

Voltaire as Propagandist in Russian Enlightenment

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Annotation: A foreign-born woman and usurper of the Russian throne, Catherine the Great held no legitimate claim to the crown. Her sole connection with the house of Romanov derived from her marriage to the late Emperor, Peter III, whose murder she was widely known to have orchestrated. The royals who held genealogical claims to the throne overtly devised plots to replace the new Tsarina. Both Ivan VI and Paul I, armed with supporters, threatened Catherine's rule, as well as the guards who possessed the military might to overthrow the Empress.[20] In a letter to Voltaire on September 21, 1762, Catherine acknowledged the conspirators and potential traitors all around her: "Every guardsman when he looks at me can say: 'I made that woman.'" A shrewd politician, Catherine also knew she needed the support of the Court, the public, and other powerful regimes in order to maintain power, suppress rebellion, and emerge as a leading world power.

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Catherine's letters to Voltaire often served as a means to woo the influential philosopher to her cause. Rather than pursue intellectual subjects, Catherine utilized her letters to flatter and cajole the philosopher. While Voltaire often attempted to initiate the Empress in an intellectual dialogue, Catherine often sidestepped his inquiries. For example, "Voltaire did try to start a discussion...in the case of the [Claude Adrien] Helvetius translation by Golitsuin. In response to Voltaire's comments...Catherine blithely agrees...but confesses she has not read the book yet." One has the impression that Voltaire would have liked to dwell on literary, philosophic or artistic subjects as he did with his other correspondents. However, Catherine was far more interested in winning the philosopher's approval than in entering a philosophical dialogue. The content of her letters does not permit one to see her primary motives as anything other than propagandistic. She is not at all interested in broadening her cultural and intellectual horizons. Catherine seeks no advice from Voltaire on how to rule Russia.... Instead Catherine tries to impose her views, justify her policies and explain away her failures. Voltaire is, for Catherine, the best method of diffusing favorable information in Europe. As a testament to Catherine's political ingenuity, she skillfully kept Voltaire at arm's length, feigning a belief in absolute liberalism in her letters while, in practice, implementing repressive reforms in her country. For example, the opinion she shares with Voltaire regarding serfdom did not always correspond with the laws she passed. "The Empress turned over 800,000 peasants to private proprietors. The 1763 law limiting freedom of movement by requiring the peasant to get a permit from the landlord before he/she could leave the property has been cited as evidence that Catherine enserfed peasants in the name of fiscal expediency."²⁴¹ Catherine's correspondence largely acted as propaganda intended to assure Voltaire (and Europe) of Russia's prosperity. Handicapped by distance and a lack of information, Voltaire was simply too willing to believe in Catherine's liberalism.

Despite her impure intentions, Catherine remained a loyal and unwavering disciple of Voltaire. Catherine revered the philosopher whose work she had read since her youth. Upon receiving a poem from Voltaire dedicated to her, the empress was "totally overwhelmed by her emotions...In a letter full of flattery and profound respect...Catherine announced that she had no desire to read any literary works that were not written as well as Voltaire's." She often called Voltaire her "teacher", her "thinking instructor", and her "master of thought". After his death in 1778, Catherine wrote letters to her contemporaries imploring them to study and memorize his works. "She believed that the study of his work educated citizens, that it helped to form geniuses, heroes and writers, and that it would help to develop thousands of talents". Her devotion to Voltaire after his death remains evident of her sincere and genuine reverence of him.

Throughout her reign, Catherine remained committed to intellectual pursuits and encouraged members of her court to engage in them as well. The empress provided her palace staff with a library and reportedly spent an average of 80,000 rubles annually on books. In his essay, "Catherine the Great: Enlightened Empress?" Simon Henderson implores the reader to consider the constraints the empress faced when deciding if she was truly an enlightened despot. Henderson asserts that despite her deceptive tactics, she always possessed an "unswerving commitment to modernizing Russia". Early on, Catherine concerned herself with the philosophies and culture of the enlightenment. Though she often agreed with their liberal positions, her status in court was entirely reliant upon the support of noble families. As a

result, the Empress could not always implement reforms the way she would have liked. For example, when confronted with the issue of serfdom, Catherine initially suggested in her proposal of "the Instruction" that landowners offer serfs the option to "purchase their freedom" ^[29] or that the government limit the period of servitude to six years. However, the nobles omitted this section from the document as it did not benefit them. "Rather than seeing her as insincere in her concern for the peasantry, historians have recently highlighted...what she might have achieved had the circumstances been different.". Despite the constraints, Catherine did manage to implement few policies that benefitted the serfs. In 1767 it was forbidden for foster parents to enserf illegitimate children and in 1781 enserfment of prisoners of war was prohibited and a law passes that saw marriage of a free man to a serf woman emancipate the woman. Catherine is known to have investigated and then bought out landowners who were reported to ill-treat their serfs,. Voltaire outwardly supported emancipation of the serfs. The philosopher believed that the Russian aristocracy "should not permit the vast majority of the people to go on suffering from the arbitrariness of [the] very laws who ought to be to afford protection to each and all.". Furthermore, in an attempt to create a more educated bureaucracy, Catherine moved to bring better education to her people. In 1786, she established the Russian Statute of National Education to launch a national school system. As a result of her campaign to modify Russia, Catherine successfully introduced the tsardom to the Western world and furthered the degree to which it was involved in European affairs. While Catherine worked to bring enlightenment principles to Russia, Voltaire worked to improve her reputation in Europe. The philosopher enthusiastically adopted her cause, commending her to friends in high places, advising her in politics, and distributing her texts to the liberal media, thereby cementing her title as an enlightened despot. "Voltaire participated in a campaign to protect Catherine's reputation...he wrote pamphlets in support of her policies...[and] published her pronouncements in the western press.". In a letter to Marquis D'Argenson, a French statesman, Voltaire asked him to help "re-establish [Catherine's] reputation in Paris", (Lentin 13). Catherine, happy with rise to popularity, admits to Prince De Ligne: "It was certainly Voltaire who brought me into fashion,".

However, Voltaire certainly recognized the benefits of fraternizing with the Empress of Russia. The philosopher enjoyed socializing with Europe's elite and often boasted of his influential friends. "He avowed the usefulness of having a crowned up [his] sleeve...". Furthermore, as a result of his association with Catherine, Voltaire saw it beneficial for his own reputation to rid the Empress of her disparaging image. "As Catherine's name was linked more and more to that of the philosophes, it became important that she be cleared of such any unsavory charges.". Thus neither pen pal was possessed entirely "pure" intentions. Yet, despite their ulterior motives, the correspondence remains an important document recording the political pursuits of an Empire. Catherine's alignment with Voltaire acted as an early indication of the Russian tsardom moving towards closer relations with Europe.

Correspondence

The main topics of discussion in the Voltaire-Catherine letters were Russia's foreign and domestic affairs. Despite their mutual affection for literature, art and philosophy, very rarely did Catherine and Voltaire discuss such topics. One scholar has suggested that Catherine did not have the intellectual capacity to have such discussions with Voltaire, and that Catherine brought up primarily political affairs in her letters in order to impart her political ideas onto Voltaire. They did discuss cultural matters in the year 1772, which suggests that Catherine wanted to distract Voltaire from her recent partition of Poland.

Both Catherine and Voltaire wrote to each other in generally approbatory tones. Voltaire's letters to Catherine have been described as "a catalogue of extravagant and unqualified compliments, and fulsome approbation of her policies." He even addressed her as "my Catherine." While Catherine also flattered Voltaire in her letters, she wrote in a more contrived manner, perhaps due to the fact that her secretary Pictet thoroughly revised the letters (unlike the letters she wrote to Frederick the Great) prior to sending them. The main difference between the two sets of letters seems to be that "[Catherine] compliments Voltaire, to tickle his vanity and play on his prejudices", while Voltaire's compliments "convey undertones of hero-worship."

Domestic affairs

In their discussions of Russia's domestic affairs, Catherine only exchanged news with Voltaire that would cast Russia and her rule in a positive light. She sent him news that depicted Russia as an economically stable and prosperous country and to depict herself as the epitome of an enlightened despot.

Catherine greatly exaggerated Russia's economic stability and greatly misinformed Voltaire on the subject. For instance, Catherine in the correspondence never mentioned the Pugachev rebellion of 1773–74. When Voltaire brought up the subject, Catherine brushed it off by simply saying that she had it under control. As a result, Voltaire never realized the significant economic hardship of Russia's peasant class that had triggered the revolt.

They often discussed legislation, as both strongly advocated for the absolute power of the law. Voltaire asked for information on Catherine's regulations, and Catherine sent Voltaire a copy of her Instructions, which he read twice. The subject of serfdom, in regard to which Voltaire advocated emancipation, also figured prominently in their correspondence. Although Voltaire sent Catherine advice on the subject, he never pushed his ideas, nor did he condemn Catherine for not taking more progressive action against the institution.

Nevertheless, Voltaire made clear his stance regarding serfdom in his submission for an essay competition held by the Free Economic Society of St. Petersburg in 1767. For the subject topic of the contest, Catherine chose "the merits of private ownership of land by the peasants." Voltaire's essay, to his disappointment, only received an honorable mention.

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