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Catherine the Great and the Enlightenment

Simon Dixon

‘Our age is the age of enlightenment’, proclaimed Archbishop Platon (Levshin) in his New Year sermon for 1771. Given in the great chapel of the Winter Palace in the presence of Catherine II and her Court, this oration was evidently intended to reassure the empress that, despite the distractions of an expensive war with the Turks, her efforts to enlighten her empire had not been in vain. ‘Never, indeed,’ Platon continued, ‘has a government incorporated so abundantly the spirit of guardianship and philanthropy’.¹ As tutor in divinity to the heir to the throne and a favoured Court preacher, the archbishop was more aware than most churchmen of the importance of pleasing the empress. Yet there was more to his rhetoric than idle flattery.

Catherine had been wooing the enlightened circles of Europe since her accession to the throne in 1762, opening up a correspondence with Voltaire in 1763 and becoming the patron of Diderot by purchasing his library two years later. Personal relationships with leading philosophers were evidently intended to secure a sympathetic hearing in the West for a ruler widely condemned as a usurper and an assassin in the wake of the coup that had overthrown her husband, Peter III. And there was plenty in Catherine’s Russia for Europe to marvel at. Though the empress confessed to Voltaire almost four months after Platon’s sermon in 1771 that she was ‘too busy fighting’ to contemplate widespread implementation of her Instruction (*Nakaz*)², her commitment to reform was not in doubt.

In the first five years of Catherine’s reign, she had reformed the Senate, secularized most of the monastic lands, established a vast Foundling Home in Moscow, and set in train a major programme of foreign colonization in her empire. Moreover, in the four years since the Legislative Commission of 1767 – an ambitious and ultimately unsuccessful attempt to codify the law – Russia had seen an unprecedented burst of intellectual

¹ Quoted in Simon Dixon, “‘Prosveshchenie’: Enlightenment in eighteenth-century Russia’ in: Richard Butterwick, Simon Davies, and Gabriel Sánchez Espinosa ed., *Peripheries of the Enlightenment*, Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century (2008:01) 247.

² Voltaire, *Correspondence and related documents*, The Complete Works of Voltaire, vols. 85-135, Theodore Besterman ed. (Banbury and Oxford 1968-1977) D17127 Catherine to Voltaire, 26 March 1771.

activity, much of it as openly indebted to Western enlightened thought as the empress's own treatise.

Written in French before being translated into Russian and other languages, the *Nakaz* itself drew freely on Montesquieu, Beccaria, Justi, Bielfeld and others. In it, their works were culled, filleted and rearranged to present Catherine's vision of a tolerant, educated society in which her subjects' liberty and property would be protected by unambiguous laws, enacted by a virtuous absolute sovereign and implemented by judges who were to presume the accused innocent until proved guilty. Since such ideas were largely unprecedented in Russia, it is hardly surprising that they proved alien to the majority of nobles there, most of whom were more preoccupied with boundary disputes on their provincial estates than with abstract political principles.³

Undeterred by their incomprehension, Catherine tried another tack. At the beginning of 1769, the first year of the Ottoman campaign, she launched a satirical periodical, *All Sorts*, in which she herself assumed a benign editorial persona. 'Granny' (*babushka*) sought to coax her readers to polish their manners by mocking loutish behaviour and ignorant superstition; a tactic later repeated in *O, these times!* (1772), the first and best known of the twenty-five plays written by the empress. Like the journals published by Nikolay Novikov that engaged *All Sorts* in mock debate, this was journalism in the tradition of Addison and Steele, whose inspiration was frankly acknowledged: 'There is not a little salt in the English *Spectator*, and *All Sorts* resembles it, so why should it not contain something useful for society?'⁴

Meanwhile, in November 1768, Catherine had founded a Society for the Translation of Foreign Books under the aegis of one of her state-secretaries, Grigorii Kozitskii. Among the first works to appear were extracts from the *Encyclopédie* which reflected the empress's current interest in Greece and the Mediterranean. Alongside her correspondence with Voltaire and the verses of Vasilii Petrov, such translations played their part in laying the intellectual foundations for the 'Greek Project' finally articulated between 1780 and 1782 – an extravagant (and ultimately unfulfilled) plan to recreate the Byzantine Empire under Russian

³ On the *Nakaz* and its reception, see Isabel de Madariaga, *Russia in the Age of Catherine the Great* (London 1981) 139-183.

⁴ Quoted in W. Gareth Jones, *Nikolay Novikov: Enlightener of Russia* (Cambridge 1984) 22.

domination.⁵ More than forty foreign titles were in print by 1772, and by the time the Society's work was transferred to the newly created Russian Academy in 1783, 112 translations had been published with a further 129 in progress.

To churchmen such as Archbishop Platon, determined to distinguish between (true) spiritual enlightenment and (mere) secular learning, the prevailing intellectual trend was bound to be disturbing. There is, of course, no reason to suppose that these two conceptions of enlightenment were necessarily incompatible. Platon himself belongs firmly in the tradition of scholarly divines recently highlighted by David Sorkin, who has charted the development of a moderate religious Enlightenment across the confessional divide from London to Berlin and from Geneva to Vienna – 'a conscious search for a middle way between extremes' which emphasised the values of reasonableness and (limited) toleration.⁶

In some ways, one might have expected a parallel response in St. Petersburg to the predicament which confronted churchmen everywhere: whereas many of the ideas the Russians borrowed from the West required a vocabulary as novel as the concepts themselves, they already had a word for enlightenment – *prosveshchenie* – whose original religious associations still dominated the Russian Academy dictionary's definitions in the 1820s. Also, the notion of moral self-perfection was always central to the Enlightenment in Russia. 'O enlightenment!' Novikov urged corrupt judges who had unaccountably failed to read the Italian jurist Beccaria, 'heavenly gift, lift the veil of ignorance swiftly for the defence of humanity.'⁷ Yet no fully fledged 'Orthodox Enlightenment' emerged in Catherine's empire. For one thing, the Russian Church was unable to match the intellectual resources of Protestantism, Catholicism and Judaism. For another, there was no

⁵ Andrei Zorin, *Kormia dvuglavogo orla: Literatura i gosudarstvennaia ideologiia v Rossii v poslednei treti XVIII – pervoi treti XIX veka* [Feeding the double-headed eagle: literature and state ideology in Russia in the last third of the eighteenth century and the first third of the nineteenth] (Moscow 2001) 39-59.

⁶ See David Sorkin, *The religious Enlightenment: Protestants, Jews, and Catholics from London to Vienna* (Princeton 2008) 11. On Platon, see O.A. Tsapina, 'Pravoslavnoe prosveshchenie – oksiumoron ili istoricheskaiia real'nost'?' ['The Orthodox enlightenment: oxymoron or historical reality?'] in: S.Ia. Karp and S.A. Mezin ed., *Evropeiskoe Prosveshchenie i tsivilizatsiia Rossii* [The European Enlightenment and Russian Civilization] (Moscow 2004) 303-304.

⁷ See Dixon, "'Prosveshchenie': Enlightenment in eighteenth-century Russia', 233, 246.

equivalent in St Petersburg to the thriving public sphere that provided crucial oxygen for the religious Enlightenment further west.

This lack of a vibrant public sphere where ideas could be discussed and debated was no less frustrating for the secular Enlightenment in Russia: unable to survive from subscriptions alone, Novikov's short-lived journals depended on the empress's patronage for support. Scarcely any of the philosophical works published by the Society for the Translations sold more than 400 copies in the first decade of the Society's existence. Many sold fewer than 200 to an embryonic Russian reading public which displayed a marked preference for light-hearted literature.⁸ But at least the authors of such works could rely on a tacit degree of intellectual sympathy from the empress, at any rate until the last decade of her reign. The overwhelmingly secular content of the *Nakaz* is an accurate reflection of its author's mind. The main legacies of her Pietist education in Stettin were a profound sense of duty and a persistent suspicion of clerics, above all of monasticism. This Catherine shared with the French *philosophes* who were her principal personal contact with Western enlightened thought.

Though the empress's secularisation of the monastic lands in 1764 was prompted largely by financial need in the aftermath of the Seven Years' War, it delighted the anti-clerical Voltaire with whom she had begun to correspond in 1763. For the remaining fifteen years of his life, he was to remain a willing mouthpiece for Catherine's regime in Europe, revelling in their mutual distaste for Polish Catholics and Muslim Turks. Diderot, another critic of 'unnatural' monasticism, was forty-nine in 1762, the year of Catherine's accession to the throne; Voltaire was twenty years older still. Here in itself was reason to think that the new empress offered the last chance in their lifetimes of a truly enlightened monarch. Frederick the Great had already disappointed them in Prussia and Louis XV's abolition of the *parlements* in 1770 seemed to herald the descent of Asiatic despotism on France itself. By contrast, Catherine was the monarch the philosophes had been waiting for. It was for her, Diderot insisted, that Montesquieu had written his great book, *On the Spirit of the Laws* (1748): 'Your majesty has a strong mind, a great soul, extensive vision.'⁹ What was more, to western minds largely ignorant of Russian history, her whole underdeveloped empire seemed to represent a unique *tabula rasa* on which an appropriately

⁸ Gary Marker, *Publishing, printing, and the origins of intellectual life in Russia, 1700-1800* (Princeton 1985) 209.

⁹ Diderot, *Mémoires pour Catherine II*, Paul Vernière ed. (Paris 1966) 199, 10.

enlightened mind could inscribe a new and glorious ‘civilisation’.¹⁰ It was a feeling of anticipation shared by the Protestant pastor and philosopher, Johann Gottfried Herder, who declared in 1769: ‘This is the moment to act in Russia: the age, the century, the spirit, the very taste demand it.’¹¹

When it came to action of her own, Catherine recognised in an early letter to Voltaire, written as she was finishing her own *Nakaz*, that it would be ‘very difficult’ to reduce her celebrated correspondent’s shafts of ironic wisdom to a practical programme of reform.¹² Philosophes who disagreed among themselves on so many crucial issues, from the nature of despotism to the utility of cruel punishments, never provided a blueprint for government.¹³ Moreover, since they had all been kept at arm’s length from any influence on the administration of France, none of them had any practical experience. During his visit to Russia in 1773-74, Diderot explicitly told the empress of his antipathy to ‘purely systematic ideas on serious subjects’ and irritated her with his Utopian schemes.¹⁴ Diderot was all too conscious of the oddity of his uniquely privileged position, as a thinker permitted to offer uncensored advice to the ruler of an empire about which he knew almost nothing. ‘I’m allowed to say everything that comes into my head,’ he wrote to Princess Dashkova, ‘wise things, perhaps, when I’m feeling stupid, and perhaps very silly things when I’m feeling wise. Ideas transplanted from Paris to Petersburg certainly take on a very different colour.’¹⁵

Though her inquiring mind remained open to ideas from a variety of quarters, including the *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1765-1769) by Sir

¹⁰ A word first used in French in 1757 – in English ten years later in Ferguson’s *Essay on the History of Civil Society* – and a concept honed with Russia’s eighteenth-century political experiment firmly in mind. See G. Goggi, ‘The *philosophes* and the debate over Russian civilization’ in: Maria di Salvo and Lindsey Hughes ed. *A window on the West* (Rome 1996) 299-305.

¹¹ J.G. Herder, *J.G. Herder on social and political culture*, F.M. Barnard trans. and ed. (Cambridge 1969) 93.

¹² Voltaire, *Correspondence and related documents*, D13433, 9 July 1766.

¹³ See, in particular, Isabel de Madariaga, *Politics and culture in eighteenth-century Russia* (London 1998) 215-234.

¹⁴ Those he suggested at the time of his visit included the idea of ‘planting’ a colony of Swiss in Saratov as a way of developing liberty in Russia; after his death, Catherine was even more appalled to discover that he advocated the abolition of serfdom.

¹⁵ Quoted in Simon Dixon, *Catherine the Great* (London 2009) 226.

William Blackstone, Catherine relied mostly for her administrative reforms on the German Enlightened ideas which had dominated Russian discussion of the subject since the reign of Peter the Great (1682-1725). Devoted primarily to the rational reform of government administration and the regulation of the population as a whole, such ideas were transmitted partly by imported books (though only one of the publications issued by the Society for the Translation of Foreign Books between 1768 and 1783 was from the German), partly by German scholars in the Russian Academy of Sciences and not least by the flow of Russian students to German universities (the only university in Russia in the eighteenth century being that at Moscow, founded in 1755). The German science of government – Cameralism, or *Polizeiwissenschaft* – was the inspiration not only for supplement of the Nakaz concerning the police but also for the boards of welfare established by Catherine's Provincial Reform of 1775 and the Police Ordinance of 1782 (literally a statute of 'good order'), a series of characteristically detailed regulations focused primarily on the policing of the many provincial towns which had flourished or been newly established in the seven years since the earlier legislation.¹⁶

Catherine, however, never resolved the dilemma that faced all reforming absolute monarchs in the eighteenth century: on the one hand, she wanted to expand the provision of elementary education as a way of fostering a sympathetic popular response to legislative initiatives such as these; on the other hand, to do so was to risk undermining the social stability she held so dear. Her own commitment to child-rearing emerged in her treatment of her two grandchildren: Alexander (b. 1777), destined for the Russian throne, and Constantine (b. 1779), so christened in the hope that he would ultimately ascend the throne in Constantinople. 'Your children belong to you, to me, and to the state', the empress insisted to the boys' parents, Grand Duke Paul and Grand Duchess Maria Fedorovna in December 1781. 'From their earliest childhood I have made it a duty and a pleasure to take the most tender care of them.'¹⁷ Her aim was to nurture not only healthy boys, but also rational children of the Enlightenment. Tears were forbidden, inquisitiveness encouraged. Catherine's *Russian primer to*

¹⁶ The most stimulating account of these influences remains Marc Raeff, *The well-ordered police state: social and institutional change through law in the Germanies and Russia, 1600-1800* (New Haven, CT 1983).

¹⁷ *Sbornik Imperatorskago Russkago Istoricheskago Obshchestva* [Miscellany of the Imperial Russian Historical Society] IX, 97.

teach young people to read, compiled for her grandsons ‘even while legislating’ in the spring of 1780 and put on public sale, incorporated a series of moral injunctions derived from her own brand of secularised Protestantism – ‘the law requires a man to love his neighbour as himself; ‘do as you would be done by’ – and concluded with a definition of citizenship which highlighted her favourite virtues: obedience and precision. ‘Question: what is a good citizen? Answer: A good citizen is he who fulfils precisely all the duties of a citizen.’¹⁸ Society’s obligation to obey an appropriately enlightened monarch was emphasised in *The Book on the Duties of Man and Citizen*, a textbook compiled by her Serbian adviser, F.I. Janković of Mirjevo (1741-1814). Janković was a disciple of Abbot Johann Ignaz Felbiger (1724-1788), the pedagogue who had earlier been responsible for reshaping the educational policies of both Frederick the Great of Prussia and Maria Theresa of Austria.¹⁹ (It was Maria Theresa’s son, Joseph II, acting on Felbiger’s recommendation, who sent Janković to Russia.) Reprinted six times between 1783 and 1796, in editions totalling at least 43,000 copies, Janković’s book served as a crucial text for the co-educational elementary schools established in provincial and district towns from August 1786. Despite persistent staffing problems, there were over 3000 such schools in Russia by the end of the century, free but not compulsory, teaching approximately 20,000 pupils, some 10 per cent of whom were girls.²⁰

In Catherine’s mind, education was designed to encourage her subjects to be content with the station that they occupied and zealous in the service of her empire. Culminating in the Charters to the Nobility and the Towns of 1785, her social legislation was not only obsessively detailed in content but also increasingly prescriptive as it descended the social scale.²¹ Though the empress was prepared to make some limited allowance for a degree of social mobility, she found it much harder to accept the Enlightenment’s emphasis on self-development. Anxious to avoid debates among ‘the blind, the semi-educated, and the half-witted’, she made it clear

¹⁸ Max Okenfuss, *The discovery of childhood in Russia* (Newtonville, MA 1980) 58-62.

¹⁹ On Felbiger, see J.V.H. Melton, *Absolutism and the origins of elementary schooling in Prussia and Austria* (Cambridge 1988).

²⁰ Gary Marker, ‘Who rules the word? Public school education and the fate of universality in Russia, 1782-1803’, *Russian Review*, 20.1 (1993) 15-34; Marker, *Publshing*, 193.

²¹ See David Griffiths and George Munro ed., *Catherine II’s Charters of 1785 to the Nobility and the Towns* (Bakersfield, CA 1991).

from the start that her own *Nakaz* was to be the sole intellectual guide to the Legislative Commission's proceedings.²² Legislation approving the establishment of private printing presses in 1783 was designed to propagate useful knowledge and not the Masonic nonsense which eventually led to the prosecution of Novikov, the publisher whose satirical journals she had subsidised in the early 1770s. The empress was equally appalled when Alexander Radishchev, one of the first students she had sent to Leipzig in 1766 and the translator of Mably's *Observations on the History of Greece* for the Society for the Translation of Foreign Books in 1773, betrayed her by attacking serfdom and alleging widespread government corruption in his *Journey from St Petersburg to Moscow* (1790). As French enlightened thought became more radical in the last years of her reign, Catherine even turned against the earlier generation of thinkers who had inspired her the most. Though a luxurious edition of Bayle's *Dictionary*, which she had first read at the beginning of the 1750s, was among her last orders from the St Petersburg bookseller Johann Weitbrecht, Voltaire's works were confiscated in 1792 and two years later, seduced by the notion that the Enlightenment was a primary cause of revolution in France, Catherine told Baron Melchior Grimm that he had been right to distance himself from the philosophes, whose work had served 'only to destroy'. The empress's last significant piece of legislation, issued on 11 October 1796, revoked the right of individuals to own private presses. Twelve of the sixteen then in operation closed overnight. The impact on publishing was no less immediate. Whereas 320 secular books appeared in Russia in 1796, only 212 were published in the first year of Tsar Paul's reign, the lowest total since 1777.²³

So underdeveloped was Russian society and political culture in the second half of the eighteenth century that many of Catherine's Enlightened reforms could only have been expected to take root over a long period. They were not granted that luxury. Though her son had been systematically schooled in the Enlightenment, he rejected many of its principles in favour of a return to barely restrained militarism. Whereas Catherine had emphasized the virtues of obedience, Tsar Paul took her obsession with precision to unprecedented extremes, ruling by fear exactly according to the prototypical despotism denounced by his mother's

²² O.A. Omel'chenko, '*Zakonnaia monarkhiia*' *Ekateriny II: Prosveshchennyi absolutizm v Rossii* [The 'legal monarchy' of Catherine II: Enlightened absolutism in Russia] (Moscow 1993) 134.

²³ See for further references: Dixon, *Catherine the Great*, 310.

intellectual inspiration, Montesquieu, in *The Spirit of the Laws*. And none of Paul's exclusively male successors in the nineteenth century could easily take the last woman on the Russian throne as his role model.