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Thomas M. Prymak

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*Thomas M. Prymak*

## A Painter from Ukraine: Ilya Repin

ABSTRACT: This article presents the life and work of the pre-eminent painter of the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Russian Empire, Ilya Repin, and analyzes his manifold connections with the land of his birth, Ukraine. Although Repin came to be known as the central figure of the Russian national school of art, he maintained close links to his Ukrainian homeland, always had close Ukrainian friends and colleagues, and repeatedly turned to Ukrainian themes during his long career as a painter. The article also briefly examines Repin's identity and national loyalties within the context of the turbulent political developments of his time and the evolving separation of Ukrainian from imperial Russian identity.

RÉSUMÉ: Ce texte présente la vie et l'œuvre d'Ilya Repin, peintre prééminent de l'Empire russe de la fin du XIX<sup>e</sup> et début du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle, et analyse les relations variées qu'il a gardées avec son pays natal, l'Ukraine. Quoique Repin soit surtout connu comme figure centrale de l'École nationale russe des arts, il a maintenu des liens étroits avec sa patrie natale. De plus, il a toujours eu des amis proches et collègues d'origine ukrainienne, et s'est tourné à maintes reprises vers des thèmes ukrainiens tout au long de sa carrière d'artiste. Cet article examine également de façon brève, les loyautés nationales et identitaires de Repin dans le contexte tumultueux de développements politiques de son époque et de l'évolution de la séparation des Ukrainiens par rapport à l'identité russe impériale.

In 2010, eighty years passed since the death of Ilya Repin, an artist who during his lifetime was widely acknowledged as “Russia's greatest painter,” a prime example of the Russian national school, and a man who during the many long years of Soviet rule became the focus of a veritable personality cult, being held up as a model “progressive” and “realist” to be imitated and copied by artists in the USSR. In the West, he was less well-known, but even in the western world some of his paintings were and still are familiar to the reading public through their reproduction on the dust jackets or covers of translations of famous works of Russian literature by Leo Tolstoy or Nikolai Gogol.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> An early American appreciation, C. Brinton, “Russia's Greatest Painter: Ilya Repin,” *Scribner's Magazine* 40.5 (1906): 513–523, argues that Repin holds a place in Russian art similar to that of Tolstoy in Russian literature or Tchaikovsky in Russian music. Also see T. Colliander, *Ilya Repin: En Konstnär från Ukraina* (Helsinki: Stoderstrom, 1944), and F. Parker and S. J. Parker, *Russia on Canvas: Ilya Repin* (University Park and London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1980), which reflects an older pro-Soviet treatment; G. Sternin et al., *Ilya Repin: Painting Graphic Arts* (Leningrad: Aurora, 1985), or more recently, G. Sternin and J. Kirillina, *Ilya Repin* (New York: Parkstone Press,

Among Ukrainians, however, both in the European homeland and among immigrants and their descendants in North America, Repin is best-known as the artist who painted the famed picture of the “Zaporozhian Cossacks Writing a Letter to the Turkish Sultan.” This painting, with its rollicking merriment and historical reminders of Cossack freedom and camaraderie, is well loved by virtually all Ukrainians, and by many others besides. It was greatly admired by personalities as diverse as Tsar Alexander III, who immediately purchased it for his new Museum of Russian Art in Saint Petersburg [RM], and Joseph Stalin, who was attracted to its rough humour and hung a reproduction of it on the wall of his *dacha* outside Moscow. Indeed, throughout much of the twentieth century, it was not only highly regarded by art connoisseurs familiar with Eastern Europe, but also became an object of popular Soviet and post-Soviet kitsch.<sup>2</sup>

This famous painting directs us to one very important point about Ilya Repin which, although acknowledged, was systematically downplayed during the existence of the USSR and its system of control and censorship: Repin was “a painter from Ukraine.” Although according to some authorities, he may have been of distant Muscovite ancestry, he was born, raised, and undertook his first painting in Ukraine. Moreover, although he left his homeland for St. Petersburg at an early age, he never completely forgot his southern roots, occasionally turning to Ukrainian themes in his work and maintaining contacts with prominent Ukrainians to his very death in Finnish exile in 1930. The present essay seeks to outline the artist’s manifold contacts with Ukraine and Ukrainians and to unearth and re-examine some very important ones that have been long-forgotten, overlooked, or simply repressed by the Soviet state. It also seeks to indicate the deep emotional, indeed, even lyrical, attachment that Repin had to Ukraine, its history, literature, language, music, and people. The complex question of Repin’s national identity is also examined and Ukraine’s place in

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2011), which are also plainly Soviet-style treatments, though nicely illustrated; E. Kridl Valkenier, *Ilya Repin and the World of Russian Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), which is the first critical non-Soviet account; and D. Jackson, *The Russian Vision: The Art of Ilya Repin* (Schoten, Belgium: BAI, 2006), which includes some information on Repin’s portraits of Tsar Nicholas II (previously suppressed), but does not examine the Ukrainian question. Additionally, H. van Os and S. Scheijen, *Ilya Repin: Russia’s Secret* (Groningen-Zwolle: Groninger Museum, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Igor Grabar, *Repin*, 2 vols., 2nd ed. (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo AN SSSR, 1963), O. A. Liaskovskaia, *Il'ia Efimovich Repin*, 2nd ed. (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1962) and 3rd ed. (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1982), *Il'ia Efimovich Repin 1844–1930: K 150-letiiu so dnia rozhdeniia. Katalog iubileinoi vystavki*, edited by Ia. V. Bruk (Moscow: Krasnaia ploshchad', 1994) (an extensive post-Soviet catalogue of his works). Also, E. Kridl Valkenier, “Repin Retrospective,” *Slavic Review* 54.1 (1995): 130–133, and T. Ponomareva, *Il'ia Repin: Istoriia zhiznennogo puti. Tvorcheskoe nasledie* (Moscow: Belyi gorod, 2007). On Stalin’s view, see his daughter’s memoir, Svetlana Alliluyeva, *Twenty Letters to a Friend*, translated by P. Johnson McMillan (New York: Harper and Row, 1967) 22.

this identity discussed. Before the revolution of 1917, Russian and Ukrainian national identities were not what they are today and an attempt is made to sidestep modern stereotypes and place Repin within the more ambiguous context of his own time.<sup>3</sup>

Ilya Efimovich Repin was born on 24 July 1844, into a family of military colonists in the town of Chuhuiv a little to the east of the city of Kharkiv near the Donets River in the heart of the historical region called Sloboda Ukraine. The status of military colonists was hereditary in the Russian Empire, and thus Repin was not born free, but rather his status was only slightly removed from that of the state peasants who constituted much of the Ukrainian rural population which surrounded Chuhuiv. During his boyhood, Ilya knew cold and hunger but also the wonderfully clear climate and striking beauty of the Ukrainian countryside. He visited local fairs, witnessed religious processions, and knew the Ukrainian language well from his early childhood. "Around [my native] town," he wrote many years later, "were several rich and beautiful villages of the Little Russians, a sensitive, good-natured, and poetic people who loved life and were content among the flower gardens and cherry orchards."<sup>4</sup>

Repin was attracted to art from the very beginning. His first painting, undertaken with his older sister Ustia, consisted of decorations for various boxes and chests and the painting of traditional intricately multi-coloured Ukrainian Easter eggs (*pysanky*), a craft which was, and still is, very highly developed in almost all parts of Ukraine. At the age of about eleven, Repin's mother enrolled

<sup>3</sup> For three brief treatments of our theme, see Ol. F., "Repin i Ukraina," *Literaturno-naukovyi zbirnyk* 3 (Hanover, 1946): 119–125; G. Prokoptschuk, "Ilja Jachemovyč Repin: Gründer der naturalistischen Schule in Russland und bedeutendster Geschichtsmaler der neueren Zeit," in *Ukrainer in München*, 2 vols. (Munich: Verlag Ukraine, 1958–1959) 1: 19–21; and Ievhen Onats'kyi, *Mala ukrains'ka entsyklopediia*, 3 vols. (Buenos Aires: UAPTS, 1957–1967) 3: 1579–1581. In the USSR, only the advent of the Khrushchev thaw and the brief cultural renaissance that occurred under the protection of Ukrainian Communist Party leader, Petro Shelest, allowed the publication of more extensive materials in the Ukrainian language about Repin. See especially Iu. Belichko, *Ukraina v tvorchosti I. Iu. Riepina* (Kyiv: Mystetstvo, 1963). In Russian, see V. Moskvinov, *Repin na Khar'kovshchine* (Kharkiv: Kharovskoe knizhnoe izdatelstvo, 1959), and *Repin i Ukraina: Pis'ma deiatelei ukrainskoi kul'tury i iskusstva k Repinu 1896–1927*, edited by B. S. Butnik-Siverskii, (Kyiv: AN Ukrainskoi SSR, 1962). For a more recent non-Soviet treatment, see V. Marcadé, *L'Art d'Ukraine* (Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 1990) 151–164, which provides some evidence, though inconclusive, that Repin considered himself to be of Ukrainian "blood." By contrast, both Belichko and Kridl Valkenier, without citing any source, maintain that he was of "Muscovite" ancestry. For a catalogue of the Repin holdings of various Ukrainian museums, see Alla Iling et al., *Ilya Repin: Tunnettu ja tuntematon / Ilya Repin: Known and Unknown* (Helsinki: Valkoisessa Salissa, 1998). I am indebted to Mark Zadorozny of Toronto for this last reference.

<sup>4</sup> In Belichko, *Ukraina* 8.

him at the local School of Military Topography where he learned drafting and colouring. But the school was shortly afterwards closed, and Repin, who apparently already showed much promise, was apprenticed to a local icon painter, Ivan Bunakov. Under the talented Bunakov, Repin made rapid progress and developed his skills in icon painting and portraiture. He also copied engravings, in particular, “Golgotha” by Karl Steuben, a picture which he used as a model for some of his work in a Ukrainian church that he was commissioned to decorate. He was never to completely forget this picture.<sup>5</sup>

An impressive watercolour dealing with our theme has survived from Repin’s boyhood: “The Bandurist” (1859, Academy of Arts, Saint Petersburg), which depicts a Ukrainian national motif that was especially popular after the publication of the poet Taras Shevchenko’s *Kobzar* [The Kobza Player] in the early 1840s. Unlike the Russian *balalaika*, the *bandura* and the *kobza* are Ukrainian national instruments and the image which Repin portrayed, that of the blind minstrel wandering the countryside with a boy to guide him, was then already deeply embedded in Ukrainian folk consciousness. Repin grew to love both the traditional Ukrainian epics or “dumas” sung by the *kobzars* and *bandurists* and also Shevchenko; he was later to paint Shevchenko’s portrait, and, on and off, read his fiery and melancholic poetry to the end of his days.<sup>6</sup>

In 1863, with money saved from the painting of various Ukrainian churches, Repin went to St. Petersburg to study at the Imperial Academy of Arts. After a brief preparation at a private drawing school, Repin was admitted to the Academy where he undertook a balanced academic and practical program and made rapid progress. However, no single personality among Repin’s teachers at the Academy stands out in his biography. Perhaps his slightly older comrade, Ivan Kramskoi (1837–1887), with whom he studied for a short while, comes closest to filling the role of true mentor, and, indeed, Repin called him his “teacher” in his memoirs; but Repin soon outshone this friend who had earlier participated in a “revolt” in the Academy, ostensibly against its “academic” traditions and classical forms. Kramskoi, who was from Voronezh province, a mixed Ukrainian / Russian borderland then still considered a part of Sloboda Ukraine, was to be a founder of the Academy’s reputed rival, the *Peredvizhniki* (Society of Travelling Exhibits or “Itinerants” for short) which Repin was eventually to join. Of the artistic youth of those times, Repin later recalled that they “instinctively believed in their own Russian art. Local life and nature stood freshly before their eyes and drew them to itself—some to Little Russia, some to Siberia, some to the north of Great Russia.”<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> See Grabar 1: 289–304, which is an appendix on “Repin’s Chuhuiv teachers.”

<sup>6</sup> *Shevchenkivs'kyi slovnyk*, edited by Ie. P. Kyrlyiuk, 2 vols. (Kyiv: URE, 1977) 2: 162.

<sup>7</sup> See the artist’s memoirs: I. E. Repin, *Dalekoe blizkoe* (Leningrad: Khudozhnik RSFSR, 1982) 154, and, more generally, A. Lebedev, *The Itinerants* (Leningrad: Aurora, 1974), esp. 246–247, E. Kridl Valkenier, *Russian Realist Art, the State and Society: The*

In St. Petersburg, Repin married his Russian landlord's daughter and had his first child (a daughter), but did not forget his homeland, actively cultivating friendships with his Ukrainian countrymen in the capital. "Always sympathizing with the Little Russians," as he later said of himself, he enjoyed their wit, love of music, and colourful personalities. One of his closest friends was Mykola Murashko (1844–1903), who, unlike Repin, had well-formed political convictions, inclined towards opposition to the regime. It was in the company of Murashko in 1866 that Repin witnessed the execution of the convicted anarchist, Dmitrii Karakozov, who had made an attempt on the life of the tsar. Murashko later founded the Kyiv art school, which Repin visited and to which he donated some of his works. In St. Petersburg in 1866, Repin drew Murashko's portrait.<sup>8</sup> On a different level, Repin turned to Ukrainian themes in his professional work during his student years in St. Petersburg. Thus in 1871, he drew four images for a cheap illustrated edition of Gogol's Ukrainian tale "Sorochinskaia iarmarka" [The Fair at Sorochintsy]. Like Shevchenko, Gogol continued to be a favoured author of Repin throughout his life.<sup>9</sup>

It was, however, his last great painting done during his student years that truly made Repin's reputation in Russia. "The Volga Barge Haulers" (1870–1873, RM) was quite innovative, turning completely away from classical European themes to a native Russian one, and from the "academic" style to "realism." This painting can be seen as a dignified depiction of the oppressed Russian people struggling on under a heavy burden, but not without hope for the youth of the country. Although on a purely Russian theme, the picture had some implications for Ukrainian as well as Russian art. Throughout the 1870s and 1880s, the "realistic" turn to the common people in which Repin participated was to be characteristic of both Ukrainian and Russian art and Repin's corpus itself was to contain both Ukrainian and Russian popular motifs.

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*Peredvizhniki and Their Tradition* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1977), and D. Jackson, *The Wanderers and Critical Realism in Nineteenth-Century Russian Painting* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006). Additionally, see Iu. Stupak, *Kramskoi i Ukraina* (Kyiv: Mystetstvo, 1971), and P. Hovdia and O. M. Kovalenko, *Peredvizhniki i Ukraina* (Kyiv: Mystetstvo, 1978). E. Steiner, "Pursuing Independence: Kramskoi and the Peredvizhniki vs. the Academy of Arts," *Russian Review* 70.2 (2011): 252–271, argues that the supposed differences between the "conservative" Academy and the "democratic" and "national" Itinerants have been overblown.

<sup>8</sup> Repin, *Dalekoe blizkoe* 197–200, esp. 200; Kridl Valkenier, *Ilya Repin* 28–31. Belichko, *Ukraina* 11, reproduces the Murashko sketch, noting that the circle of Ukrainian artists and intellectuals in St. Petersburg was under the influence of "Uncle [P.] Ch[ubinsky]," referring to the famed folklorist who about this time penned the words of the song which in 1917 became the Ukrainian national anthem; long suppressed by the Soviets, it was resurrected in 1991.

<sup>9</sup> A. Paramonov, *Illustratsii I. E. Repina* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1952) 13–37.

From 1873 to 1876, on an Academy stipend, Repin toured Italy and settled in Paris where he got to know some of the works of the French Realist Gustave Courbet and was also exposed to the French Impressionists. Among the Impressionists, he was most affected by Édouard Manet whose style he imitated in two or three of his paintings. But even in Paris, Repin could not completely forget Ukraine. His major work done for the Academy at this time was the fanciful “Sadko in the Underwater Kingdom” (1876, RM), a canvas which reflected the tensions between cosmopolitanism and nativism during this period of the artist’s life. Based on a medieval tale about a Novgorod merchant tempted by the underwater king to renounce his native land, Repin painted Sadko enthralled by a parade of beautiful girls representing various nations of the world but with his eyes clearly raised toward a peasant girl in what could be either native Ukrainian or perhaps Russian costume in the upper left-hand corner. This painting, which, given his realist impulses, Repin did not consider altogether successful, is of undeniable national (what we would today call East Slavic), Ukrainian and Russian, intent. Moreover, in Paris, Repin continued to dream specifically about Ukraine, writing on 27 March 1874 to his friend, the art critic V. V. Stasov, that he was drawn “ever more to Little Russia and its history.” He added that “there is so much of the picturesque there and so much feeling.”<sup>10</sup> Two important portraits on this theme are dated to this period: “The Ukrainian Girl” (1875, Pushkin State Museum, Moscow), the model being a relative of the Voronezh-born painter of French ancestry, Nikolai Ge (1831–1894), who was raised, educated, and lived in Ukraine, and “A Ukrainian Girl by a Wicker Fence” (1876, formerly in the Latvian Art Gallery, Riga), in which the beautiful model strikes a particularly calm yet haunting pose.<sup>11</sup> Upon

<sup>10</sup> I. Repin, *Izbrannye pis'ma v dvukh tomakh 1867–1930*, edited by I. A. Brodskii (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1969) 1: 121.

<sup>11</sup> Both reproduced in two-tone in Belichko, *Ukraina* 16–17. There is also a good colour reproduction of the former, with colourful headdress and embroidered peasant blouse, in A. Wesenberg, ed., *Ilja Repin: Auf der Suche nach Russland* (Berlin: Nicolai, 2003) 77. With regard to Sadko, both Prokoptschuk 1: 20 and Onats'kyi 3: 1579–1580, state unequivocally that Sadko has his eyes fixed upon “a Ukrainian girl” or “a girl in Ukrainian costume.” Onats'kyi continues: “The original intent of emphasizing Ukraine, and as a demonstration of it putting Ukrainian costume on the same level as the costumes of other nations, was quite brave for its time.” Repin himself, in a letter of 11 December 1873, to Stasov (in Repin, *Izbrannye pis'ma* 1: 95–96) does not seem to distinguish Ukrainian from Russian at this point, stating simply that she is “a black-haired maiden” (*devushka-chernavushka*) and “a Russian girl” (*rusaskaia devushka*) and that this reflected his own personal situation and perhaps that of Russian art as a whole. The dark-eyed maiden, or, maiden with dark eye-brows or *chornobryva* to be exact, is, however, a Ukrainian national motif, just as famous as the dark eyes (*ochi chernye*) of the popular Russian song written by Ukrainian poet Hrebinka. Unfortunately, in all likelihood because of the censorship, Belichko did not discuss Sadko at all in his book *Ukraina*, thus giving up Sadko’s dream girl to the Russians.

Repin's return to Russia, an acrimonious dispute broke out among the art critics, who had noticed a new French influence on his art and either praised or attacked his new cosmopolitanism. His friend Stasov, who was the staunchest promoter of critical "realism" and a Russian national school of art, did not give up on Repin and when the artist decided to withdraw from the fray to seek his roots in Chuhuiv, he did so with Stasov's full support.<sup>12</sup>

The year in Ukraine which followed was among the happiest in Repin's life. His only son was born there, and, armed with new techniques learned abroad and reinvigorated by the familiar and much-loved surroundings of his youth, he experienced a great creative rebirth. He attended weddings, visited taverns, fairs, and churches, and was simply carried away by the beauty surrounding him, a beauty of which he had been largely unaware in his younger days. On 11 November 1876, he enthusiastically wrote to Stasov: "How charming! What a Delight! [...] Only Ukrainian and Parisian girls really know how to dress tastefully! You would not believe in what a fascinating way the girls bedeck themselves [...]" He concluded: "And what pendants and necklaces! What head ornaments and flowers! What Faces! And what a language! Simply splendor, splendor, splendor!"<sup>13</sup>

In such a mood, Repin sketched the Ukrainian country folk, their peasant cottages, and the surrounding countryside. At this time, he became fascinated by Ukrainian folk dancing and began collecting materials for his cheery painting of "The Evening Party" (1881, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, hereafter TG). This work depicted a typical Ukrainian peasant party going right through a winter's night in a warmly lit peasant cottage. (When he saw it a few years later, the writer Leo Tolstoy very much liked this canvas, which put village life in such a positive light.) Also in Chuhuiv, Repin painted a portrait of the famed Ukrainian beauty, Sofiia Liubys'ka (1877, Kharkiv Art Museum) and in Kyiv, another of his friend Murashko (1877, Kyiv Museum of Ukrainian Art), who acted as his new son's godfather.<sup>14</sup> But his most famous portrait of this period was the powerful visage of "The Archdeacon" (1877), a fleshy picture of a Chuhuiv resident and, as Repin remarked at the time, one of "those lions of the clergy who do not have an iota of anything spiritual about them."<sup>15</sup> This "bold" and "merciless" exercise in realism, as one critic called it, immediately restored Repin's reputation as Russia's foremost "national" painter. It was promptly purchased by the business tycoon, Pavel Tret'iakov, for his gallery of Russian art in Moscow.<sup>16</sup> And indeed, Moscow, with its strong Slavophile character and

<sup>12</sup> Kridl Valkenier, *Ilya Repin* 71–74.

<sup>13</sup> Repin, *Izbrannye pis'ma* 1: 184–185.

<sup>14</sup> In Belichko, *Ukraina* 21–22.

<sup>15</sup> Repin, letter of 13 January 1878 to N. N. Kramskoi, *Izbrannye pis'ma* 1: 208–209.

<sup>16</sup> Kridl Valkenier, *Ilya Repin* 75–80.



new middle-class art patrons, was the next destination of Repin and his young family.

In Moscow Repin was patronized by the rich businessman, Savva Mamontov (1841–1918), whose estate at nearby Abramtsevo was a refuge for aspiring Russian musicians and artists. Also in Moscow, Repin openly joined the Itinerants with whom he had been in sympathy for several years. The interest in old Muscovite history so prominent in the former Russian capital attracted Repin for a while, and his dramatic portrait of the “Tsarina Sofiia” (1879, TG) confined in a monastery by her younger half-brother, Peter the Great, while her supporters, the conservative, anti-Western sharpshooters of her guard (*strel'tsy*) are being executed outside her window, is a product of this interest. The dark atmosphere of this picture, filled with helpless rage and repressed violence, says much about Repin’s view of Muscovite history.<sup>17</sup>

In 1882, Repin left the restrictive Slavophile atmosphere of Moscow and returned to cosmopolitan St. Petersburg. He did not, however, completely forget the old capital and its history. The assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881 sent a shock wave through all Russian society, and Repin was not unaffected. He attended the execution of the convicted conspirators and began a painting on the theme of regicide. Once again, he turned to Muscovite history for his subject. In 1885, he completed his “Ivan the Terrible and His Son” (TG), a gruesome depiction of a horrified Ivan embracing his dying son whom he had just struck on the temple in an uncontrollable fit of rage. The son has blood streaming down the side of his face and Ivan’s terrified face contrasts with that of the calm, almost Christ-like son. The painting caused an immediate scandal and the police had to be called in to control the unruly crowds attempting to see it at the Itinerant Exhibition. Even more than the “Tsarina Sofiia,” Ivan the Terrible was an explicit statement about Repin’s dark view of Muscovite history.<sup>18</sup>

This negative view of Muscovite history stands in stark contrast to his impressions of the Ukrainian past. In 1878 in Abramtsevo, Repin got the idea to paint a great panorama of the “Zaporozhian Cossacks Writing a Letter to the Turkish Sultan.” It was suggested to him by his friend M. V. Prakhov (1840–1879) who brought him a copy of an interesting publication on this subject by the Ukrainian historian, Mykola Kostomarov (1814–1885). Of course, having read Gogol’ and other Ukrainian authors, and being familiar with the Ukrainian “dumas” or epic songs, Repin was already somewhat acquainted with the basic

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<sup>17</sup> Kridl Valkenier, *Ilya Repin* 87–89.

<sup>18</sup> Kridl Valkenier, *Ilya Repin* 120–121, emphasizes the regicide theme. A few years later, Repin returned to Muscovy in his “Choosing the Grand Prince’s Bride,” (1884–1887, State Picture Gallery, Perm). But even in this picture, which had so much potential to reproduce youthful feminine beauty (to which Repin was hardly indifferent), the candidates for tsarina are anything but beautiful and the young prince unenthusiastic. Reproduction in Ponomareva, no. 265.

outlines of Zaporozhian history. He already seemed to fully accept the image of the Cossacks as defenders of popular liberty, an image which was propagated by romantic authors like Gogol' and Kostomarov and extended as far back as Voltaire, who famously wrote that Ukraine had always wanted to be free. Repin also may have been somewhat aware of the important differences between the more cultivated “town Cossacks” of central Ukraine and the more plebeian Zaporozhians of the south who lived “beyond the rapids” on the Dnipro river (*za porohamy*) and out of reach of any civil authority. Moreover, he had actually heard of this famous apocryphal letter earlier in his youth as it was a popular folk motif known in several different forms throughout many of the villages of Ukraine. This Cossack letter relates to a supposedly historical event: in 1676, the Turkish Sultan Mehmed IV sent the Zaporozhians a formal letter—complete with his extravagant titles and political claims—demanding their immediate submission to him. The Cossacks were rather amused by this and drafted a reply mocking these titles and calling the sultan all sorts of rude, indeed, vulgar names. And so, when Repin again read a version of this letter in Kostomarov’s article at Abramtsevo, he was seemingly immediately struck by the contrast between dark, absolutist Muscovy with its restrictive authoritarian traditions and the bright Ukrainian south with its irrepressible spirit of liberty. On 26 July 1878, he did his first pencil drawing of the merry Zaporozhians drafting their defiant letter to the sultan.<sup>19</sup>

Although Repin was preoccupied with “Tsarina Sofiia” throughout much of 1879, he turned to his happy Zaporozhians as soon as he was free to do so. He began serious research into Ukrainian history, read with delight the *Istorieskie pesni maloruskogo naroda* [Historical Songs of the Ukrainian People] by Volodymyr Antonovych and Mykhailo Drahomanov, and made several trips to St. Petersburg to interview the historian Kostomarov on the matter. Repin informed Kostomarov of his intention of going on a research trip along the Dnipro to the Zaporozhian region to find models and materials for his picture,

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<sup>19</sup> In Russian, see A. Davydova, “K istorii sozdaniia kartiny Repina ‘Zaporozhtsy,’” *Iskusstvo* 5 (1955): 36–42; N. Zograf, “Kartina I. E. Repina ‘Zaporozhtsy,’” *Iskusstvo* 11 (1959): 56–66; A. S. Davydova, *Zaporozhtsy: Kartina Repina* (Moscow: n.p., 1962), and I. A. Brodskii, “Zaporozhtsy pishut pis'mo turetskomu sultanu 1878–1891,” in *Zamechatel'nye polotna*, edited by V. M. Lobanov (Leningrad: Khudozhnik RSFSR, 1966) 271–280. Perhaps not too strangely (because of the strict Soviet censorship of Ukrainian national materials), I have not been able to find even a single scholarly article in Ukrainian devoted to this picture, though Belichko, publishing during the brief Shelest renaissance, managed to devote much attention to it in *Ukraina*. For Kostomarov’s publication, basically the texts of the Sultan’s letter and the Zaporozhian reply, see *Russkaia starina* 6, 10 (1872); reprinted as “Sultan turetskii i Zaporozhtsy,” in *Kazaki*, by N. I. Kostomarov (Moscow: Charli, 1995) 365–366.

and Kostomarov drew up an itinerary for the artist.<sup>20</sup> It was probably also at this time that Repin painted his first full-scale coloured painting, a preliminary study in which the faces of the Cossacks are somewhat stereotypical and not very well differentiated, but one already containing the principal elements of what would be the final canvas.

In May–September 1880, Repin toured Ukraine in the company of his student, V. A. Serov. He travelled down the Dnipro, visiting Kyiv and Zaporizhzhia, and going as far south as Odesa, visiting local museums, sketching artifacts, especially weapons and costumes, drawing the locals, especially those whom he thought might be descended from Cossack ancestors, and painting the countryside. He even sought out and painted what he believed to be the grave of the legendary Zaporozhian “*Otaman*” (“*Ataman*” in Russian) or leader, Ivan Sirko (d. 1680), whom he later made one of the central figures of his great painting. For a month and a half, he stayed at Kachanivka, the estate of the famous Ukrainian landowner in Chernihiv province, V. V. Tarnovs'kyi the Younger (1837–1899), whose family had earlier hosted Gogol', Shevchenko, Kostomarov, Ge, and many others, and whose collection of Ukrainian Cossack artifacts Repin studied and whose portrait he painted at least twice: Repin titled one picture “The Cossack” (1880, TG) and the other, “The Hetman” (1880, Sumy Art Museum). In the second picture, Tarnovs'kyi is dressed in an early eighteenth-century scarlet Cossack costume with gold and silver trim, a pistol stuck in his cummerbund and a sabre at his side; he is leaning on an old Cossack cannon. Repin at this time also copied what was (probably incorrectly) believed to be an old portrait of the Ukrainian Cossack Hetman, Ivan Mazepa (d. 1709), who had dared to rebel against the Muscovite Tsardom at the time of Peter the Great (Dnipropetrovsk History Museum). On a different level, Repin also painted a portrait of Tarnovs'kyi's wife, Sofiia, at a piano (Sumy Art Museum).<sup>21</sup> Every evening Repin would visit the Ukrainian villages surrounding Kachanivka, observe the local customs, and sketch the country folk. It was at Kachanivka as well that Repin did much of his most important work on his cheery, indeed, even eager and exuberant canvas, “The Evening Party.” His last stop in Ukraine was at the estate of his colleague, the painter Ge, also in Chernihiv province, where he painted the lady of the house, before returning to Moscow loaded with entire albums filled with drawings and studies.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> See Repin, *Dalekoe blizkoe* 364; Belichko, *Ukraina* 37, and my *Mykola Kostomarov: A Biography* (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1996) esp. 237, note 67.

<sup>21</sup> Both “The Hetman” and “S. V. Tarnovs'ka” are reproduced in colour in I. Zil'bershtein, “Repin v Kachanovke,” *Ogonek* 5 (1953): 16–17.

<sup>22</sup> The most detailed description of Repin's 1880 tour of Ukraine is Iu. V. Belichko, “Istoryko-etnografichne znachennia podorozhi I. Iu. Riepina na Ukrainu 1880 roku,” *Narodna tvorchist' ta etnografii* 4 (1988): 28–37, which, as the date indicates, only appeared after the commencement of the Gorbachev reforms. There is only a brief summary in Liaskovskaia, 1982 ed., 291ff.

In Moscow, Repin sat right down to work and began integrating his new materials into what would eventually become a fuller version of his great painting. On 6 November 1880, he wrote to Stasov about his passion for the work:

Ah, forgive me for not writing to you earlier. I am a man without a conscience. I was not able to answer you, Vladimir Vasil'evich, and the "Zaporozhians" are responsible for it. What a people! When I try to write about them, my head spins with their rowdiness and noise. [...] I took up the palette and here it is two and a half weeks that I have lived with them without a break. It is impossible to tear oneself away from them, this happy people [...] Gogol' did not write about them in vain and everything that he wrote was true! A devilish folk! No one in the entire earth felt *liberty, equality, and fraternity* as deeply as they! Throughout its entire life, Zaporizhzhia remained free, never submitting to anyone. [When the Muscovites tried to put the Zaporozhians down,] they left for Turkey and there lived freely to the end of their days. [...] It may be a mocking picture, but all the same, I will paint it [...] <sup>23</sup>

Over the course of the next years, Repin's enthusiasm for the Zaporozhians never failed. His daughter, Vera, later recalled how immersed he was in Ukrainian history during his Moscow period. "Almost every day, Papa read verses aloud [to us] in Ukrainian: 'On the Three Brothers' [and other epics] [...]. At that time, he painted his picture [...] We had gradually come to know all the heroes, Otaman Sirko with his grey whiskers [...], Cossack Holota 'who feared neither fire, nor sword, nor swamp' [...] There was Taras Bulba with [his sons] Ostap and Andrii, and Vakula the blacksmith. Papa modelled the figures of the Zaporozhians from yellow clay, Taras Bulba and the others. Some have been preserved to this day."<sup>24</sup>

However, Repin's conception of the final large canvas was of epic proportions and it could not be completed in only a few short years. He was to work on it intermittently from 1878 to 1891. In 1885, the Ukrainian archeologist and historian of the Zaporozhian Cossacks, Dmytro Iavornyts'kyi (1855–1940), driven out of his homeland by charges of "Ukrainophilism," arrived in the capital, and Repin, at that time living in St. Petersburg, made a point of meeting him. After a memorial service in honour of the poet Shevchenko at the Kazan Cathedral, Repin walked up to Iavornyts'kyi and introduced himself. The two Zaporozhian enthusiasts became immediate friends and the historian put his extensive collection of Zaporozhian artifacts at the artist's disposal. In turn, Repin drew some illustrations for one of Iavornyts'kyi's books on archeology

<sup>23</sup> Repin, *Izbrannye pis'ma* 1: 240. This translation and all others (except where indicated) are mine.

<sup>24</sup> Vera Repina, "Iz detskikh vospominanii..." *Niva* 29 (1914): 572, quoted in Liaskovskaia, 1962 ed., 214.

and folklore, *Zaporozh'e v ostatkakh stariny i predaniiakh naroda* [Zaporizhzhia in the Relics of the Past and the Legends of the People] (1888). It may even be that Iavornyts'kyi's arrival stimulated Repin to begin work again on his masterpiece. Certainly, by this time, he was again engrossed in it, and in 1888, possibly at the suggestion of Iavornyts'kyi, he undertook a new research trip to the Kuban in search of the descendants of the Zaporozhians among the Kuban Cossacks. (At one point Iavornyts'kyi hoped to accompany Repin together with Tarnovs'kyi on this trip, but his academic duties prevented it.) Moreover, in 1889, Iavornyts'kyi published an outline history of the Zaporozhians with a special section on the apocryphal letter as a Ukrainian folk motif, written especially for the use of Repin.<sup>25</sup>

At this time, the Ukrainian artists and intellectuals in St. Petersburg would often gather at evening parties for discussions and song. Repin frequently attended. Ukrainian history, including the subject of the raids of the Crimean Tatars who carried off into Turkish captivity as much of the younger population as they could, and Cossack reprisal raids even unto Istanbul itself, often came up. At one such party, the painter Panas Slastion, who played the *kobza* well, and the artist Khoma Bondarenko, who sang well, performed the famous piece "Duma pro plach nevil'nykiv" [The Lament of the Poor Slaves (in Turkish Captivity)]. The company was deeply moved and Repin himself, as Iavornyts'kyi recalls in his memoirs, "cried more than a single tear."<sup>26</sup> It was this view of Ukrainian history, of the conflict of Christendom and the Islamic power on the Ukrainian steppes that forms the background to Repin's "Zaporozhians." On 19 February 1889, that is, at a time when he was most absorbed by his Zaporozhian brotherhood, he wrote to the Russian literary figure, N. S. Leskov, as follows:

I have to say to you that even in the "Zaporozhians" I had an idea. I have always been attracted to the communal life of citizens, in history, in the monuments of art, and especially in the architectural planning of cities—most often feasible only under a republican form of government. In each trifle remaining from these epochs, one may observe an unusual spirit and energy; everything is done with talent and energy and bears wide, common, civic meaning. Italy gives us so much material of this kind!!! Up to today, this tradition is alive and well there [...] And our Zaporizhzhia

<sup>25</sup> It was titled *Ocherki po istorii zaporozhskikh kozakov i novorossiiskogo kraia* (1889). On Repin and Iavornyts'kyi, see the latter's memoir: "Kak sozdavalas' kartina 'Zaporozhtsy,'" in *Khudozhestvennoe nasledstvo: Repin*, edited by I. S. Zil'bershtein, 2 vols. (Moscow: AN SSSR, 1949) 2: 57–105; M. M. Shubravs'ka, *D. I. Iavornyts'kyi: Zhyttia i fol'klorystychno-etnohrafichna diial'nist'* (Kyiv: Naukova dumka, 1972) 31–33, and M. M. Shubravs'ka, "Istoryk i mytets'," *Vitchyzna* 9 (1968): 195–202. The latter contains a photograph of Repin with an inscription dedicated to Iavornyts'kyi dated 1898. On Iavornyts'kyi more generally, see my "Dmytro Yavornytsky and the Romance of Cossack History," *Forum: A Ukrainian Review* 82 (1990): 17–23.

<sup>26</sup> Iavornyts'kyi, "Kak sozdavalas' kartina 'Zaporozhtsy,'" 83.

delights me with this same love for freedom and heroic spirit. There the brave elements of the Russian people renounced a life of comfort and founded a community of equal members to defend the principles of the Orthodox faith and human personality that they most cherished. Today these will seem like obsolete words, but then, in those times, when thousands of Slavs were carried off into slavery by the powerful Muslims, when religion, honour, and freedom were being desecrated, this was a powerfully stirring idea. And thus, this handful of daring men, of course the best of them [...] rose up, not only to defend Europe from the Eastern plunderers, but even to threaten that civilization and laugh to their very souls at that Eastern arrogance.<sup>27</sup>

Thus did Repin juxtapose the tears of the poor slaves in Turkish captivity to the laughter of his happy Zaporozhians.

One further point should be made about Repin's letter to Leskov, and this concerns Repin's reference in it to the "Russian people" (*russkii narod*). By this term, of course, Repin did not mean to imply that the Zaporozhians were "Russians" in the modern sense, or some kind of Muscovite immigrants to Ukraine; rather he used this term, as most people did in those days, in a general way where we would today say "Eastern Slavs"; that is to say, Ukrainians, Russians, and Belarusians. Of course, the Zaporozhians were central to Ukrainian history, and Repin usually, but not always, used the term "Little Russians" when referring to the Ukrainians of his time. From this we may deduce that in Repin's view of this particular part of history there existed a kind of hierarchy of simultaneously held identities, Russian, Ukrainian, and Zaporozhian, which is alien to modern notions of mutually exclusive national identity. This is an important point to which we shall return later.

Throughout these many years, Repin's enthusiasm for the Zaporozhians never seriously flagged. This was true even though he sometimes feared that certain persons who could expect to enjoy favour at the imperial court would accuse him of spreading Ukrainian "separatist" ideas. In general, Repin was very uncomfortable with Russian nationalist elements, men like the fiery journalist, Mikhail Katkov, who was in part personally responsible for instigating the official ban on public use of the Ukrainian language in the empire during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and whom he detested as a hopeless reactionary.<sup>28</sup>

When it was finally finished in 1891, Repin's "Zaporozhian Cossacks Writing a Letter to the Turkish Sultan" was an epic canvas, vigorous and exuberant, and reflecting every kind of laugh or smile that one could imagine. A very large painting, it contained more than sixteen well-developed figures

<sup>27</sup> Repin, *Izbrannye pis'ma* 1: 359. This translation is adapted from Parker and Parker 99.

<sup>28</sup> On "separatism," see I. E. Repin, letter of 10 January 1892 to Tat'iana Tolstaia, in *Perepiska s L. N. Tolstym i ego sem'ei*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1949) 46. On Katkov, see Kridl Valkenier, *Ilya Repin* 85, and Jackson, *The Russian Vision* 196–197.

closely grouped around a table upon which the scribe was penning the letter. Each Cossack is dressed in a different period costume and there are a great variety of facial types among them. Weapons and other artifacts, based upon models from the collections of Tarnovs'kyi, Iavornyts'kyi, and the museums, are prominently displayed across the picture. The fictional Taras Bulba, dressed in red, holding his enormous sides, stands to the right. Otaman Sirko, pipe in mouth, leans forward over the scribe, and to the left, a Cossack in a black fur hat of the type once worn by Hetman Sahaidachnyi looks intently on. All of the major figures are based on real models, many of them peasants originally drawn in Ukraine, but others being more famous Ukrainians or personal friends of Repin from St. Petersburg: Taras Bulba was O. I. Rubets, a professor of the St. Petersburg Conservatory and collector of Ukrainian folk songs; Sirko was Repin's friend, General Mykhailo Drahomirov, sometime commander of the Kyiv garrison and a protector of nationally conscious Ukrainian activists; the Cossack in the black Sahaidachnyi hat was V. V. Tarnovs'kyi; the Cossack putting his fist on the back of another Cossack was the painter Ia. F. Tsionhlyns'kyi; another Cossack was the artist from Poltava, P. D. Martynovych, and the scribe was none other than Iavornyts'kyi himself.<sup>29</sup>

The painting was a great success and, being generally applauded for its native "Russian" character, was immediately purchased by Tsar Alexander III for his new Museum of Russian Art in St. Petersburg. The Tsar paid the enormous sum of 35,000 rubles for the painting. Moreover, both the critics and Repin himself (often very critical of his own work) agreed that it was one of his finest productions. It was especially well received in Ukraine where reproductions and copies soon turned up in many towns and cities, and it even came to be imitated in folk art. However, certain restrictions on Ukrainian culture, including the official ban on the appearance of the Ukrainian language in print, were strictly enforced during the reign of the reactionary Alexander III, and, on a certain level, this probably inhibited open discussion of this epic canvas.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Iavornyts'kyi, "Kak sozdavalas' kartina 'Zaporozhtsy,'" 74–76; Brodskii 278. Zil'bershtein, in his introduction to Iavornyts'kyi's memoir, remarks that Repin later intended to add a section on the composition of the Zaporozhians to his memoirs *Dalekoe blizkoe* but that the outbreak of the First World War prevented this. Zil'bershtein, *Khudozhestvennoe nasledstvo* 2: 58.

<sup>30</sup> Belichko, *Ukraina* 75–77. The principal Ukrainophile journal in the Russian Empire, *Kievskaiia starina*, said nothing about it, but it was discussed in Ukrainian-populated Austrian Galicia where the censor was no problem. There are no less than three notes on it in the Ukrainophile Lemberg (L'viv) journal *Zoria* for 1892, no. 1, 18–19, no. 1, 59–60, and no. 4, 217; this last, a submission from the Russian Empire signed simply "Artist," favourably compared Repin's "Zaporozhians" to those of the Polish painter, Józef Brandt, who frequently painted Cossacks and Tatars. Jackson calls the Zaporozhians "a popular and critical triumph for Repin" and "his greatest success, critically and

Of course, during the long years that he intermittently worked on his Zaporozhians, Repin completed many other paintings. Some of them were portraits of prominent members of Russian society; others were larger-scale, more complex works, like his “Religious Procession in the Province of Kursk” (1880–1883, TG), a work which contained elements from both his earlier experiences in Chuhuiv as well as actual motifs from Kursk.<sup>31</sup>

One of Repin’s most remarkable portraits from this time was his oil painting of the Ukrainian bard, Taras Shevchenko, who had died in 1861 and could not be painted “from life” (1888, Shevchenko Museum, Kyiv). The canvas originated when the St. Petersburg Shevchenko Society asked Iavornyts'kyi to approach Repin about painting a portrait of Shevchenko to place at the house close to his grave at Kaniv on the Dnipro south of Kyiv. Pilgrims to the gravesite often spent the night there, and it was thought that such a portrait would be much appreciated by the visitors. Repin agreed to do the job for the low price of 200 rubles. He examined paintings and photographs of the poet and to better understand his psychology and, it seems, the famous sparkle in his eyes, interviewed elderly people who had known him personally. When it was finished, Repin’s portrait was a stunning interpretation. It showed an aged Shevchenko looking straight into the eyes of the viewer with a weather-beaten but unbroken visage; he was in a dark frock coat and set against a flaming red field. The poet exudes a calm power and intensity.<sup>32</sup>

The oppositional intent of Repin’s Shevchenko was quite clear, but this picture was not the only example of Repin’s attention to this theme. About the

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commercially” but is not concerned with the Ukrainian angle. Jackson, *Wanderers* 114–115. Along with the final version which the Tsar purchased and which today hangs in the Russian Museum in St. Petersburg, Repin painted a slightly smaller alternate version, which the Ukrainian sugar magnate, I. N. Tereshchenko wished to buy (Davydova, *Zaporozhtsy* 27–29). Today it hangs in the Kharkiv Museum of Art. The 1879 full-scale oil “sketch” Repin gave to Iavornyts'kyi as a token of his esteem and in recognition of his help. But the impoverished Iavornyts'kyi had nowhere to hang it and it remained in Repin’s studio for several years. Eventually, it was sold and today hangs in the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow.

<sup>31</sup> Compare the sunny earlier Chuhuiv study for the painting, “Procession in the Oak Forest” (1878, TG), with its brightly coloured greens and yellows, with the Kursk version with its somber colours, desolate setting, and barely contained social tensions. In the latter version, the varied crowd seems to be united only by its slow but relentless movement forward. The former is nicely reproduced in van Os and Scheijen 79, and the latter has, of course, been reproduced many times, including on the cover of the Penguin Classics edition of Gogol’s *Dead Souls*, translated by D. Magarshack (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1972). Also see M. I. Murashko, *Spohady staroho vchytelia* (Kyiv: Mystetstvo, 1964) 53–54.

<sup>32</sup> Iavornyts'kyi, “Kak sozdavalas' kartina ‘Zaporozhtsy,’” 82; Belichko, *Ukraina* 39. Reproduction in: *Shevchenkivs'kyi slovnyk*, vol. 1, frontispiece.



same time, Repin produced a whole series of works on the theme of the Russian revolutionary movement of which “They Did Not Expect Him” (1883–1884, TG) is his masterpiece, dramatically mixing a variety of psychological reactions and including some very definite Ukrainian motifs. “They Did Not Expect Him” was stimulated by the amnesty of political prisoners occasioned by the coronation of Alexander III, and shows a former political prisoner unexpectedly returning home after many years from what was probably Siberian exile. His gait is unsure, his dress ragged, and his face gaunt. He is at first not recognized by all of his family: his mother is hesitant, his wife shocked, his daughter suspicious, and the maid judgmental. Only his son bursts out in immediate delight. It is a middle-class family from the intelligentsia. The room is filled with brightness and sunlight. On the wall, hang Steuben’s “Golgotha” flanked on one side by a picture of Shevchenko and on the other by another writer, perhaps either the Ukrainian Panteleimon Kulish or the Ukrainian-born Russian, Nikolai Nekrasov. If the second writer is Kulish, then the returned exile is a Ukrainian activist probably condemned for his participation in the general Russian revolutionary movement to which many of his dissatisfied compatriots were attracted; if it is the Russian Nekrasov, the identity of the exile is somewhat more ambiguous, since the Ukrainian Shevchenko was for a time a hero of a certain part of the liberal Russian intelligentsia. But there is no doubt that the painting has Ukrainian national content. After its exhibition, Repin received a letter from Kyiv informing him that the wealthy Ukrainian, I. N. Tereshchenko, wanted to buy it and that the painting “is creating a furor here.”<sup>33</sup>

In the 1890s, Repin enjoyed enormous prestige, and Ukrainians were delighted that he had not forgotten his native land and was still occasionally turning to Ukrainian themes in his work. Repin was then living in St. Petersburg, and in 1899, moved to an estate just north of the capital, within the autonomous Grand Duchy of Finland. He called his new home, the “Penates,” after the ancient Roman household gods. But even here, Repin continued to be in touch with admiring Ukrainians. Thus the historian and public figure from Kharkiv, Dmytro Bahalii, visited Repin at the Penates and afterwards wrote to him that

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<sup>33</sup> In Liaskovskaia, 1982 ed., 228. Soviet authors are in accord in claiming that the second writer is N. A. Nekrasov (1821–1878), whose “civic poetry,” like that of Shevchenko, was sympathetic to the enserfed peasantry. Both Prokoptschuk and Onats’kyi maintain it is P. O. Kulish (1819–1897), perhaps the second most important nineteenth-century Ukrainian writer after Shevchenko, who pioneered writing novels in the Ukrainian language, but whose political views were in some ways more conservative. See Prokoptschuk 1: 20 and Onats’kyi 3: 1580. There is a close-up of this part of Repin’s canvas in Wesenberg 141. Once again, Belichko did not dare tackle this problem in *Ukraina*, which skirts around the issue of the Ukrainian national movement and is largely limited to folk themes. Similarly, the Ukrainian angle of this painting is ignored by Jackson, who seems to be totally unaware of the significance of Shevchenko’s portrait on the wall. See his “Enigma Variations: The Search for Meaning in Ilya Repin’s ‘They Did Not Expect Him,’” *Groniek Historisch Tijdschrift* 168 (2005): 371–378.

his service to the “South Russian” people was a rare thing and that Sloboda Ukraine was proud of him. Repin replied by saying that he was homesick for Sloboda Ukraine (“*Akh, Slobodskaia Ukraina [...] toska po rodine.*”) and when he had recently visited Chuhuiv, he was delighted by its unexpected beauty.<sup>34</sup> Also during this period, Iavornyts'kyi, who had lived and studied in Warsaw for a while but made a habit of visiting the artist on his many trips to the capital, approached Repin about returning to a Ukrainian theme in another great historical canvas. Iavornyts'kyi suggested that Repin take up the subject of the old Ukrainian Hetman Ivan Mazepa, the Zaporozhian Otaman Kost' Hordiienko, and the Swedish King Charles XII, meeting in council before the fateful Battle of Poltava (1709) at which Tsar Peter I defeated these challengers to his growing empire, suppressed all efforts to create an independent Ukraine, and set the Russian Empire on the road to great power status. Repin responded to Iavornyts'kyi's suggestion with a resounding negative: no, he would not paint Mazepa whom he thought of as a kind of “Polish nobleman.” (The Poles had ruled much of Ukraine up to that time.) He upbraided the historian, even accusing him of “turning into a Pole” during his time in Warsaw, and said that if he painted again on a Ukrainian historical theme, it would be on Bohdan Khmelnytsky who had freed Ukraine from the Polish lords. He himself, concluded Repin, loved neither the Polish lords nor the Polish state but rather was of lowly “churlish” stock and loved the common folk. Iavornyts'kyi replied that, in fact, he had not turned into a Pole at all, and that, like Kostomarov writing about Ivan the Terrible, the artist did not have to actually like Mazepa to paint him. Repin never did paint Mazepa and Charles XII before Poltava.<sup>35</sup>

However, the artist did continue to explore Ukrainian Cossack themes in his work and over the course of the next two decades produced several such canvases, some of them quite important. In letters from Katerynoslav in the old Zaporozhian territory where Iavornyts'kyi now ran a small museum, the historian continued to urge the painter in St. Petersburg to return to Cossack themes and send him some examples for his museum; Repin did so and in turn asked for help with descriptions of artifacts for the paintings, at one point asking about the “sacred sabres” used by the Ukrainian Cossack rebels called the Haidamaks and immortalized by Shevchenko in his long poem on this subject.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Both letters, dated 8 and 14 November 1907, are in *Repin i Ukraina: Pis'ma* 28–29 and 160–161.

<sup>35</sup> Iavornyts'kyi, “Kak sozdavalas' kartina ‘Zaporozhtsy,’” 89–90. Repin's view of the rebel Mazepa “as Pole” was probably influenced by Kostomarov who, repeating a libel first lodged by an infuriated Tsar Peter I, took this line. Kostomarov's *Mazepa* study was first published in 1882, that is, two years after Repin had sketched the Hetman at Kachanivka. See my *Mykola Kostomarov* 176–177, 236, note 57.

<sup>36</sup> Shubravs'ka, “Istoryk i mytets',” 200. Iavornyts'kyi's assistant, the artist Slastion, sent Repin photos of such sabres. They were weapons blessed by an Orthodox priest prior to

In fact, it was probably the influence of Shevchenko that inspired Repin to paint several pictures dealing with the Haidamaks. Moreover, Repin continued to be influenced by Gogol' and turned to his works too in his paintings of this time. More generally, it was probably the famous *duma* about Oleksii Popovych and his comrades caught in a great storm on the Black Sea that inspired "The Black Sea Cossacks" (1908–1919, Private Collection, Stockholm), a stormy seascape on which the artist worked for over ten years and with which he was never quite satisfied, and it was Ukrainian folk dance that inspired his very last painting, the almost mythically powerful and exuberant canvas upon which he was working when he died, "The Hopak" (1926–1930, Private Collection).<sup>37</sup>

There is one important point which should be made about Repin's continued and deep interest in Cossacks: the fact of the matter is that this interest was spurred by his upbringing in Ukraine and his reading of Gogol', Shevchenko, and Kostomarov and was more or less restricted to Ukraine and its Cossack history. Repin may have had some interest in the Russian Cossacks of the Don, the Urals, or Siberia, but never painted anything substantial about them. Iermak, Stenka Razin, and Pugachev lay beyond the sphere of his most intimate interests. Thus with the great rise of national consciousness and the fuller separation of Ukrainian from Russian imperial identity, that occurred at the beginning of the twentieth century, Repin's Cossack corpus fit well into and greatly contributed to the elaboration of the myth of the freedom-loving Cossack as hero in Ukrainian national history. This contribution occurred in spite of the fact that most of his paintings on this theme were completed outside the borders of modern Ukraine, that is, in St. Petersburg or in Finland, and are today held by museums in Russia and elsewhere.<sup>38</sup>

Of course, as mentioned above, Gogol' provided much of the impetus to this creativity and this myth. Repin was deeply interested in both Gogol's work and his personal life. Thus not only did he illustrate his various stories but also painted two striking portraits of the writer and his personal psychological ordeal: a watercolour of a conscience-stricken Gogol' and his nemesis called "Nikolai

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battle.

<sup>37</sup> A list of Repin's Ukrainian canvases may be found in Belichko, *Ukraina* 110–121. Both "The Black Sea Cossacks" and "The Hopak" are reproduced in colour in Jackson, *The Russian Vision* 264, 266, who, untowardly, labels Repin's continued interest in the Cossacks "a late fixation."

<sup>38</sup> Of course, the Cossack myth existed as well in Russian culture, but unlike in Ukraine where it was central, in Russia, it was peripheral. Compare Walther K. Lang, "The Legendary Cossacks: Anarchy and Nationalism in the Conceptions of Ilya Repin and Nikolai Gogol," *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* (2002): <<http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/index.php/component/content/article/85-spring02article/193-the-legendary-cossacks-anarchy-and-nationalism-in-the-conceptions-of-ilya-repin-and-nikolai-gogol>> (Accessed 17 January 2008); Walther K. Lang, *Das Heilige Russland: Geschichte, Folklore, Religion in der Russischen Malerei des Späten 19 Jahrhunderts* (Berlin: Reimer, 2003) 79–100.

Gogol' and Father Matvei" (1902, RM), and a large oil which he called "The Self-Immolation of Gogol'" (1909, TG), which displayed the half-crazed author throwing the sequel to his master work, *Mertvyje dushi* [Dead Souls], into the fire.<sup>39</sup> The other myth-maker, Shevchenko, was also frequently brought to Repin's attention. Thus when in 1908 a group of Ukrainian patriots received permission to gather funds to erect a monument to the poet in Kyiv, they asked Iavornyts'kyi to approach Repin about the matter. Repin enthusiastically agreed to help, sat on the jury of the first competition for designs for the monument, painted a sketch on the theme of Shevchenko's fiery revolutionary poem, "Kavkaz" [The Caucasus], which was used for a picture post-card sold to raise funds for it—the drawing portrayed Prometheus bound to a rock being attacked by a great black eagle—and even made four sketches which he submitted as possible designs. Shevchenko, hero of the enserfed, exiled, and bound in chains, but an aristocrat of mind and soul who breathed liberty, justice, and love, this was the stated theme of Repin's version of the monument. Only some very serious political difficulties and the outbreak of the Great War prevented its final construction.<sup>40</sup>

On a different level, Repin included several important Ukrainian personalities among the prominent people that he painted. These included both people associated with the Ukrainian national movement and others whose connection to the country was less directly national. General Drahomirov and the historian Bahalii are examples of the former; the artist Kramskoi and the writer Vladimir Korolenko of the latter.

However, it was not only the cultural and artistic elite that attracted Repin's attention. In 1914, he celebrated his seventieth birthday and visited Chuhuiv in connection with the festivities planned there. At this time, he became involved in the foundation of an art school for the common folk to be established in the town. In an article published in the newspaper *Russkoe slovo* [The Russian Word] on 27 November 1913, Repin had publicized the project, called for public support, and stressed that "it is time to think about a Ukrainian style in art and begin the development of its direct folk creations which are spread so widely across this contented, beautiful, and happy land." His appeal met with an enthusiastic response and soon there were plans for the establishment of such

<sup>39</sup> The former is reproduced in two-tone in Sternin et al., *Ilya Repin: Painting, Graphic Arts*, plate 158; the latter in full colour in S. Fehleemann and N. Hartje, eds., *Ilya Repin und seine Malerfreunde: Russland vor der Revolution* (Wuppertal: Kerber, 2006) 124.

<sup>40</sup> The original letter of Pavlo Chyzhevs'kyi of 29 February 1908 to Iavornyts'kyi explaining the project and requesting his help to approach Repin has been preserved. See Svitlana Abrosymova, ed., *Khronika 2000* 3–4 (1993): 151–153. Also see Belichko, *Ukraina* 90–93, who prints one of the sketches for the monument, p. 93, and O. I. Rudenko and N. B. Petrenko, *Vichnyi iak narod* (Kyiv: Lybid', 1998) 128, which reprints the postcard.

schools elsewhere in Ukraine. Only the outbreak of war in late 1914 prevented these plans from being carried out.<sup>41</sup>

The revolutions of 1917 had a very profound effect upon Repin, whose progressive liberal sympathies and disdain of monarchy were never very far from the surface. But he remained on his estate in Finland throughout most of these cataclysmic events, only going to Petrograd to paint a portrait of the Provisional Government leader, Alexander Kerensky (1917–1918).<sup>42</sup> He produced very little else on the revolutions of 1917 and hardly anything at all on the Soviet experiment that followed. (What he did paint was very critical of Soviet rule.) Rather, he remained in self-imposed exile at the Penates, which was now in independent Finland. The Soviets invited him to return to the USSR, but he refused the invitation giving the excuses of age and poor health. During this period, he turned increasingly to religious subjects, his early training as an icon painter again beginning to show.

Repin's attitude toward the Ukrainian events of 1917–1921 is not known. He was geographically far removed from the country and in all probability could only read in the press about the emergence of a national government in Kyiv and its declaration of independence in 1918. But even in Finland, Repin could not forget his homeland and was soon again painting on Ukrainian subjects. On 3 April 1925, Iavornyts'kyi wrote to him and renewed contact between the two, now elderly, Cossack enthusiasts. The historian expressed his great affection for the painter, writing: "I do not quite know what you are painting [these days], but I wish, oh how I wish! Yes, I passionately wish that in your declining years you might give Ukraine a new canvas like your immortal picture [of the Zaporozhians]." Repin immediately responded expressing his joy at the renewed contact with his old friend, as he said, "still a humble young Cossack soul who so loves his Ukraine," and informed him that he was at that very time planning a canvas on a Cossack theme, "Maksym Zalyzniak and the Haidamaks."<sup>43</sup> The two men remained in contact for the next five years, Iavornyts'kyi being one of the correspondents with whom Repin was in closest touch during this time. The historian encouraged the painter to work on, sent him copies of his most recent publications on Zaporizhzhia, consoled him in the travails of his old age, and assured him of his great esteem and affection. For his part, in spite of progressive paralysis in his right hand and other difficulties, Repin once again turned to Ukrainian themes in his work, in 1926 beginning work on "The Hopak," and other pictures with Ukrainian national content. At one point, he even seems to have considered visiting Ukraine, in 1927 writing Iavornyts'kyi

<sup>41</sup> B. S. Butnyk-Sivers'kyi, "Riepin i ukrains'ke narodne mystetstvo," *Narodna tvorchist' ta etnohraftia* 1 (1957): 59–62; Moskvinov 79–80, 101; Jackson, *The Russian Vision* 252.

<sup>42</sup> Colour reproduction in Wesenberg 191; discussion in Kridl Valkenier, *Ilya Repin* 194.

<sup>43</sup> Shubravs'ka, *D. I. Iavornyts'kyi* 138; Repin, *Izbrannye pis'ma* 2: 359–360.

that “again Zaporizhzhia, again you will be my Virgil.”<sup>44</sup> Shortly, Repin received an official invitation to return from the Ukrainian intelligentsia, who wrote to him at the instigation of the Soviet Ukrainian government, but in the end, he again refused the offer, writing evocatively to the Ukrainians:

My dear sweet countrymen [*zemliaki*]: I ask your forgiveness for my poor ability to write in the Ukrainian language. I acknowledge to you that your letter has joyously lifted my spirits and I am very sad that I cannot reply to you in the language of dear Ukraine which is so close to my heart. I ask that you believe in my sincere devotion and eternal regret that I cannot come to live in my sweet happy Ukraine. Fate has determined that my grave shall be in my own garden at home [here in Finland].

On 29 September 1930, Repin passed away and was buried in the grounds of the Penates. On his easel still stood “The Hopak,” on his reading table, a well-worn copy of Shevchenko’s *Kobzar*.<sup>45</sup>

Repin’s legacy was simply enormous, his many paintings and sketches having important and lasting implications for the history of Ukrainian as well as Russian art. Addressing this issue during the Khrushchev thaw which coincided with the twenty-fifth anniversary of the painter’s death on 29 September 1955, the Soviet Ukrainian graphic artist, Vasyl’ Kasiian (1896–1976), wrote in the main Soviet Ukrainian newspaper, *Radians'ka Ukraina* [Soviet Ukraine], that “it is difficult to overestimate the significance that Repin’s work on Ukrainian life and historical themes had for Ukrainian culture.”

At the time of black reaction, when Ukrainian culture experienced terrible repressions on the part of the tsar’s government, Repin’s works awakened the social and national consciousness of the Ukrainian people and were for Ukrainian artists a high example of the selfless dedication of art to the people. And it is no coincidence that not only Repin’s immediate students—M. K. Pymonenko, O. O. Murashko, F. S. Krasys'ts'kyi and many others knew the powerful influence of the work of their teacher; we also see this influence in the work of such Ukrainian artists as S. I. Vasyl'kivs'kyi, I. S. Izhakevych and others [...]. Repin played an enormous role in the education of the young generation of Ukrainian painters. He helped the Kyiv and

<sup>44</sup> In Iavornyts'kyi, “Kak sozdavalas' kartina ‘Zaporozhtsy,’” 66; Shubravs'ka, *D. I. Iavornyts'kyi* 138–144; Shubravs'ka, “Istoryk i mytets,” 201–202. Of course, the historian’s correspondence with Repin, and after Repin’s death with his daughter, was closely monitored by the Soviet political police and was held against him during the purges of the 1930s, when he was accused of Ukrainian bourgeois nationalism and sacked from his position at the Katerynoslav Museum. See V. Chentsov, “Natkhennyy ukrains'koi nationalistychnoi kontrevoliutsii: Nevidomi fakty pro ostanni roky zhyttia Akademika D. I. Iavornyts'koho,” *Khronika 2000* 16 (1996): 191–207, esp. 196.

<sup>45</sup> Ol. F., “Repin i Ukraina,” 125, and Belichko, *Ukraina* 109, both quote his letter to the Ukrainian intelligentsia. According to Onats'kyi, citing the journal *Maliarstvo i skul'ptura* (Kyiv, 1940), in his testament to the Ukrainians, Repin added: “I belong to you, not to them.” (*Ja vash, a ne ikh.*) Onats'kyi 3: 1581.

Odesa art schools at the time that they were the main centres of artistic education in Ukraine, and he guided their activity.<sup>46</sup>

Even allowing for the exaggeration typical of the Repin cult in the Soviet Union, and the typical subservience of the Ukrainian “younger brother” before the Russian “elder brother” that was incumbent upon Ukrainian authors writing under the conditions of Soviet censorship, this is quite a statement.

The disintegration of the Soviet Union, the emergence of an independent Ukraine, and increased international contacts led to greater international awareness of Repin and his legacy and to new debates about his national character. Evidence for this lies in the increased number of Repin exhibits abroad and new debates on the internet. For example, in 2005–2006, a sharp exchange occurred on the Discussion Page of the Repin article in the English-language version of the Wikipedia, presently the world’s largest interactive encyclopedia. Certain Ukrainian contributors objected to the absence of Ukrainian material in the article and, pointing out his birthplace, contributions, and interests, characterized Repin as a “Ukrainian” rather than, or in addition to, a “Russian” artist. This position was ridiculed as being “nationalistic” by certain Russian contributors to whom Repin’s Russianness seemed to be self-evident, pointing out that many Russians (and others too) had contributed to Ukrainian culture, but this did not make them Ukrainians.<sup>47</sup>

The question of whether Repin was Russian or Ukrainian or (more typical of the nineteenth-century) both at the same time, was raised, as well, during the painter’s lifetime. Very important in this regard is the artist’s correspondence (1896) and relations with the Ukrainian publisher and cultural activist, Ievhen Chykalenko (1861–1929). The latter had read one of Repin’s articles about his visit to Austrian Galicia where he was quite impressed by Jan Matejko’s paintings extolling the Polish past and awakening patriotic sentiments among the Polish public. Chykalenko wrote to Repin suggesting that he could play a similar role for Ukrainians by his paintings on Ukrainian themes, awakening Ukrainian feelings, and thus acquire a lasting reputation as a “Ukrainian national painter.” Repin replied to Chykalenko but rejected his idea, stating that although he was from Ukraine, he “did not feel himself to be a Ukrainian” and that in general Little Russia had been so integrated into Great Russia that they were

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<sup>46</sup> Also in Onats'kyi 3: 1581. Daria Zelska-Darewych, ed., *Spirit of Ukraine: 500 Years of Ukrainian Painting* (Winnipeg: Winnipeg Art Gallery, 1991), mentions Repin several times in connection with his influence upon Pymonenko (216), Oleksandr Murashko (230), and Kyriak Kostandi (238).

<sup>47</sup> “Ilya Repin,” *Wikipedia*: <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Ilya\\_Repin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Ilya_Repin)> (Accessed 28 July 2006). Such questions also arose during the Cold War, raised by articles in the Ukrainian émigré press. See the clipping file in the Yevhen Onatsky Papers, Box 29, folder: Repin, Ilya Efimovich, 1844–1930, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis.

now one “indivisible Russia.” He added that it was his love for the Russian people (*russkii narod*) that lay at the foundation of his paintings on Ukrainian history such as his “Zaporozhians.”<sup>48</sup>

This exchange, which occurred in 1896 during the darkest years of political reaction, when ethnic Ukrainians were still officially considered to be merely a southern variety of Russians and almost any expression of Ukrainian national sentiment not safely disguised as Russian patriotism was severely repressed, is not really very surprising. Although born in Ukraine, Repin may have been of Russian stock, spent most of his life in Russia, and devoted most of his painting to Russian, not specifically Ukrainian, subjects. His identity seems to have consisted of a hierarchy of loyalties—to Chuhuiv, to Sloboda Ukraine, to Ukraine as a whole, and to Russia—that was typical of that time and stands in clear contrast to the mutually exclusive Ukrainian and Russian national identities that emerged in part as a result of the revolution.<sup>49</sup> The question remains, however: did Repin’s national identity change to any degree at all along with that of the Ukrainian intelligentsia as a result of the growth of the Ukrainian national movement after 1905, and even more, after 1917–1918 and the proclamation of an independent Ukrainian People’s Republic? Perhaps not. But this is a question that remains unanswered and requires further research.<sup>50</sup>

There is one very important indication that Repin’s Ukrainian identity involved more than simple local patriotism for Chuhuiv or Sloboda Ukraine and that his “hierarchy of loyalties” may not always have been in harmonious accord. This lies in the striking contrasts between his depictions of Muscovy and those of Ukraine. It has already been remarked that Repin’s “Tsarina Sofiiia” and “Ivan the Terrible and His Son” have a dark, disturbing feel about them, a gloomy atmosphere of anger and violence that stands in clear contrast to the exuberant laughter of his Zaporozhians or the joyous energy of his “Evening Party” and “Hopak.” An unabashed Ukrainian nationalist author extrapolates from this: “Ukraine in his paintings is all beauty, joy, happiness, a grand and

<sup>48</sup> Ievhen Chykalenko, *Spohady (1861–1907)* (New York: UVAN, 1955) 191–192; Belichko, *Ukraina* 4, 81.

<sup>49</sup> On the hierarchy of loyalties see, in particular, Paul R. Magocsi, “The Ukrainian National Revival: A New Analytical Framework,” *Canadian Review of Studies in Nationalism* 16.1–2 (1989): 45–62.

<sup>50</sup> D. Snowyd [Dmytro Dontsov], *Spirit of Ukraine* (New York: United Ukrainian Organizations in the United States, 1935) 102–103, writes of Repin that “long before he professed his Ukrainian sympathies (at the resurrection of the Ukrainian national state) he showed them in his art [...]” (I am indebted to Andrew Gregorovich of Toronto for this reference.) By contrast, M. Popovych, *Narys istorii kul'tury Ukrainy* (Kyiv: Artek, 1998) 465–466, while noting Repin’s Ukrainian origins and interests, including his love for Shevchenko, describes Repin’s Ukrainian corpus as “merely episodic” and his identity as “pan-imperial and even universally human.”



even reckless struggle against powerful enemies; Russia is wallowing in ugliness and cruelty.”<sup>51</sup> While in part true of his historical paintings, this is less true of his ethnographic studies—oppressed bargemen along the Volga, dancing villagers along the Donets—and does not apply at all to his portraits of members of the Russian and Ukrainian elites. Thus while there is some evidence that there might have been some tension between his Russian and Ukrainian identities, and it cannot be easily dismissed, it is, at present, not entirely convincing for purposes of national identification (after all, there were often tensions between St. Petersburg and Moscow as well), and, certainly, during the most creative part of his life before 1917, it did not reach the point of mutually exclusive national identities that later on came to hold the field.<sup>52</sup>

To recapitulate: Ilya Repin may have been of some kind of Russian background, but was born, raised, and did his first painting in Ukraine. Living at a certain remove from his birthplace, he idealized and loved his “sweet happy” Ukrainian homeland dearly, its history, its songs, its poetry, its language, and its inhabitants, and in his work returned to Ukrainian themes repeatedly throughout his life. He gave Ukraine its unforgettable panorama of the freedom-loving Zaporozhians who, as he himself said, would bow to no outside power, and he gave Ukraine one of its most impressive nineteenth-century portraits of its national poet, the much-loved Shevchenko. Ukrainians, especially Ukrainian painters and historians who cared dearly for their native culture, were always to be found among his closest friends, and he had a definite influence upon the further development of Ukrainian art and even the interpretation of Ukrainian history. For all these reasons, the émigré Ukrainian encyclopaedist, Ievhen Onats'kyi, considered him to be “the most outstanding painter of Ukrainian birth.”<sup>53</sup> But Repin seemingly did not actually consider himself to be a Ukrainian. Most of his life was spent outside of the borders of historic Ukraine and the bulk of his work dealt with non-Ukrainian themes. He had a cosmopolitan side to him and a pan-imperial side, and was the very personification of the Russian national school of art which did, in fact, have a Ukrainian aspect to it. He never rejected the adoration accorded him as “Russia’s greatest painter.” Nevertheless, we may modestly conclude, he always

<sup>51</sup> Snowyd 103.

<sup>52</sup> Indeed, even after 1925, Repin seemingly still clearly acknowledged his “Russian” identity. Thus when in response to Iavornyts'kyi’s request, he sent the historian one of his pre-1914 sketches for the projected Shevchenko monument in Kyiv, which depicted a battered but unbeaten Shevchenko in chains, he signed it pointedly and with an affectionate awareness of Ukrainian-Russian tensions: “To the Long-suffering Great Poet of An Enchanted Ukraine, Taras Grigor'evich Shevchenko [...] Moskal', Il'ia Repin.” See Iavornyts'kyi, “Kak sozdavalas' kartina ‘Zaporozhtsy,’” 102, n. 1 and Moskvinov 86. However, Lang, “The Legendary Cossacks,” believes that this signature should be read as a jest.

<sup>53</sup> Onats'kyi 3: 1579.

remained “a painter from Ukraine” who, it is clear, was far from indifferent to the fate of his native land.