. It should not be surprising that misogyny functioned differently in Europe and gendered assumptions about women in European history will not directly apply to the Russian case. It is undeniable that having so many women in power, who were actively expanding that power, and

⁵ Meehan-Waters, 296.

⁶ Meehan-Waters, 302.

⁷ Meehan-Waters, 304.

who served as a direct example to the nobility had an effect on women's lives, especially their public and cultural functions.

The Empresses would expand the power of their office through rituals that subverted the Orthodox requirements of their male predecessors. Peter I's imperial coronation ceremony was first performed for his successor and wife Catherine I and reduced the role of the church within the affair.⁸ Empress Anna would follow in 1730 by entering the holy altar reserved for the (male) clergy and taking Communion according to the clergy as well.⁹ Empress Elizabeth did the same, but even placed the crown and imperial mantle on herself without the help of church officials.¹⁰ These rituals were continued, but it is important to note how imperial power was increased by women who subsumed the priestly function of ruler in Russia by placing themselves above the Church. Catherine II is usually perceived as becoming reactionary with age. However, Catherine II always put order first. Her 1767 *Nakaz* cited how large her empire was as a need for absolute rule since quick decisions mitigate the time it took to communicate over long distances.¹¹ Her justifications can be interpreted as excuses of course, but the uniqueness of Russian culture did mean that Western ideology could not directly apply. Russia committed to absolute rule under the monarch and it is possible the gender of the six female rulers of the century compounded the elevation of ruler over clergy after Peter's reforms. It is also possible that the emphasis was almost entirely on the well-ordered service society that had been created and the subjugation of religious authority that entailed this. In *The Russian Enlightenment*, Gordon explains how cultural change was controlled absolutely by the monarch.¹² This meant that the growing

⁸ Meehan-Waters, 305.

⁹ Meehan-Waters, 305.

¹⁰ Meehan-Waters, 305.

¹¹ *Nakaz*, Chapter II.

¹² Gordon, 34.

influence women were having on intellectual culture was encouraged by the state. Though out of the scope of this report, the theatre, music, and ballet traditions begun by Elizabeth and the society journal contributed to by Catherine II were other examples of the court and monarch propagating culture.¹³

Besides despotism, the Empresses had other aims in producing cultural change that were specific to Russia. The Russian enlightenment was not an importation of the European thought. For example, even with the prevalence of French-speaking nobility in Russia, its enlightenment thought was disregarded by many as immoral. Diderot was received by Russian courtiers as an atheist and disliked.¹⁴ As someone who married the heir to the throne and was an avid reader of Enlightenment thinkers, it is important to note that Catherine II took great care in administering in a way effective in Russia. Diderot's discussions with Catherine took place during the Turkish war and Pugachev revolt. She rejected his liberal reforms, saying "you work only upon paper, which submits to every thing; it is altogether obedient and supple, and opposes no obstacles, either to your imagination or to your pen; whereas I, a poor Empress, I work upon human nature, which is, on the contrary, irritable and easily offended."¹⁵ European thought was only adopted when it was useful to the sovereign.

Women had unprecedented access to the sovereign during this time. Where before they could look for his favor in court or by bringing their concerns to his wife, now they could enter the ruler's boudoir and relate through shared experience. Princess Yekaterina Romanovna Vorontsova-Dashkova mentions the moment on the road to review the troops after Catherine was

¹³ Hosking, 115. The journal, *This and That (Vsiakaia vsiachina)* fostered debate, satire, and "pleasant reading" to show moral principles.

¹⁴ Wilson, 185.

¹⁵ Wilson, 189.

proclaimed Sovereign of all the Russias -- they stopped at a house with one bed which they shared as they discussed the manifestos Catherine would soon publish.¹⁶ There was a physical and unofficial closeness for afterhour politics that were usually reserved for men. In Dashkova's case, this closeness would directly affect her role in the public sphere.

Besides the imperial court, women were not often seen performing official duties in public life. Exceptions to this were women in places of authority--in roles that managed and organized first and foremost. While there would not be a female academician in the Academy of Sciences for another century, a woman would be appointed Director of it. Dashkova's speech to the Senate when she was appointed opened with, "You are surely as surprised as I am myself at seeing me come here to swear an oath of loyalty to Her Majesty whose very name name has been long engraved on my heart. But one must obey, and not believe oneself exempt from a duty prescribed for all. To this is due this unusual event -- the appearance of a woman in your august sanctuary."¹⁷ She positions herself as loyal subject and mentions the call to public service she has in common with the academicians which addresses any anxiety about her being female. While Dashkova certainly displays humility, her appointment was probably a surprise for everyone, including her. She had not held any public office up to this point, she was not a scientist, and she put educating her son above and managing her children's estates after her husband's early death before any other responsibilities, yet here she was swearing an oath to the monarch like the men before her. This is not to say she was not qualified. During her travels abroad she frequently toured institutions she thought Catherine would find useful and sent her detailed plans of them, including a well-organized hospital. In her memoirs she mentions how she suggested to the

¹⁶ Dashkova, 79.

¹⁷ Dashkova, 207.

Sicilian King that he should excavate Pompeii and restore the artifacts to where they were originally found to show how its inhabitants once lived, then to charge a fee to tourists to view it. He said that she was right and the antiquaries who got excited about these things did not think of it. Then he gave her a copy of all the volumes containing all the discoveries in gratitude which she said she “valued far above expensive ornaments and jewels”.¹⁸ Many of her collections of books, precious materials, and art were gifted to the Empress or found its way into the Academy’s collection. It is still unlikely that she would have been appointed director without the respect of Catherine II as the appointment was very prestigious and had not been given to a woman in all of Europe. Dashkova explains their affinity for each other from when they first met when she was only 15: “I could argue, perhaps, that as there were no other two women at the time, apart from the Grand Duchess and myself, who did any serious reading, we were mutually drawn towards each other”.¹⁹ Of course, this is an exaggeration, but as intellectual equals, it was not hard for Catherine to see the potential for leadership in another woman like herself. Her appointment was proven extremely successful and the Academy erased its debts within the first year of her directorship. However, her success in reforming the institution into a respectable contributor to the sciences again was not entirely due to shrewd and practical organization. Her veneration of Euler, who had retreated into his research as the Academy had declined, put her in good standing with the majority of its members.²⁰ She was aware of the significance of the sciences and in his work in particular.

¹⁸ Dashkova, 176.

¹⁹ Dashkova, 36.

²⁰ Dashkova, 206.

Public Gatherings

Before the reforms, aristocratic women led “strictly secluded lives” in the *terem* quarter of the house; even the regent Sophia spent most of her time in the palace’s.²¹ After, women were on the forefront of cultural change, especially in St. Petersburg. This was a state-sanctioned role enforced by the Policemaster General in the form of public assemblies, or *assemblei*.²² They were modeled partly on French salons and moderated by female hosts. Peter I’s 1718 ordinance described them as “a free assembly or gathering in a house not only for amusement, but also for business, for one may see each other there and talk over every need, and also hear what is going on somewhere else”.²³ *Assemblei* allowed attendees from the aristocracy, merchants, workshop masters, and their wives and children to move freely without elaborate decorum.²⁴ In his article *Importation of Being Earnest*, Gordin interprets these assemblies as a way for (especially St. Petersburg) society to learn social etiquette (manners, dancing, etc.) in contrast to the Academy of Sciences’ assemblies which taught intellectual conduct. In reality, both taught etiquette, and the gatherings at notable women’s homes did not avoid intellectual pursuits. Gordin is right that *assemblei* centered the woman, though. Especially within the French Enlightenment, women “symbolized the conquest of love, beauty, civilization” and men’s “higher faculties”.²⁵ Peter was likely aware of this and used women’s involvement and control of activities like dances to propagandize the new behavior required of the nobility as well as the public service required by all subjects, even women. Committing women to public events made a shift in culture easier, especially in educating the next generation.

²¹ Meehan-Waters, *Autocracy and Aristocracy*, 99.

²² Gordin, 19.

²³ Gordin, 19.

²⁴ Wortman, 55.

²⁵ Wortman, 55-6.

By the end of the eighteenth century and into the next, one of the most important women-led gatherings was the literary salon. It is likely they evolved from the *assemblei* in which women gained experience in running public gatherings. The “moral and aesthetic formation” of the nineteenth century’s first generation of intelligentsia was provided by salon hostesses.²⁶ The hostesses “defined the values of both literature and public life” since these spheres were indistinguishable.²⁷ The Russian language was swiftly changing at the turn of the century and hostesses were aware of the social and cultural importance of their work.²⁸ This work gave these women a “significant social position” which affirmed their “abilities” publicly, used their education, and encouraged “intellectual interaction” between men and women.²⁹ Hostesses were active participants in this space; they helped test writers’ “creative experiments”, they translated literary works into Russian, and were called *zakonodatel'nitsa* (legislator).³⁰ N. M. Karamzin, a writer, linguist, and historian, called women the “ultimate linguistic arbiters” who “tested” and “improved” it.³¹ Since women were less often exposed to written language, the sciences (especially naval), and business correspondence their Russian was less “contaminated”.³² Even the well-read Dashkova remarked that Peter I had been “multiliating the Russian language with Dutch terms and word-endings which invade his edicts and all naval phraseology”.³³ Karamzinists incorporated women’s “linguistic usage” into literature, seeking to “imitate” their conversations, encouraging the participation of women in writing literature, and

²⁶ Bernstein, 220.

²⁷ Bernstein, 210.

²⁸ Bernstein, 209.

²⁹ Bernstein, 209.

³⁰ Bernstein, 210. On translation, 216.

³¹ Bernstein, 210.

³² Bernstein, 210.

³³ Dashkova, 182.

model what they labeled “feminine narratorial prose” in their own works.³⁴ Some notable hostesses include V. A. Yushkova, a well-educated musician who held a salon in the provincial town of Tula that focused on Russian language and literature in the late 1700s and S. D. Ponomareva, a St. Petersburg resident who hosted literati, military officers, and government servants and conducted discussions of Russian poetry in French.³⁵ A. P. Elagina would host a salon in Moscow (where Russian was spoken) which “resembled university seminars on literary, philosophical, and moral issues” and extended the role of woman educating her offspring on religion, morality, and aesthetics to the wider younger generation.³⁶ Salons were necessary for the free exchange of political news, ideas, literary works and a place for writers to get valuable feedback from the women whose opinions they sought.³⁷ The hostess was many things to the visitors--from service gentry to Tsar--”model, critic, and umpire, and sometimes a patron and a close friend.”³⁸

There was a stigma attached to women who wrote their own works however, so women deigned to create albums composed of creative works that were often seen in the domestic, intimate boudoir more so than in the public *assemblei*. Women writers were proud of their intellectual pursuits; writer and critic Pavel Iakovlev exclaimed that a woman “preserves her album . . . as you preserve your Academicians' diplomas!”³⁹ She puts her work on par with Academy members, seeing her album as evidence of talent, success, and intellectual community that can be publicly seen and recognized on paper. Still, the boudoir, like the salon, was run by

³⁴ Hammerberg, 297.

³⁵ Bernstein, 211, 214.

³⁶ Bernstein, 219.

³⁷ Bernstein, 220.

³⁸ Bernstein, 220.

³⁹ Hammerberg, 300.

hostesses who “fostered literary play, amateur poetry, and music making” benefitting the most beloved poets of the time.

The development of the Russian language by women was not just unofficial however; in 1784, Princess Dashkova, Director of the Academy of Sciences, was assigned by Catherine II to create and become President of the new Russian Academy to develop, document, and standardize the Russian language which had been rapidly changing during this time period. At the end of the century, Russia still lacked a dictionary and an academy to regulate its language. During a conversation in which Dashkova suggested the Empress create an Academy, Catherine II appointed her to create it despite her protestations that its development would be better served by having court secretaries request the plans of European versions.⁴⁰ Her main task in this role was to create the first Russian dictionary, which had to be an etymological one.⁴¹ The Russian Academy would make standard rules and reform foreign additions to the language.

Dashkova also influenced culture creatively; she wrote dramas, helped edit journals, and consciously published works of cultural merit through her work as President. Though she missed Diderot on his pilgrimage to Russia, she visited him on her travels abroad. They argue about serfdom, and she says that without enlightenment, freedom for the peasants would only produce anarchy.⁴² She also claims that he found her argument very convincing which is highly unlikely to be true. Yet, this access to Enlightenment thinkers of Europe given to a Russian woman is notable.

⁴⁰ Dashkova, 213.

⁴¹ Dashkova, 216.

⁴² Dashkova, 125.

Education

There was an effort to educate girls outside the home during this century. A 1707 project for educating young women abroad failed due to parent opposition.⁴³ In 1717, Peter I visited Madame de Maintenon's *Maison Royale de Saint Louis* in Saint-Cyr.⁴⁴ Despite this, there was a slow start to forming educational institutions for women, but it was not totally abandoned due to sympathetic Empresses like Elizabeth who also sent an envoy, I. I. Betskoy, to Saint-Cyr.

The "General Institutes"-- passed in 1764 -- officially recognized that girls must have the "same access to elementary education".⁴⁵ Catherine wanted to address the problem of low literacy in general, and it did not make sense to only educate males.⁴⁶ More than this, Betskoy, who shared her educational goals, said "new fathers and mothers can [...] instill the rules of life which they received into the hearts of their own children".⁴⁷ He describes an active role for women and men in parenting. It was important that all of society, not just half, was able to adopt reforms, new ideas, and be able to serve and reproduce societal norms that benefited the state. The population being able to read was then very important in doing this. This thought is reinforced by the goals of the 1763 Imperial Foundling Home for orphans whose plans included an entire chapter justifying giving girls equal education to boys; this included the fact that mothers educated their children and the sons of nobility were often under the care of domestic servants; Betskoy evidenced, girls must develop minds "enlightened by different knowledge in order to lead a useful civil life".⁴⁸ In 1763, representatives were sent by Catherine II to gather

⁴³ Meehan-Waters, *Autocracy and Aristocracy*, 100.

⁴⁴ Black, 153.

⁴⁵ Black, 156.

⁴⁶ Black, 154.

⁴⁷ Black, 156.

⁴⁸ Black, 155.

information about institutions for women's education, but she was not interested in them.⁴⁹ That year she created the Imperial Educational Society for Noble Girls (also known as the Smolny Institute) which had a section for the bourgeois class as well. The curriculum was more challenging than Saint-Cyr's; it added foreign languages, economics, architecture, heraldry, ethics, science, law, and math on top of music, catechism, history, sewing, reading, writing.⁵⁰ Physical health and virtue was the most important, however, even though it was a secular school (unlike Saint-Cyr).⁵¹ Voltaire was concerned Catherine would be creating "amazons" with this school -- she replied that she wanted to create pleasant, capable women able to raise children and manage a household. Diderot visited the school with Catherine and was impressed that she let the girls throw their arms around her⁵². He even offered to rewrite the French plays they performed to be more age appropriate.⁵³ Students from both schools graduated with a stipend and their careers were followed by the school's Board -- many were taken directly into court service.⁵⁴ In the whole of Russia, major and minor public schools had low attendance from girls, but education was available to them.⁵⁵ Traditional values meant that parents were slow to send their girls to school (especially if it was far away), but as they began to see the opportunities education provided, they slowly grew in popularity, even in the provinces.

The elementary schools formed by Catherine II in the 1780s were equipped (including Smolny) with a conservative book of civics called *On the Duties of Man and Citizen* (1783). It described to students how "virtuous sons of the fatherland" was a name "given to people of both

⁴⁹ Black, 156.

⁵⁰ Black, 157.

⁵¹ Black, 160.

⁵² Wilson, 176.

⁵³ Wilson, 186.

⁵⁴ Black, 161.

⁵⁵ Black, 170.

sexes and all ranks who honour their fatherland” and who “care about its well-being”.⁵⁶ The duties emphasized obedience in a time of unrest; Pugachev’s uprising had ended six years earlier. The duties were also public ones that all citizens were responsible for--not just men. On autocracy it stated that “Some believe that love for the fatherland is a civic virtue more characteristic of a free society or Republic, than of a monarchy, or that in a Republic there are at least more reasons and motives for such love. But all this is quite unjust because if one finds less love for the fatherland in our time than in ancient times, then the cause of this lies not in the form of government, but in an inadequate education.”⁵⁷ Education, then, was meant to directly combat what the monarch saw as disloyalty. Order was more important than intellectual freedom. In the Russian Enlightenment, cultural change in the gentry class is most obvious and directly contributed to its thought, but Catherine and the other Empresses were always aware of the place of service people and serfs. Free, secular, co-ed elementary schools had the promise of creating a third estate, one that did not have the excessive privileges of the nobility but was still educated and would hopefully be more reliable.⁵⁸

Conclusion

My findings were that women in the nobility and service gentry were primarily involved in intellectual culture through management roles in family life, public gatherings, and in managing events and finances in higher institutions of scientific learning like the Academy of Sciences. There was an emphasis on women’s official and unofficial service to the monarch. This report provides myself and others with a starting point to interrogate autocracy pushed by

⁵⁶ Black, 244.

⁵⁷ Black, 245.

⁵⁸ Hosking, 117.

the Empresses, the role of women in the public and private spheres, the development of education and women's literature in Russia, and women's contributions to the Russian language.

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