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**WOMEN IN RUSSIA,
1700 – 2000**



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1

THE PETRINE REVOLUTION: NEW MEN, NEW WOMEN, NEW IDEAS

Women in Public and the New Domesticity

This book begins with dramatic changes – in some ways a revolution – initiated from above by Tsar Peter the Great (1689–1725) that eventually transformed the existence of almost everyone, women and men alike. In 1689, when Peter ousted his half-sister Sophia, who acted as regent, and took the throne, Russia was just gradually emerging from her medieval ways. Governed by religious values, largely isolated from the cultural and intellectual changes transforming the worldview of Western elites, most Russians remained wary of the outside world. In order to secure Russia's imperial status, Peter sought to reshape Russian society, culture, and politics according to models that he had seen and admired in Moscow's foreign community and during his travels to the West. The state became far more dynamic and prone to intervene in the lives of its subjects under Peter's leadership. Vastly accelerating changes already underway, Peter deployed decrees and legislation like weapons in a war against Russia's traditional order and meted out harsh punishments, even to elites who dug in their heels. Shock waves from the Petrine revolution reverberate to this day.

Like many contemporary European societies, Russia was divided into *orders*: those who fought (servicemen), those who worked (taxpayers), and those who prayed (churchmen). Peter's Westernizing revolution was aimed primarily at the service elites, members of aristocratic *boiars* and Russia's service nobility. New political institutions began the transformation of the Muscovite system of rule into a modern bureaucracy, formalizing and augmenting the power of the autocrat. Peter revamped Russia's army and founded its navy. To administer new or reformed institutions, Peter required new kinds of individuals, men who looked, behaved, and even thought differently than had their fathers and grandfathers. Peter needed new kinds of women, too, fit consorts for the new men. Revealing their flesh in Western-style clothing, enjoying the pleasures of mixed society, rearing their sons in the appropriate Petrine spirit, elite women would serve the state as men did, but in a

different fashion. To ensure elite participation in the new order, Peter sought to reshape their public and personal lives.

Gender and the Pre-Petrine Order

Transforming the elite family order was essential to Peter's efforts to formalize political authority. Behind the facade of Muscovite autocracy, leading *boiars* clans maneuvered for power and patronage, with marital and kinship ties among the major determinants of success. To advance their families' interests, elites arranged the marriages of their offspring. The practice of secluding women and segregating the sexes helped to sustain this political system. Women of the most elite families lived in their own special quarters, known as the *terem*. They might receive visitors there or interact with men while managing their household, but they did not socialize with men, even members of their family. "I was born a recluse, raised within four walls," Princess Daria Golitsyna (1668–1715) told a young foreign friend. Before Peter the Great forced her to alter her lifestyle, Princess Daria ventured forth only two or three times a year, including visits to church and the cemetery, and even rarer were visits to female relatives. She always traveled in a closed or curtained carriage so as to remain hidden from view.¹ This sexually segregated social life prevented the personal attachments between men and women that might interfere with arranged marriages.

Even as it restricted their movement and contacts, women's separate sphere may also have provided women a source of independent authority. This authority was exercised by the tsar's wife, the *tsaritsa*, and her daughters, who dwelled in the royal *terem*. As in many medieval courts, in Muscovite Russia, the personal and private realm was inextricably intertwined with public affairs of the state. In Russia, a pious *tsaritsa* served as spiritual intercessor, an intermediary between the tsar and his subjects and God. As spiritual helpmate to her husband, she ensured both the tsar's salvation and that of his realm by performing pious deeds, dispensing charity, and ensuring social justice. She also exercised more mundane but no less significant authority in her separate realm. In the royal *terem*, the *tsaritsa* supervised noble attendants and servants, arranged weddings, and bestowed dowries that might include sizeable grants of land. *Tsaritsy* (plural of *tsaritsa*) also enjoyed independent status in the law. They managed their own properties and exercised judicial authority over their subjects. As facilitators of peace and justice, *tsaritsy* received numerous petitions from Russian subjects requesting intervention in relatives'

¹ Quoted in Daniel Schlafly, "A Muscovite *Boiarynia* Faces Peter the Great's Reforms: Dar'ia Golitsyna Between Two Worlds," *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* 31, no. 3 (Fall 1997), 255.

legal affairs, even in affairs of state. As autocracy grew more bureaucratized and the tsar acquired a tougher image, the *tsaritsa* appeared to offer a kinder and gentler form of authority and an alternate route to the throne.²

Other elite women likely played a similarly active role in their own gendered sphere. They, too, administered large and complex households and often took the initiative in arranging the marriages of their children, including marriages that might provide access to political power. Women held the power to veto or approve the marital alliances of male kin, sometimes entering the women's quarters of other families to evaluate a prospective bride.³ Tsars' mothers were no exception. Natalia Naryshkina, Peter the Great's mother, selected his first wife Evdoksia, to whom Peter was quite indifferent. In the countryside, elite women managed estates when their husbands served in the army. Wealthy widows enjoyed still greater freedom of action.

Gender segregation and the concealment of women's hair and bodies also upheld the collective and clan-oriented Muscovite system of honor and shame. Elite women wore high necklines, long sleeves, and long skirts, and their clothing fit loosely so as to hide the body's contours. The more important the occasion and the wealthier the woman, the more layers she would wear. Because religion taught that it was sinful for a man to gaze upon a married woman's hair, her hair was hidden by the appropriate headdress and by capacious scarves, which sometimes covered the shoulders as well (Fig. 1). Women who observed dress and behavioral codes preserved their own and their family's honor; women who violated honor codes harmed not only themselves but also their kin. Family honor held enormous importance for the servitor class. It provided the measuring stick that determined their status in the social hierarchy.⁴ The system of honor also granted social esteem and power to defend their dignity to women who lived up to honor's dictates. If a woman followed the rules, she could obtain legal compensation from men who violated those rules by, for example, pulling her braid or peering into her carriage. In the words of Nancy Shields Kollman, "Patriarchy served itself by serving women well."⁵

The teachings of Russian Orthodoxy, the official religion, supported this gender segregation, offering women a profoundly dualistic message. It

² Isolde Thyret, *Between God and Tsar: Religious Symbolism and the Royal Women of Muscovite Russia* (DeKalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois University Press, 2001), 119–23.

³ Nancy Shields Kollman, "The Seclusion of Elite Muscovite Women," *Russian History* 10, pt. 2 (1983), 184.

⁴ Nancy Shields Kollman, "Muscovite Patrimonialism," in James Cracraft (ed.), *Major Problems in the History of Imperial Russia* (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath, 1994), 45.

⁵ Nancy Shields Kollman, "Women's Honor in Early Modern Russia," in Barbara E. Clements, Barbara A. Engel, and Christine Worobec (eds.), *Russia's Women: Accommodation, Resistance, Transformation* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1991), 72.



1. Portrait of M. Apraksina, from *The Female Portrait in Russian Art* (Leningrad, 1974)

condemned women as sinful – wanton, deceitful instigators of lust and pollution. “What is a woman like on earth?” rhetorically inquired an eighteenth century sermon. “A slanderer of saints, a serpent’s resting place, the Devil’s consolation, an incurable sickness, a treasure that inflames, a temptation for the saved, an incalculable evil, a whore by day, an inn where one cannot rest,

the Devil's accomplice."⁶ Such views encouraged men to fear and distrust women and to control their sexuality in order to protect the family from dishonor and society from disorder. But Russian Orthodoxy also offered a positive model, the good woman, whose qualities were diametrically opposite those of her sinful sister. The *good woman* was modest and hardworking, pious and chaste, devoted to her household and children, and submissive to her husband. The good woman gave generously to the needy and used her access to figures of authority to champion the powerless and downtrodden. The *Domostroi*, a household guide penned in the sixteenth century for an elite readership, idealized the wife who managed her household while living a semicloistered life. "Who can find a capable wife? Her worth is far beyond coral," begins the section entitled "In Praise of Women," employing a quotation from Proverbs.⁷ The church also contributed to the spiritualizing of the *tsaritsy*, associating them with famous Orthodox women saints rather than with sinfulness.

Female saints who endured martyrdom for their faith offered devout women the most exalted model of all. The most commonly read books in pious households, the lives of the saints, presented images of spiritual strength and self-denying asceticism. Devoted to a higher ideal, saints held to their convictions even in the face of persecution and torment. Such images, intended to celebrate piety, could encourage women's rebellion as well as their submission. These images inspired the extraordinarily wealthy widow, the *boiarynia* Feodosia Morozova (1632–75), to become a martyr for her beliefs. In the 1660s, the Russian Orthodox Church instituted modernizing reforms that revised and standardized liturgical practices, provoking fierce opposition. Morozova became the most well-known female opponent of reform. In her struggle to preserve long-standing religious practices, she defied both religious and secular authorities and ignored the appeals of her family to capitulate. Her enormous wealth and relative freedom as a widow enabled Morozova to transform her Moscow mansion into a kind of refuge for religious dissidents and center for the production and distribution of dissident writings. Eventually she became a nun. Arrested with two other leading female schismatics and tortured in 1672, Morozova refused to recant her beliefs. Together with her two companions, she was sent to a distant monastery, where the three were starved to death in a punishment pit.⁸ Old Believers, as

⁶ Robin Bisha, Jehanne M. Gheith, Christine Holden, and William Wagner (eds.), *Russian Women 1698–1917: Experience and Expression – An Anthology of Sources* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2002), 22.

⁷ Carolyn Johnston Pouncy (ed. and trans.), *The Domostroi: Rules for Russian Households in the Time of Ivan the Terrible* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994), 102.

⁸ Margaret Ziolkowski (ed.), *Tale of Boiarynia Morozova: A Seventeenth-Century Religious Life* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2000), 5–12.

the schismatics were known, considered Morozova a saint. Her biography, written around 1674–5, was widely disseminated in manuscript and served as a key text in Old Believer ideology.

Peter the Great's half sister, Sophia, offers another example of a rebel, but in a different religious key. First as regent for her underage brothers (Ivan and the future tsar, Peter), then increasingly in her own right, Sophia ruled Russia from 1682 until 1689. Sophia's authority was portrayed in feminine terms in order to demonstrate her worthiness for the throne. Emphasis on her piety and asceticism, for example, drew on myths and rituals connected with the royal *terem*. This extension of the authority that *tsaritsy* had enjoyed as spiritual helpmates into the secular political realm strengthened Sophia's claim to govern directly.⁹ Then, in 1689, Peter the Great's forces ousted her from power. For the remainder of her life, Sophia was incarcerated in a nunnery, a common fate for uppity or unwanted women.

Few women launched such overt challenges to the religious or political order, as far as we know. Instead, they accepted their assigned place or at least gave the appearance of accepting it. However highly prized, good women functioned within a fundamentally patriarchal order. The Old Believer leader, Archpriest Avvakum, who eulogized the *boiarynia* Morozova as one of "Christ's martyrs," was capable of chastising her harshly when she crossed him: "You did not listen to us, you acted according to your own will – and truly the devil has led you to complete degradation. . . . Stupid, witless, disgraceful woman, *put out your eyes with a weaving shuttle, as did the famous Mastridia!*" [italics in original]¹⁰

In letters surviving from Peter's time, women refer to themselves with self-deprecation. They sign their letters, "thy unworthy sister," or "your unworthy daughter," or as Morozova did in a letter to Avvakum, "a most sinful and unworthy woman." They refer to themselves in this fashion even when, or perhaps especially when, they were themselves *tsaritsy*. Self-deprecating phrasing appears in the surviving letters of Peter the Great's first wife, Evdoksia. Raised conventionally, Evdoksia wrote to her husband following their marriage in 1689: "Your unworthy wife Dun'ka greets you;" and in a separate letter "Write to me, my light, about your health, and make poor wretched me happy in my sadness."¹¹ Such verbal self-deprecation failed to protect Evdoksia from a fate identical to her sister-in-law Sophia's.

⁹ Thyret, *Between God and Tsar*, 139–69.

¹⁰ "Archpriest Avvakum Describes His Struggle for the Lord, ca. 1673," in Cracraft, *Major Problems*, 71; For the condemnation of Morozova, see Ziolkowski, *Tale*, 91.

¹¹ Ziolkowski, 90; Quoted in Lindsey Hughes, "Peter the Great's Two Weddings: Changing Images of Women in a Transitional Age," in Rosalind Marsh (ed.), *Women in Russia and the Ukraine* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 32.

The Petrine Revolution

Peter the Great reconfigured Russia's patriarchal order. His modernizing reforms that aimed at strengthening the bureaucracy and institutionalized forms of authority inevitably affected the informal authority that women exercised in their separate sphere. Initially, the transformation of political life along Western European lines was symbolized by new dress and facilitated by new demeanor. Peter forced men to shave their beards and abandon their caftans and women to wear foreign clothing. A law of 1701 mandated "German clothes, hats and footwear" for men and women of all ranks of the service nobility, as well as for leading merchants, military personnel, and inhabitants of Moscow and other towns; only clergy and peasants were exempted.¹² Henceforward, women who failed to wear dresses, German overskirts, petticoats, hats, and shoes of foreign design became subject to fines.

In order to give his court a Western appearance, Peter breached the walls of the *terem*, forcing elite women to leave its seclusion in order to socialize in public at European-style evening parties. Squeezed into corsets and displaying their bodies in low-cut gowns, they were expected to perform Western dances, to display appropriate social skills, and to converse with men in French. This was, as Lindsey Hughes put it, "a female version of service to the state, albeit in ballroom and assembly hall rather than regiment or chancellery."¹³ In his 1718 decree on assemblies, Peter attempted to extend such entertainments beyond the court, where they had already become customary. Peter even proposed to send noblewomen abroad to learn languages and social graces. But in this case, fierce parental opposition forced him to retreat. An edict of 1722 required basic literacy of women by forbidding a woman to marry if she could not sign her name.¹⁴ No one appears to have paid attention.

Peter's second marriage exemplified the Petrine combination of high-handedness and Western-style modernity. Dissatisfied with his first wife, Evdoksia, in 1699 he forced her into a nunnery. In 1712, Peter married for a second time to a woman of common birth, who took the name Catherine when she converted to Orthodoxy. She had become his mistress around 1703–4; by the time of their wedding in 1712, she had borne him several children. The wedding celebration was conducted in the spirit of the new era and featured ladies wearing low-cut gowns and elaborate French wigs sitting in the same

¹² The law of 1701 is translated in Cracraft, *Major Problems*, 110.

¹³ Lindsey Hughes, *Russia in the Age of Peter the Great* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998), 201.

¹⁴ Olga Glagoleva, "Imaginary World: Reading in the Lives of Russian Provincial Noblewomen (1750–1825), in Wendy Rosslyn (ed.), *Women and Gender in Eighteenth Century Russia* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2002), 130.

room with men garbed in naval uniforms. This elaborately staged wedding served as a kind of public spectacle, in which participants acted out the new manners, thereby instructing the public in the new ways.¹⁵

Peter's second marriage also represented a new understanding of private life. Peter loved his second wife Catherine passionately and deeply and made no secret of his feelings. In this, Peter departed significantly from the official morality of his time, which portrayed the goal of marriage as reproduction and social stability, rather than emotional fulfillment or sexual enjoyment. To be sure, husbands were expected to love their wives. However, such love meant mutual respect and cooperation within a framework of patriarchal discipline, not passionate personal attachment. Enjoyed for its own sake, sexual pleasure was supposedly sinful. Russian Orthodoxy regarded sexuality as a manifestation of human sinfulness after the Fall. Favoring chastity even within marriage, the church discouraged spouses from sexual activity without procreative purpose and the *Domostroi*, mirroring such views, taught regular sexual abstinence. Peter's second marriage thus represented a new conjugal ideal.¹⁶ The new, more affective ideal was disseminated in portraits of Peter, Catherine, and their children, depicted individually and as a family group.

Peter sought to transform the intimate lives of his subjects along similar lines. Peter attempted to alter the Muscovite custom, wherein marriages were contracted by the parents, or if they were dead, by close relatives of the bride and groom, who usually saw each other for the first time only after the wedding ceremony. A law of 1702 required a six-week betrothal period before the wedding, enabling the betrothed couple to meet and become acquainted with one another. Should they decide against marriage, all parties gained the right to terminate the match, the betrothed as well as their parents.¹⁷

Subsequently, Peter made it more difficult to dissolve a marriage. Believing celibacy preferable to married life, the church permitted spouses to dissolve their marriage in order to enter monastic life, if they had the permission of their spouse and had fulfilled their obligations to children. If a spouse continued to live in the secular world, she or he was entitled to remarry. Peter abused this tradition to rid himself of his own first wife, as did other powerful men. After 1721, however, this informal means of divorce became unavailable. Henceforward, divorce permitting a partner to enter monastic life was permissible only after the spouses had made "representation in detail concerning the divorce" to their bishop, who then forwarded the petition to

¹⁵ Hughes, "Peter the Great's two weddings," 40.

¹⁶ Nancy Shields Kollman, "What's Love Got to Do with It?: Changing Models of Masculinity in Muscovite and Petrine Russia," in Barbara Clements, Rebecca Friedman, and Dan Healey (eds.), *Russian Masculinities in History and Culture* (New York, Palgrave 2002), 15–32.

¹⁷ The law was rescinded in 1775.

the Holy Synod for a decision. Divorce became a formal procedure.¹⁸ Peter intended marital reform to affect everyone. An edict of 1722 explicitly forbade forced marriages, including those arranged for “slaves” by their masters, and obliged both bride and groom to take an oath indicating that they consented freely to their union. The requirement that elites participate in social events also threatened parents’ monopoly on arranging their children’s marriage by expanding personal contacts.

Although Peter recast Russia’s patriarchal order, he by no means ended it. Authority remained in the hands of husbands and fathers, who exercised virtually unlimited power over other family members. Marital law required a wife to submit to her husband as head of the household and to live with him in love, respect, and unlimited obedience. Except for ladies-in-waiting, women enjoyed no independent civil status. Women of the lower orders were neither counted in censuses nor assessed for purposes of paying taxes or performing services. As was the case elsewhere in Europe, a woman’s status was determined by the rank of her husband or father. The law continued to deal far more harshly with women than with men. A wife who murdered her husband was buried up to her neck in the ground and left to die; a husband who killed his wife was flogged with the knout. An adulterous woman was punished by forced labor, usually in a textile mill. “Loose” women met a similar fate.¹⁹

Moreover, as bearers and nurturers of future subjects, women were expected to make their primary contribution to Russian society in the family. Peter defined women’s most important duties as wifeness and motherhood, thereby giving motherhood new meaning. The sixteenth century *Domostroi* had had “curiously little” to say about children and nothing whatever to say about their education, assuming that children would learn what they needed from their parents.²⁰ Now, mothers of future servitors held the key to Russia’s future. Recognizing this, in 1713 Feodor Saltykov had proposed the establishment of girls’ schools to teach reading, writing, French, German, needlework, and dancing “so that our women will be equal to those of European countries.”²¹ Only educated women, Saltykov argued, were capable of rearing useful servants for the Russian state. However, like many projects proposed in Peter’s reign, plans to educate women went nowhere. To ensure that women became wives and especially, mothers, Peter forbade women to enter a monastery during their reproductive years. The Spiritual Regulations of 1721 barred women from taking the veil before the age of fifty, the age when, presumably, their reproductive lives had ended. Henceforward,

¹⁸ Brenda Meehan-Waters, *Autocracy and Aristocracy: The Russian Service Elite of 1730* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1982), 123.

¹⁹ Hughes, *Russia*, 200. ²⁰ Carolyn Johnston Pouncy, “Introduction,” *The Domostroi*, 29.

²¹ Quoted in Hughes, *Russia*, 195.

women would have to fulfill their reproductive duty. Should a young girl wish to remain a virgin for the purpose of taking monastic vows, she would simply have to bide her time. Under strict supervision, she must “remain without orders until she is sixty, or at least fifty, years old,” the Spiritual Regulations decreed.²² Nuns were also supposed to engage in productive activity: in 1722, the state dispatched seamstresses to Moscow convents to instruct the nuns in spinning.

The changes that Peter initiated put down roots only gradually. During his reign, they affected mainly women of the imperial family and the court. Some women reacted with distaste to fashions that required them to display their bodies in a manner that just a few years earlier would have shamed the woman and dishonored her family. “In my old age,” complained the 31-year-old Daria Golitsyna around 1700, “I was reduced to showing my hair, arms and uncovered bosom to all of MOSCOW . . . the only advantage I see [in this change] is to offend modesty, the treasure that every woman should boast.”²³ Others who were prepared to alter their appearance nevertheless retained the values with which they had been raised. Peter’s own sister, Natalia Alexeevna (b. 1673) converted completely to Western dress. A 1715 portrait of her shows her in an elaborately fashionable hairstyle and low-cut gown. But even she clung to aspects of an older way of life, owning icons as well as paintings and a library composed mainly of religious books. A foreign visitor was struck by the inability of Russian ladies of Peter’s time to converse in an appropriate manner, the result of their “in-born bashfulness and Awkwardness.”²⁴

Outside the court, change proceeded more fitfully still. Moscow lagged behind St. Petersburg, the new capital created by the force of Peter’s will. A visitor to Moscow in 1716 observed, “Russian wives and Daughters are extremely retired and never go abroad, unless it be to church or to see their nearest Relations.” Messages to young women about their behavior continued to be mixed – on the one hand, they were instructed by the tsar to put on revealing dresses and to socialize in public, while on the other, they were raised to be good Russian Orthodox maidens. *The Honorable Mirror of Youth*, a manual of etiquette published in 1717, offered advice to young women that could have come straight from the *Domostroi*: “Of all the virtues which adorn well-born ladies or maidens and are required of them, meekness is the leading and chief virtue,” the book advised. The book emphasized the importance in women of such qualities as industriousness, bashfulness, restraint, chastity, and taciturnity and of the knowledge and fear of God.²⁵

²² Quoted in Brenda Meehan-Waters, “Popular Piety, Local Initiative and the Founding of Women’s Religious Communities in Russia,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly*, 30, no. 2 (1986), 112.

²³ Quoted in Schlafly, “A Muscovite Boiarynia,” 262.

²⁴ Quoted in Hughes, *Russia*, 189. ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 190, 193.

Women in Public

In the post-Petrine period, the most dramatic evidence of women's new visibility was in the realm of politics. Sophia, Peter's half-sister, had laid claim to the throne as regent, and initially ruled behind the scenes. In the eighteenth century, four women sat on Russia's throne: Peter's second wife, Catherine I, reigned from his death in 1725 until her own in 1727; Anne of Courland, the daughter of Peter's half-brother Ivan, ruled from 1730–40; Peter's daughter Elizabeth reigned from 1741–61 and finally Catherine the Great, born to a petty German ruling house, sat on Russia's throne for 34 years, from 1762 until her death in 1796. The fact that the elite accepted women rulers is a measure not only of the success of Peter's efforts to bring women into public life but also of the careful crafting of the empresses' public image. In Peter's time, the image of the ruler had assumed an aggressively masculine character. By contrast with Peter, the women rulers, and Elizabeth and Catherine the Great in particular, emphasized the civilian and humanistic aspects of rule. Presented to their subjects as powerful yet disarmingly mild and loving, they proclaimed that they ruled by love rather than by force, as Peter had done. The empresses thus revived the ruler's feminine dimension, building on Muscovite precedents for women's empowerment. Yet they also represented something new. References to Classical and allegorical female figures, as well as to religious models, underpinned the authority of the empresses. Instead of helping the people to redeem their sins or ensuring their afterlife, the empresses were portrayed as showering their bounty upon their people and bringing them earthly happiness.²⁶ Their rule benefited elite women directly. During their reigns, women acquired greater public visibility and assumed prominent ceremonial roles. Such women also enjoyed unprecedented access to female rulers.²⁷

The state first assumed responsibility for women's education in the reign of Catherine the Great. Before then, what a girl learned had depended entirely on the values and economic wherewithal of her parents or guardians. In the decades that followed Peter's death, some elite parents sought to bestow upon their daughters the fruits of Western culture. Sharing the new belief that refined society required women's participation, they hired foreign governesses and tutors to instruct their daughters at home. Remembered Princess Catherine Dashkova, born 1743, soon orphaned and raised by her uncle together with his own daughter: "My uncle spared nothing to give us the best tutors and according to the ideas of the time we received the best

²⁶ Richard Wortman, *Scenarios of Power: Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995), 84–8.

²⁷ Jehanne Gheith, "Introduction," *The Memoirs of Princess Dashkova: Russia in the Time of Catherine the Great* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995), 8.

education; for we had perfect knowledge of four languages, particularly French; we danced well and drew a little . . . we were attractive to look at and our manners were ladylike. Everyone had to agree that our education left nothing to be desired," she wrote, implicitly criticizing such a lady's education.²⁸ The practice of educating daughters accelerated after the 1760s, as increasing numbers of "new men" left secondary school, having received a humanistic education. First appearing in the reign of Elizabeth, during Catherine's reign private boarding schools proliferated. By the close of the eighteenth century, there were more than a dozen in Moscow and St. Petersburg and more in provincial cities, invariably run by foreigners. However, only a minority of nobles had sufficient means to hire tutors or governesses or to send their daughters to boarding school.

Catherine intended to address this gap; she also sought to further the Westernization of Russia's manners and morals, thus extending the "civilizing mission" begun by Peter the Great. The initiative came from Ivan Betskoi, her first chief advisor on education. An advocate of complete equality in education for boys and girls, Betskoi believed that in education lay the seed of all good and evil. By instilling proper ideas in parents who would then pass them on to their children, education would produce a "new order" of individuals. Mothers, in particular, would be the moral educators of their young. Educating women thus formed part of Catherine's far-reaching efforts to improve Russian family, social, and civic life. Two years after assuming the throne, in 1764, Catherine established Russia's first school for noble girls. Called the Society for the Training of Well-Born Girls (better known as Smolnyi Institute, after the former monastery in which it was housed), the school primarily admitted daughters of servitors from the elite as well as the middling-level ranks of military and civil service – girls who either lacked a father or whose father had insufficient funds to educate them. The Smolnyi Institute aimed to refine the "vulgar" noble family by preparing better companions for servitor husbands and more caring and competent mothers of future state servitors. To promote refinement and prevent students becoming "spoiled" by contact with Russian provincial reality or their own family's crude habits, the girls were admitted at an early age and kept separate from their families during twelve or more years of schooling. They were brought into contact with the court and high society. In addition to preparing women for motherhood, the school strove to cultivate them as *citizens*, that is, as participants in the nascent public life. Students performed in plays and enjoyed outings and amusements. On Sundays and holidays, the oldest girls presided over receptions to prepare for the role they would play in society. The school graduated 70 students its first

²⁸ Gheith, *Memoirs*, 32.

year and about 900 women altogether during Catherine's reign. Catherine also established schools that admitted girls from more humble social backgrounds. About twenty other institutes, organized along lines similar to Smolnyi, were opened in Russia's major cities and towns in the years after its founding.²⁹

Catherine believed that society required cultivated women, and she encouraged aristocratic women to follow her lead. By the close of the eighteenth century, women's cultivation had become a distinctive characteristic of the cream of Russia's elite. Judging by the women's dress, their hairstyles, the dances that they knew, and the language that they spoke – almost invariably French – they were virtually indistinguishable from their Western European counterparts (Fig. 2). The artist Elisabeth Vigée Lebrun, who visited Russia in the 1790s, returned to Paris impressed by what she saw: "There were innumerable balls, concerts and theatrical performances and I thoroughly enjoyed these gatherings, where I found all the urbanity, all the grace of French company." She believed, in particular, that it would be impossible "to exceed Russian ladies in the urbanities of good society."³⁰

Some of these cultivated women also developed independent intellectual interests and enthusiastically pursued them; the erudition of a few rivaled that of their European counterparts. Catherine the Great herself was an enormously prolific writer, founding Russia's first satirical journal and authoring works in a wide variety of genres, among them comedies and plays, pedagogical works, and children's stories. Princess Catherine Dashkova (1743–1810), née Vorontsova, who at the age of nineteen assisted her friend Catherine the Great in the coup that brought her to the throne, wrote numerous plays and articles and in 1783 became one of the first Russians to edit a journal, *The Companion of Lovers of the Russian Word*. That same year, Dashkova became one of the first women in Europe to hold public office, appointed by Catherine the Great as Director of the Academy of Sciences. The appointment was so unusual that Russian officials had no idea how to proceed: Prince Viazemskii, the Minister of Justice, asked the empress whether Dashkova should be sworn in as were other state employees. The empress responded that Dashkova should be treated like the rest: "Unquestionably [she should be sworn in] . . . for I have never made a secret of Princess Dashkova's appointment to the Directorship of the Academy . . .," Catherine replied.³¹ Dashkova proved an able administrator. She supervised the refurbishment

²⁹ J. L. Black, "Educating Women in Eighteenth Century Russia: Myths and Realities," *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 20, no. 1 (1978), 23–43.

³⁰ Quoted in Judith Vowles, "The 'Feminization' of Russian Literature: Women, Language, and Literature in Eighteenth-Century Russia," in Toby W. Clyman and Diana Greene (eds.), *Women Writers in Russian Literature* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1994), 42.

³¹ Quoted in Gheith, "Introduction," *Memoirs*, 5.



2. Portrait of S. Iakovleva, from *The Female Portrait in Russian Art*

and expansion of the Academy's library, increased the Academy's budget, oversaw the construction of new buildings, and instituted lectures for less privileged nobles. In 1783, Dashkova also founded and became President of the Russian Academy (1783–94). The most widely known example of women's cultivation, Dashkova was hardly unique. Highly cultivated women

dwelt in provincial towns as well as Moscow and St. Petersburg. In his semifictional autobiography set in the reign of Catherine the Great, the writer Sergei Aksakov presents us with such a woman, Sofia Nikolaevna Zubina, a character based upon his own mother. The daughter of a leading official in the provincial town of Ufa, Sofia Nikolaevna corresponded with the writer and journalist Nikolai Novikov in far-off Moscow. She so impressed him with her letters that Novikov regularly sent her all new and important books in Russian. “[A]ny learned or casual travelers who visited the new and ravishing District of Ufa never failed to make Sofia Nikolaevna’s acquaintance, and to leave written tributes of their admiration and regard,” wrote her son, citing the names of leading intellectual figures of the time, foreigners as well Russians.³²

In their civilizing role, such women exerted influence over the development of Russian culture. In urban salons and elite intellectual circles, cultivated women became arbiters of taste. Writers now wrote for a society that had been transformed by the presence of aristocratic women, influencing both the style that writers adopted and the themes that they raised in their poetry and prose. Literary language became feminized, with women’s tastes and language, untouched by Church Slavonic or chancellery idiom, the measure of cultural excellence. Sentimentalism, in vogue from the 1780s to around 1820, contributed to this feminization by encouraging a perception of women as “vessels of emotion” and models of virtue. Such influence, however, did not authorize women to step outside socially prescribed feminine roles. Granting women a central civilizing role, it left gender differences intact. Men continued to monopolize literary production, their repertoire now expanded to incorporate a feminine, emotional component.

By contrast, for women to adopt male competencies risked violating the natural order. Thus, feminization remained a “male enterprise.”³³ Nowhere is the ambiguous cultural role of women clearer than when they sought to wield pens of their own. Those who took up their pens were expected to do so *as women*, by contributing to the “moral refinement of the nation,” rather than by writing for pleasure or pursuing their own aims, as men were free to do.³⁴ Nevertheless, it was in this period that substantial numbers of women first found their way into print. They translated from foreign languages or wrote prose and most commonly, poetry of their own. To legitimize their writing, women adopted traditional roles, primarily that of moral educator of family and nation. Most women writers made their appearance in print

³² Sergei Aksakov, *The Family Chronicle* (New York: Dutton, 1961), 79.

³³ Carolin Heyder and Arja Rosenholm, “Feminisation as Functionalisation: The Presentation of Femininity by the Sentimentalist Man,” in Rosslyn, *Women and Gender*, 57.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 61; Wendy Rosslyn, “Making Their Way into Print: Poems of Eighteenth-Century Russian Women,” *Slavonic and East European Review* 78, no. 3 (July 2000), 413.