



“The Autocrat and the Revolutionary: Catherine the Great, John Paul Jones, and the Enlightenment’s ‘Woman Question’”

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When Western audiences think about Russia today, images of the hyper-masculine Putin administration and its far-reaching power come to mind. In the eighteenth century, Westerners still viewed Russia as something pervasive and powerful, but all that power belonged to a woman who was both an autocrat and a revolutionary: Catherine the Great. Through art, architecture, fashion, dramatic literature, and memoir writing, Catherine complicated and constructed new understandings of femininity and womanhood, creating a space in Russia where women held greater intellectual freedom and opportunity than their Western counterparts. Intimidated by Catherine, British, French, and American diplomats, editors, and statesmen condemned the Russian Empress for taking their Enlightenment farther than they were willing to go and tried to undermine her influence by overemphasizing her sexuality. In the midst of this “debate,” a ten-year-old Russian girl, Katerina Stepanova, accused ex-American admiral John Paul Jones, then serving in the Russian navy, of raping her. Katerina Stepanova’s story set the stage for a transnational scandal that highlighted the differences between the Western and Catherine’s Enlightenments.