Class 5: To Russia with Reason

A. Time Capsule

0. Information slide
1. Class title 1 (Diderot and Catherine)

Let's start with a little time capsule.

2. Section title A (Triquet)

The words on the screen are French; they mean "Sparkle, lovely Tatiana!" Let me explain. Most of this class will concern itself with the 18th century. But I want to start by going forward to the end of the 19th, the 1878 opera *Eugene Onegin* by **Pyotr Ilych Tchaikovsky** (1840–93). It is based on an earlier source: the 1832 verse novel by **Alexander Pushkin** (1799–1837) which opens some time in the 1820s. The opera, of course, is in Russian, and it begins with Russian folk music. We are on a provincial estate. It is harvest time, and the villagers are bringing a decorated sheaf to the landowner, **Madame Larina**, who comes out with her daughters **Tatiana** and **Olga**. This excerpt comes from a film by **Petr Weigl**; its quality is not the greatest, but it perfectly captures the mood.

3. Tchaikovsky: *Eugene Onegin* (Weigl), peasants' chorus

Thoroughly Russian, right? The music you heard at the beginning is rather like an Orthodox hymn; the dance is obvious folk music. Later on in the opera, Tatiana has a birthday party which is attended by an elderly Frenchman called **Monsieur Triquet**, and he sings her a song in French, whose refrain you have already heard. Here it is from the same film. So why Triquet? Why French?

4. Tchaikovsky: *Eugene Onegin* (Weigl), M. Triquet, verse 1

Why French? M. Triquet is introduced as a time-capsule himself. When he was a young man in the middle of the 18th century, the upper classes spoke French as their principal language; many would rely on a bilingual steward to transmit their orders to their serfs and servants. French was the language of the Russian court until Napoleon's failed invasion of 1812, when for obvious reasons it fell out of fashion. M. Triquet is an antiquated hangover.

5. Pushkin and *Eugene Onegin*

Pushkin, in fact, is a pivotal figure. His earliest works were poems in French (although I can't find any to show you). Starting in his late teens, however, he pioneered the then-unheard-of use of Russian as a literary language, choosing subjects from Russian history, life, and folklore. The painting of the duel is an illustration from the book; ironically, Pushkin himself would be killed in a duel only 5 years later.

6. "The Governess"
7. Brillantmont School, Lausanne

Until well into the 20th century, upper- and upper-middle-class children, especially girls, would be entrusted to the charge of a governess, and the most sought-after governesses came from France. France, after all, was perceived as the arbiter of **etiquette** (which is of course a French word), and the main aim in the education of girls was to give them the graces that would ensure a good marriage. Even in the 1950s, I knew several girls who were sent off to finishing schools in French-speaking Switzerland become coming out in society, and a few such schools still exist today. In my day, French was still the international language of diplomacy.

8. Peter the Great and Catherine the Great

Today's class will be divided between two rulers of Russia commonly referred to as "the Great." **Peter I** (1672–1725) was probably of too early a generation for French to have been the language of his childhood. His connection with France is that he pursued a policy of Westernization, often traveling abroad. He visited Louis XV in Versailles and modeled his own palace in Saint Petersburg to match, as we saw last week. **Catherine II** was a very different case. Originally called **Sophie of Anhalt-Zerbst**, she was a *German* princess whose best language was almost certainly French. When she came to Russia at the age of 15, she spoke no Russian at all, and although she made determined attempts to learn it, she never lost her accent or fully mastered its grammar. So everybody in her court spoke the one language they had in common: French. Despite what you might think of as these disavantages, she became Tsarina by deposing her mentally-impaired husband **Paul III** six months into his reign (perhaps having him killed shortly after), and using a practiced combination of charm and willpower to sieze and maintain control.

9. Timeline

Here is a timeline to keep us oriented. You will see **Peter and Catherine** in the second line, against a deep red background; I am not interested in the Tsars and Tsarinas that came in between; their reigns were mostly short. The **last three Louis** of France are along the top, on a blue background. In the middle, on purple backgrounds, are two other European monarchs whom I shall reference briefly: **Frederick the Great of Prussia** (reigned 1740–86) and **Joseph II of Austria** (reigned 1765–90). At the bottom in green are four of the French *philosophes* who give this class its *raison d'être;* **René Descartes**, the first great rationalist, is way earlier than the other three—**Voltaire, Rousseau, and Diderot**—who epitomize the French Enlightenment of the 18th century. The bars on the chart begin when the monarchs take their thrones, and the philosophers make their first significant publication. My plan for the class is to spend a little time on Peter the Great, then look at the concept of the **Enlightened Despot**, of which Peter was a forerunner, and Frederick, Catherine, and Joseph the arch examples. I will save detail on Catherine until after the break, at which time I will also discuss her relationship with the French *philosophes.* There will be lots of music along the way.

B. The Traveling Tsar

10. Section title B (Peter monument in Moscow)
11. Peter and Catherine (repeat)

Both the tsars called "Great" could be called **Enlightenment monarchs**, though they came to it by different routes. **Catherine** spoke French, was an assiduous reader of French, and counted both **Voltaire** and **Diderot** as close personal advisers. **Peter the Great**, on the other hand, came to the throne as a child in the late 17th century, *before* what we think of as the *Age of Reason*. Besides Russian, he learnt Dutch and maybe some English, and did not make direct contact with France until later in life. But several things combined to make him very much a product of the new age: he had an encyclopedic curiosity about science, he deliberately turned Russian culture outwards towards the West, and he instituted numerous reforms of language, social structures, and cultures. To understand him, though, you need to know a little more about his youth. I am outsourcing that to a BBC video presented by **Lucy Worsley**. It is 10 minutes long, and rather odd in how it combines historical materials with modern images, but I think it is worth it.

12. Worsley video on Peter
13. Dobrovolsky: *Peter the Great Contemplating the Founding of Saint Petersburg*

One thing that Worsley didn't point out was that the foreign experts whom Peter recruited to teach him boat-building were **Dutch**, and he learned to speak their language. The gap-year embassy she speaks of took him to Sweden and North Germany, as he was interested in establishing a Russian naval presence on the Baltic, but mainly to Holland, where he put himself through an apprenticeship as a ship-builder, and to England, which had a Dutch king. And when he returned to Russia and decided to build himself a new capital on the Baltic, it was to Dutch models that he turned, as you will hear in this briefer video.

14. St. Petersburg and Holland
15. Peter kissing Louis XV

It was not until 1717, when Peter had been on the throne for 29 years, that he visited France and met the 7-year-old King, **Louis XV**, who had succeeded his great-grandfather two years before, famously shocking the court by picking the boy up and kissing him on both cheeks! Despite this breach of protocol, the visit was a success. As Wikipedia puts it, "*During his visit, Peter explored Paris, visited palaces, manufactories, and libraries, and interacted with statesmen, scholars, artisans, and artists. He also acquired books, art, and scientific instruments to take back to Russia*." He established himself as a friend of France, interested in the same things as the leading French thinkers of the time. If he had not been Francophile before, he was now.

16. Peterhof Palace, St. Petersburg (1714–23)

Peter had built himself a relatively modest palace just outside St. Petersburg, but once he saw **Versailles** he knew he had to emulate it. The result was **Peterhof**, often called "the Russian Versailles." I removed

the annoying travelogue music that came with this video and replaced it with a choral piece that at least comes from Peter's time.

17. Peterhof video, with new music
18. Peter, with a summary of reforms

Taking it all in all, it was a pretty remarkable reign!

C. The Enlightened Despot

19. Section title C (Peter, Frederick, Catherine, Joseph)

Although the term was not coined until the 19th century, Peter the Great perfectly exemplifies the concept of the **Enlightened Despot**: the absolute ruler who uses his absolute power to bring about changes in his country for the good of his people, not himself. The music in the background was the final chorus of *La clemenza di Tito* (1791), the last opera of **Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart** (1756–91) and surely an oblique tribute to the last of the rulers shown here**, Joseph II of Austria** (1741–90), the **Holy Roman Emperor**. The ancient Roman Emperor Titus was certainly an absolute monarch; the opera shows him acting against self-interest in pardoning people who in fact have acted against him. (Actually, by the time Mozart wrote it, Joseph had just died, but he was succeeded by his brother **Leopold II**, who pursued the same policies, so same difference). And the first opera that Mozart wrote for Emperor Joseph after coming to Vienna, *The Abduction from the Seraglio* (1782), also features an absolute ruler—in this case a Turkish Pasha—who also act against self-interest in the name of common humanity. Here is the finale to the opera as shown in the film *Amadeus* (1984), **Tom Hulce** pays Mozart with **Jeffrey Jones** as the Emperor.

20. *Amadeus:* premiere of *The Abduction from the Seraglio*
21. Voltaire

Joseph himself summed up the philosophy of Enlightened Absolutism in his succinct phrase: "*For the people, all; by the people, nothing*." By this, he meant that everything such a ruler did was for the good of his people, as he conceived it, but that the people themselves had no say in his decisions." Joseph's reforms were very much in line with the ideals of French Enlightenment writers like **Voltaire** (François-Marie Arouet, 1694–1778). Joseph worked to reduce church influence, to further the reach of education, and give greater autonomy to the peasants; he read widely (including Voltaire), formed collections of both art and science, and supported theater and music.

22. Voltaire and revolution

There are two ironies when you consider the views of the French *philosophes* on politics. One is that although they could find several examples of Enlightened monarchs in other countries, the Kings of their own country, France, were not among them. The other is that while it is clear that the Enlightenment

emphasis on human rights would become founding principles of the great revolutions in America and France, most of the *philosophes* were conservative by nature and would have been strongly opposed. Voltaire came from a minor branch of a noble family. More important, he was a pragmatist. While **Rousseau** believed that government depended upon the will of the people, Voltaire knew that in practice these rulers were in place whether people willed it or not. What was important was that *they* should act by enlightened principles, rather than some tide of goodwill lifting all boats.

23. Voltaire and Frederick the Great

Voltaire's political and especially his anti-clerical writings did not go down well with he French auhorities. He was once imprisoned in the Bastille, and from then on spent much of his life in exile away from Paris or in a different country altogether. In 1750, he accepted the invitation of the most notable Enlightened Despot of the time, **Frederick the Great** of Prussia (1712–86; reigned 1740–86), who gave him a suite in *Sanssouci,* his new palace at Potsdam.

24. Sanssouci

Sanssouci is sometimes referred to as the Prussian Versailles, and to the extent that it is surrounded by magnificent grounds, with pools, fountains, and sculptures, this is true. But it is much smaller than Versailles, only a single-story pavilion. Though thoroughly French. Frederick called it *sans-souci,* meaning "without cares," because he intended it for his private relaxation and personal entertaining. He later built a much grander palace nearby with which he could project the image of his considerable power.

25. New Palace and Sanssouci

If this gives a kind of schizophrenic impression of Frederick the Great, the man was a bit of a split personality also. He was certainly strong. He goes down in history as one of the greatest of military leaders. Besides being a superb tactician, he was extremely brave, and personally led his troops into action in numerous battles.

26. What did Frederick the Great Accomplish?

But he also checked all the boxes for an Enlightenment monarch. He spoke French in preference to German, he read the French thinkers, and he carried out similar programs of reforms to those of **Peter the Great** and **Joseph II**; indeed he was something of a role model for the latter. In all this he was a stark contrast to his father, **Friedrich I**, who hated France, had no time for namby-pamby ideas, and executed his son's best friend before his eyes. His vehemence may have come in part from a suspicion that the Crown Prince was homosexual—something that is now taken as fact. And the young man seemed to be more interested in music than more manly pursuits. Indeed, he was an accomplished flutist, wrote scenarios for operas, and was a more than competent composer himself. This painting by **Adolf Menzel** (1815–1905), a century later, shows what must have been a frequent occasion: Frederick performing his own music to an audience of friends at Sanssouci. Accompanying him at the keyboard is **CPE Bach**, the third son of **Johann Sebastian Bach** (1685–1750), and an employee at the court.

27. Adolf Menzel: *Flute Concerto at Sanssouci* (1852, Berlin NG)

Frederick also met the elder Bach, on May 7 1747. Wanting to hear him improvise, the king played him a tune, and Bach sat down at the *fortepiano* and produced a three-part *ricercar* using the theme. He later worked it into a 6-part work which, with several other pieces, became one of his last compositions, *The Musical Offering.* While this has very little to do with France *per se,* it is absolutely part of Enlightenment culture, and makes a good ending to the first hour.

28. Bach plays for Frederick the Great
29. Class title 2 (music room at Sanssouci)
30. Osher information

D. Diderot's Encyclopedia

31. Class title 3 (Paris to Petersburg)
32. Section title D (Diderot slide)

For various reasons, I find myself behind schedule in preparing this class, so I am relying much more than usual on videos, whether found online, or prepared myself for other classes. The second hour, as you see, has two protagonists: the *philosophe* **Denis Diderot** (1713–84) and **Catherine the Great of Russia**, who became his patron towards the end of his life, and invited him to Saint Petersburg. The music, incidentally, is a French song composed by a Russian princess in Catherine's court; we'll be hearing more from her later.

33. Museum of Natural History, Paris

Some years ago, posters in the Paris Métro were showing intriguing ads for an evolution exhibit at the **Museum of Natural History**, so my son and I went to see it. And it was indeed impressive: a Noah's Ark procession of stuffed animals, at least a block long, picked out of the mist by a constantly changing display of *son et lumière.* Here is a sample.

34. MHN Paris, Evolution display
35. MHN Paris, paleontology gallery

My son was studying the History of Science at Hopkins at the time, and what interested him most was the contrast between this and the old-fashioned paleontology galleries surrounding this central space. As you see, they made no attempt at modernization, but I did find this short video clip which puts to two exhibits on a more-nearly equal footing.

36. MHN Paris, Paleontology video

I am a retired theatrical director and my son has worked in stage lighting, so it is no wonder we responded to the *son et lumière*. But can you guess what so fascinated us about the other?

37. MHN Paris, taxonomy displays, with a page from the *Encyclopédie*

Can you guess? The exhaustive display of every species, arranged in sequence and carefully labeled, was a reminder that the ***Siècle des lumières,*** or Century of Light, began with the objective classification of all branches of human knowledge. The displays seen at the top left and bottom right of this slide are the three-dimensional equivalent of one of the eleven volumes of plates that accompanied the huge *Encyclopédie*, edited by Diderot and **Jean-Baptiste le Rond d'Alembert** (1717–83), described in Wikipedia as a "mathematician, mechanician, physicist, philosopher, and music theorist," a renaissance man. Published between 1751 and 1772, it contained contributions from just about every other scholar in 18th-century France, covering every conceivable subject from philosophy to farm equipment.

38. The *Encyclopédie,* title page for plates

I put a video online from Washington University in St. Louis, in which a professor and a librarian present their copy of the multi-volume set. In a minute, I'll play you part of the introduction in a moment, but I want to start with a section where they discuss the plates. Note two things here: this depicts some humdrum mechanical apparatus—the backstage machinery in a theater—but the presenter also treats it as a metaphor for something else: the machinery in the human body, and even the human spirit .

39. The *Encyclopédie,* plates (Washington University of St. Louis)
40. The *Encyclopédie,* title page

Like most of the *philosophes,* Diderot was a **deist**. That is to say, he believed that God, as a kind of divine clockmaker, created the world, but that He did not tinker with his creation once He had made it. This belief, of course, was contrary to received Church thinking, and throughout the process, Diderot and his colleagues were constantly having to thread the needle between truth and faith. With that in mine, pay particular attention to anything that deals with religion in the opening section of the video.

41. The *Encyclopédie,* introduction (Washington Univesity of St. Louis)
42. The *Encyclopédie,* title page (repeat)

What did you hear? Religious belief is sort of shoehorned in, isn't it, but it is not central. I was particularly interested in the missing frontispiece. Let's look at it again

43. The *Encyclopédie,* frontispiece zoom

I like the idea that **Reason** and **Philosophy** are tearing the veil off **Truth**, but that **Religion** is kneeling in front, looking for her personal truth in an entirely different direction. Reason considers bridling Religion, but doesn't do so. Diderot was not opposed to religion *per se*, but he was incensed by the crimes the Church commited in religion's name. Here is a trailer for the 1966 film by **Jacques Rivette**, *La Religieuse* (The Nun), based on Diderot's 1780 novel of the same name. The film was banned shortly after it was issued, and Diderot's book could only be published after his death. It concerns a young woman sent by her family to a convent against her will, and her attempts to regain her independence. At one point, she comes under the care of a Mother Superior who turns out to be a lesbian—probably the reason why the film was banned. Diderot by no means confined his energies to editing encyclopedias!

44. Rivette: *The Nun,* trailer

E. Catherine's reading

45. Section title E (Catherine's reading)

The Saint Petersburg component of my "Paris to Petersburg" axis was of course **Catherine the Great**, who was an assiduous reader of the French *philosophes.* She first made contact with Diderot shortly after her accession in 1762. Hearing that the French government was threatening to discontinue the *Encyclopédie* because of its irreligious nature, she offered Diderot sanctuary in St. Petersburg to complete the project there. He declined, which was probably wise since it would have cut him off from his other contributors. But when Catherine offered him a salary in 1773 (with a 50-year advance!) in return for the bequest of his entire library to her in his will, he could not refuse to travel to Saint Petersburg in person. He stayed there 5 months. Catherine thought him an extraordinary man, but emerged from their early sessions covered in bruises, because he made his points by slapping her thighs! Let's look at the beginning of the **Lucy Worsley** video dealing with her.

46. Worsley video on Catherine 1
47. Worsley video on Catherine 2
48. Catherine's achievements

I can round off my series of Accomplishment slides with one of Catherine. As you will see, it looks very much the same as those for Peter, Frederick, and Joseph; she checks almost all the Enlightenment boxes, except that she did not succeed entirely in abolishing serfdom, and while she greatly reduced the stranglehold of Orthodox Church, her policies towards other religions were inconsistent.

49. Helen Mirren as Catherine the Great

Most Wikipedia articles on famous people have a section at the end on "Representation in Popular Culture." Catherine could not have got rid of a husband and taken over a country not her own without an extraordinary combinaton of personal charm and absolute ruthlessness. This has made her irresistable to directors of movies and musicals. The 2019 HBO miniseries scored a coup by casting **Helen Mirren** in the title role; born **Helen Lydia Mironoff** to a Russian father and an English mother, she has twice the amount of Russian blood that Catherine herself had. But the series concentrated almost exclusively on the Tsarina's love affairs, as this opening half-minute of the trailer will show.

50. *Catherine the Great* (2019), opening of trailer
51. Peter III and Catherine

When her husband came to the throne in 1762 as **Peter III**, Catherine was merely the Tsar's wife. To gain power for herself, she had to do something drastic. Fortunately, Peter was already making himself unpopular by favoring German against Russian interests. Hearing of an incipient coup, Catherine had merely to go to the dissident barracks at night, accuse her husband of mistreating her, and beg the officers for their protection. Peter was deposed and conveniently died some weeks later. The reason was given out as hemmorhoids, but it is hard not to imagine her hand behind it. I found a clip from a

Russian musical by **Sergei Dreznin** (bdnk) showing the moment where Catherine makes the decision to sieze power; the singer is **Maria Vinenkova**.

52. Dreznin: *Catherine the Great*, "The Iron Age"
53. Pavilion in the Catherine Park as Tsarskoye Selo

I want to end, however, on a less sensational note with two more clips. First, **Lucy Worsley** once more on Catherine at the palace at the "Tsars' Village," **Tsarskoye Selo**, that she used as a retreat; you will note the tie-in to last week in the similarity to Versailles and the reference to English gardens,

54. Worsley video on Catherine 3
55. *Marie Antoinette and her Children* (1787) by Élisabeth Vigée-Lebrun (above)

One more French guest in Saint Petersburg. The lovely French portrait painter **Élisabeth Vigée-Lebrun** (1755–1842) had been the favorite portraitist of Marie-Antoinette (sister of Joseph II and queen of the ill-fated Louis XVI). Despite the artist's attempts to make the Queen more relatable to the people as a bereaved mother, she was overthrown and eventually guillotined. Her close association with Versailles spelled trouble in the Revolution, so she fled France and eventually made her way to Saint Petersburg, where she was welcomed by Catherine. In the almost six years she spent there (1795–1801, overlapping Catherine's death), she painted many members of the court, generally in the fresh informal style that had made her name. One of these was **Princess Natalia Ivanovna Kourakina** (1766–1831), who was also a composer. Here is her song "Je vais donc quitter pour jamais" (I must leave you for ever—in French naturally). I have put it together with a number of Vigée Lebrun's Russian portraits; they share the same gentle Romanticism.

56. Kourakina: "Je vais donc quitter pour jamais," with V-L portraits and class title 3

Vigée Lebrun never got to paint Catherine herself. She had an appointment, but the Empress died on the day set for the first sitting.