



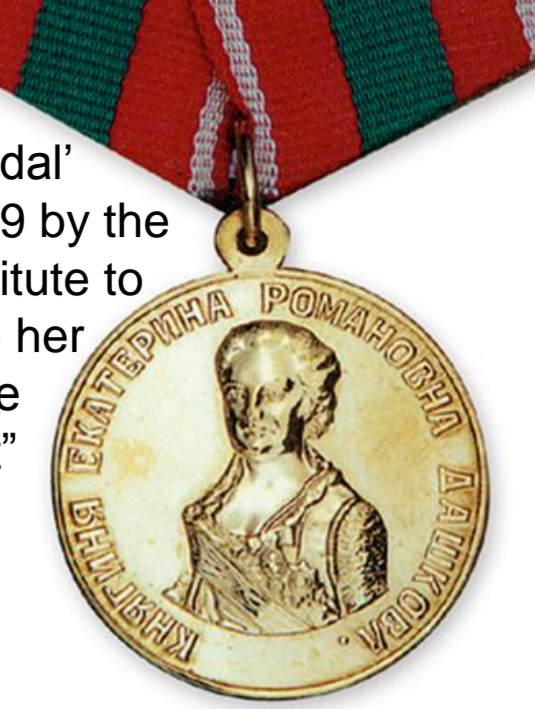
Dashkova on a 1996 Russian stamp as part of a series commemorating "famous women"



Jessica Tipton, Bristol University, PhD Year 2  
[jessica.tipton@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:jessica.tipton@bristol.ac.uk)  
Supervisors: Prof. Derek Offord, Dr. Vladislav Rjéoutski  
[www.bris.ac.uk/arts/research/french-in-russia](http://www.bris.ac.uk/arts/research/french-in-russia)



Dashkova 'medal' created in 1999 by the Dashkova Institute to commemorate her "services to the Enlightenment"



# Princess Dashkova (1743-1810): francophone Russian or Russian gallophobe?

## Dashkova's francophonie

### Was French Dashkova's main language as a child, or just one of many?

- As a child Dashkova was taught French, Russian, German and Italian, and later learned English. She claimed French was especially important in her education and that she had to improve her Russian to communicate with her in-laws.
- However, when Dashkova was growing up in the 1740s/50s, French was not yet widespread amongst the Russian nobility, particularly amongst women. Other documented francophone Russian women were younger than her by 20-30 years.
- Perhaps her French came to the fore later as both her relationship with Catherine II developed in the 1760s and as French grew in importance in Russian noble society?

### Evidence of Dashkova's written and spoken fluency in French

- Favourite childhood authors all French (Bayle, Montesquieu, Voltaire).
- More French books in library (37%) than any other language.

*"...she expresses herself completely fluently..."*

*"...a French-speaking Tomiris..."*

(Diderot and Voltaire respectively on Dashkova's spoken French)

### Dashkova's reliance on French

- French used for most private communications throughout her life, e.g., with Catherine II from 1760s to 1790s; with brother Aleksandr in late 1700s; with nephew Mikhail in early 1800s.
- Relied on French for communicating with non-French foreigners, e.g., Swedish Academy of Science, Scottish Enlightenment figures and her Irish friends.
- Her continuing use of French in private, despite her public role as advocate for the Russian language, shows that French remained her "natural" language throughout her life, but this did not interfere with her commitment to Russia and its language.

## Was Dashkova aware of her own, and Russia's, reliance on French?

- Dashkova commented remorsefully in her essay *Vospitanie (Upbringing)* that girls needed to know French to marry.
- Catherine Wilmot wrote in a letter to a friend during her stay with Dashkova:

*"...fascination is drawn from France [...] Such arrant folly! [...] The National music, the national Dancing, the national Salutation, the national dress & the national Language have all sunk down to the Ground & none but Slaves practice any! What I have seen therefore has been a superstructure from France – the Monkey rampant on the Bear's back! [...] Princess Daschkaw's Character [...] is diametrically opposite to all singerie for if ever there was an Original upon the face of the Earth it is herself..."*

[my underlining]  
From *The Russian Journals of Martha and Catherine Wilmot 1803-1808*, London, 1934, p. 195

**BUT**

- She was seemingly unaware of the irony of using *French* to castigate the French frequently in her memoirs (see pink box on right).
- Dashkova and Catherine II discussed, in *French*, the need for a Russian Academy and the qualities of the Russian language (later described as "our language" in Dashkova's record of their conversation).

## Dashkova's Russian

### Did Dashkova really need to "improve" her Russian to converse with her in-laws?

- In her memoirs, Dashkova says she had Russian lessons as a child but later needed to work on her Russian.
- However, she will have needed to converse in Russian with family and servants, and there are extant childhood letters written in fluent Russian to her father. This possible overstatement of her poor Russian may have been made to demonstrate her achievements in promoting Russian as head of the Academy, and/or perhaps show her ability to hone her Russian language skills from a poor start.

### When did Dashkova use Russian?

- Dashkova used Russian mainly out of necessity: with her servant "who only knew his native language"; to comment in secret to a Russian friend on her European travels; in letters to her father and in-laws who only knew Russian; and in letters and papers related to her two Academies, estate and legal matters.
- However, there are also a few letters composed in Russian with correspondents for whom French was usually the common language, such as with her brother Aleksandr, her daughter, her nephew Mikhail, and Catherine II. Perhaps this was to emphasise their shared identity, to practise her Russian or just for interest.

## Dashkova's loyalty to Russia and the Russian language

- Founded the Russian Academy to promote her native language.
- Used Russian for public essays and speeches related to the Academy.
- Refers to herself as the Irish Wilmot sisters' "Russian mother" during their stay with her in Russia.
- Employs a Russian language and gusli tutor for Martha Wilmot.
- Introduces Diderot to Russian folk music.
- Says that "love for the Fatherland is the first and most necessary quality in a citizen".
- Her library included thousands of books in Russian (31%), though these are still outweighed by French books (37%).



The Russian Academy on Vasil'evskii island

## Examples of Dashkova expressing gallophobia in French

- "slander, indecency and rage" in France during the Revolution;
- the uncouth behaviour of Lyonnaise women in the theatre, "proof enough that the alleged civility of the French does not come from the heart";
- "present-day French writers who pile up remorselessly lie upon lie and thus rob history of any consolation or profit that might be derived from it";
- "the priestly rabble of Catholic faith [who] did not allow [Newton's philosophy] in France".

Above passages from *The Memoirs of Princess Dashkova*, ed. Fitzlyon, 1995, pp. 56, 91, 117, 158. Note Dashkova composed her memoirs in French in 1804-5, but they were not published until 1840 in English translation. The French original does not survive and so the English translation is arguably the most reliable version.

