The French language and French cultural model in the Russian nobility: a case study on the Vorontsovs

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Members of the Vorontsov/Dashkov family likely to feature in research

Generation born before 1750
• Princess Ekaterina Dashkova, née Vorontsova (1743-1810), confidante of Catherine II, head of Russian Academies of Science and Language
• Dashkova’s brothers, Counts Aleksandr (1741-1805) and Semion (1744-1832), Ambassadors in London, francophone but anglophone
• E.A. Vorontsova, née Sinivina (?-1784), wife of Semion, musician

Generation born after 1760
• Dashkova’s son Pavel (1763-1807), graduate of Edinburgh University
• N.A. Kurakina (1768-1831), Dashkova’s relation by Panin line, musician
• Semion’s son Mikhail (1782-1856), served in Napoleonic Wars

Generation born in early-mid 19th century
• Sofiya Shuvalova, née Vorontsova (1825-1879), Mikhail’s daughter
• Illarion Vorontsov-Dashkov (1837-1916), Governor of Caucasus

Why?

Several academics, mainly from Russia and the US, have conducted research on Dashkova and the rest of the Vorontsov family, but the influence of French language and culture does not appear to have ever been a focus. This case study is designed to stand alone as my PhD project but should also complement the findings of a wider project at Bristol University.

Emerging research questions

French v. other languages and cultures
• What role did other languages play in the Vorontsovs’ lives? How did Dashkova’s Russian, German, English and Italian compare with her French?
• What influence did Dashkova and her brothers’ foreign travel and acquaintances have on their attitude towards languages and culture?
• To what extent did the family’s anglophilia influence its pascalophobia, or vice versa?
• Why did Aleksandr and Semion continue to use French when serving as ambassadors in England?

Linguistic identity
• Did the Vorontsovs consciously associate the French language with the French people and culture?
• What was the impact of Dashkova’s official role as head of two Russian Academies on her francophony? Was there a difference between her private and public use of language?

French over the generations
• How did Dashkova’s command and use of various languages compare with that of her brothers Aleksandr and Semion, and her sister Elizaveta?
• How did the family’s attitude towards, and use of, French change over time?

The French cultural model
• How did Dashkova’s interest in music compare with that of her younger female relatives Kurakina & Sinivina?
• Were these women influenced by French, Italian or wider European culture in their musical activities?
• How does their use of language in songs they composed and performed compare?

Emerging hypotheses
• Dashkova’s public profile in Russia and abroad, in particular her official position as Head of the Russian Language Academy, meant she was more conscious of linguistic identity and of the need to use her native language than other Russian francophone noblemen and women.
• The rest of Dashkova’s family, including her brothers who served as foreign ambassadors, also seem to have been more unconscionable of language than Dashkova, mostly making language choices based on convenience or etiquette.
• It seems that Dashkova was more inventive in her use of language in songs than her female relatives, probably thanks to her command of several languages but perhaps also because she had not been as influenced by French or Italian music teachers in childhood and so was more open-minded.

Primary sources
• Correspondence by Vorontsov family between one another, with other nobles, rulers (especially Catherine II), the French (e.g., Voltaire, Diderot), other foreigners (e.g., Irish Wilmot sisters, Mrs Hamilton, Ambassadors), tutors, musicians (e.g. Paisiello, Sarti, any French?).
• Memoirs and diaries (published and unpublished) of family members, other nobles/monarchy, foreign acquaintances, servants, e.g., Dashkova, Wilmots, Voltaire, Diderot, Goltysns, Iusupovs, Catherine II.
• Dashkova’s essays, speeches and reports as Head of the Russian Academy of Sciences and Russian Academy.
• Other official reports and speeches by the Vorontsovs.
• Musical notebooks by Dashkova, Kurakina and Sinivina.
• Reports in contemporary press, e.g., Komer-fur’erskii zhurnal 1776, local press where Vorontsovs were staying.
• Location of sources: some in published Vorontsov archives, original manuscripts in Russia (RGB, RGIA, RNB, RGADA, GARF), Dublin (Dashkova’s Irish friends) and Paris. SSEES and British Library hold some primary sources.

Dashkova’s memoirs, written in French in 1804-5: reliability issues
• Which copy of the memoirs is most reliable? There is no surviving manuscript written in Dashkova’s hand. Two French copies remain; most authentic seems to be one in the British Library, made by C. Wilmot during her stay with Dashkova; and a seemingly incomplete draft copy, which was published in 1881 with other sections of the Vorontsov archives. Many editions and translations (even back into French!) derive from the English-language version made by M. Wilmot, not published until 1840. Aside from these issues of authenticity, Dashkova had several agendas in writing her memoirs and her memory often seems unreliable.

Above: pages from the project database in which Vladislav Rjéoutski recorded findings from his archival visit to Russia in spring 2012. I will follow up relevant sources during my trip to Russia in the summer.