

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide

a journal of nineteenth-century visual culture

Walther K. Lang

The "Atheism" of Jesus in Russian Art: Representations of Christ by Ivan Kramskoy, Vasily Polenov, and Nikolai Ghe

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide 2, no. 3 (Autumn 2003)

Citation: Walther K. Lang, "The 'Atheism' of Jesus in Russian Art: Representations of Christ by Ivan Kramskoy, Vasily Polenov, and Nikolai Ghe," *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 2, no. 3 (Autumn 2003), <http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/autumn03/the-atheismq-of-jesus-in-russian-art-representations-of-christ-by-ivan-nikolevich-kramskoy-vasily-polenov-and-nikolai-ghe>.

Published by: [Association of Historians of Nineteenth-Century Art](#)

Notes:

This PDF is provided for reference purposes only and may not contain all the functionality or features of the original, online publication.

License:

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#) [Creative Commons License](#).

Abstract:

In the second half of the 19th century several Russian artists marked by the critical spirit of the Nihilist generation of the 1860s, as well as by contemporary Western criticism of religion, began to focus on an aspect of Christ traditionally neglected in orthodox painting—his manhood.

The "Atheism" of Jesus in Russian Art: Representations of Christ by Ivan Kramskoy, Vasily Polenov, and Nikolai Ghe by Walther K. Lang

Introduction

During the second half of the nineteenth century, representations of Christ retained as important a place in Russian art as ever before. However, in the easel paintings of the period (as distinct from monumental ecclesiastical paintings), it is possible to observe a dramatic departure from the pictorial conventions that had long determined the ways in which Christ was represented.^[1] While in the Orthodox tradition, the hieratic view of Christ had prevailed—as manifested in the figure of the Pantocrator and in icons of the Holy Face—Russian paintings of the second half of the nineteenth century advanced the human aspect of Christ. These new paintings of the Redeemer rarely were commissioned works; instead, they were painted on the initiative of individual artists on a spiritual quest.

To be sure, the humanization of Christ in painting was not entirely unprecedented. As early as the seventeenth century, Protopop (archpriest) Avvakum [Petrovich], (1620/1–1682), leader of the Old Believers movement, had railed against the too "human" representations of Christ in the "newfangled" icons of certain panel painters: "The Redeemer Immanuel is represented with a bloated face, red-gold lips, curly hair, fat arms and muscles, and thighs as sturdy as if a German were being represented, except that no saber is painted on his hip. Nikon, my enemy, thought one should show Christ as if he were alive. The good old artists depicted the saints otherwise: they refined the face, the hands, and all the senses, showed them emaciated through fasting, work, and innumerable cares. You, however, have now altered their appearance—you paint them to look like yourselves."^[2] What Russian artists of the second half of the nineteenth century looked for in Christ, however, was not the well-fed, sturdy-legged type that Avvakum had criticized, but their own alter ego, a human being that resembled them. They envisioned a Redeemer whose sorrows or inner struggles reflected their own.

Ivan Nikolaevich Kramskoy (1837–1887)

Avvakum's polemic still possessed currency even in an age of bourgeois criticism of religion. The insufficient emphasis, in paintings of the period, on the divinity of Christ often met with resistance, and not only in ecclesiastical circles. A heated debate developed for example, regarding Kramskoy's *Christ in the Wilderness* (fig. 1), a work that resolutely eschews all godly attributes. This painting was the uncontested crowd-puller at the second Peredvizhniki ("Itinerants") exhibition in 1872, held in St. Petersburg, Moscow, and various other Russian cities. At daybreak in a stony wilderness, an overtired, slightly hunched Christ squats on a boulder, his sinewy hands pressed tightly together in prayer. His puffy eyes gaze blankly at the ground in front of him. Outwardly, this wanderer-in-the-wilderness has a faintly wild look about him. His hair is unkempt, his thin beard frayed. His shabby clothes, a wine-red tunic with blue wrap, seem already faded and worn. The somber form of Christ, anything but a glowing presence, sits with his back to the sunrise. This brooding figure appears fossilized, like a boulder in the landscape. A cold, pinkish morning light, accompanied by pale blue bands of cloud, appears at the horizon.^[3]



Fig. 1, Ivan Kramskoy, *Christ in the Wilderness*, 1872. Oil on canvas. Moscow, State Tretyakov Gallery
[\[larger image\]](#)

The reactions of the press in 1872 were divided, but there was general agreement that this was a work of great importance.^[4] In an article published posthumously, the writer Ivan Goncharov recognized the artist's right to deviate from the formula of the icon. It was alright to paint a Christ in a manner other than celebratory or heroic, and show him appropriately dejected. According to Goncharov, Christ's "superhuman exertion of thought and will" as well as his "strength to accomplish a great deed" were Kramskoy's principal messages. In his psychological analysis of the painting, the divinity of Christ is not even an issue. In a similar vein, the young writer Vsevolod Garshin observed in the figure of Christ an inner composure: "the expression of enormous moral strength, the hatred of evil, and a radical determination to declare war on it."^[5]

Kramskoy's *Christ* must be seen against the backdrop of contemporary nihilism and the Narodniki movement of the 1860s and 1870s, in which radicalized intellectuals joined the peasants in an attempt to educate them and thus improve their lot. The complete rejection of the existing social order and of all traditional values was proclaimed by one of the first representatives of the new *Zeitgeist*, Ivan Sergevich Turgenev, through his ambivalent hero Yevgeni Basarov in *Fathers and Sons* (1862). Basarov's rebellious attitude was shared by large sections of the youthful urban intelligentsia, including students at the Imperial Academy of Arts in St. Petersburg. In 1863, fourteen young artists refused to complete the necessary course for the attainment of the final diploma and left the academy amid much uproar. The leader of this group was none other than Ivan Nikolevich Kramskoy. The artists' cooperative "Artel," which he founded, not only pursued new commercial strategies, but its members also practiced—in the first years of its existence—communal living.^[6] During their evening gatherings, which were attended by many artists, there were lively discussions about art, literature, philosophy, and social theory.

Soviet research has placed great emphasis on the reflection of the revolutionary *Zeitgeist* in Kramskoy's *Christ in the Wilderness*. With more or less justification, the artist has been variously labelled a "progressive intellectual," a "democrat," and an "atheist."^[7] Parallels have

been drawn between Kramskoy's painting and the prevailing ideology of the Narodniki, whose single-minded activists often aggrandized their "mission" by using Christological metaphors.[8] In contrast to these seemingly concrete parallels, however, Alexander Benois expressed the view that Kramskoy did not quite know what he wanted to say with this painting. "When Garshin asked him what he wanted to express with his Christ, the answer he gave was so tortuous, confused, and vague that one could only infer one thing from this explanation, namely that Kramskoy himself didn't really know why he had chosen this theme, and what kind of a spiritual relationship it had to Christ in any case. As someone infected by Positivism, he acknowledged that Christianity had become an anachronism, but at the same time he believed, since he possessed an instinctive inclination toward mysticism, in the divinity of Christ and even sought a supernatural revelation." [9]

What Benois derided as half-heartedness, had for Kramskoy the tragic dimension of metaphysical doubt. The artist repeatedly stressed the impulse that led to his Christ in the Wilderness. "The image had stood before me continually for five years. I had to paint it, in order to be rid of it. During work on the painting, I mused, prayed, and suffered a great deal (to put it rather pompously)." [10] Kramskoy confessed to his friend, the landscape painter Fedor Vasiliev, that he repeatedly asked himself whether he was at all capable of depicting Christ: "I have perhaps committed sacrilege, but I couldn't help but paint him. I couldn't, if you like, not do it. I can say that I painted him with blood and tears." [11] But Kramskoy instantly qualified his grandiloquence and gave it an ironic twist, saying that his blood and tears must be of poor quality, since the result seemed to him at times unsatisfactory.

Kramskoy described his *Christ* in the same letter to Vasilev in his own words: "At daybreak he sits tired, tormented, and careworn amongst the stones, cold stones. His hands are convulsive and pressed together tightly, very tightly; the fingers press into the flesh, the feet are sore, the head bowed. He has been deep in thought and has been praying for a long time, so long that his lips are as if stuck together...." [12] As Kramskoy later reported to the critic Alexander Chirkin, one day he had seen the figure in his painting in real life before him: "I suddenly stumbled upon him, just like that at daybreak; just like that he sat there, the hands clasped together, with bowed head, his mouth almost faded away from long remaining silent. He did not notice me." Kramskoy was so struck by this figure that he felt compelled to paint it. He wrote in the same letter to Chirkin: "Nothing in the painting is contrived. I saw everything together just like that. By chance the whole scene was exactly the same." [13]

A few years later, the artist returned once more to this encounter. In a letter to the writer Garshin, he again described this extraordinary experience. He claimed to have seen in the stranger who appeared before him an uncanny physical force, "the force to smash everything to pieces," as well as a character capable of "subduing the entire world," but having "decided not to do so." [14] Kramskoy in no way suggested that this mysterious meeting was an apparition of Christ. On the contrary, he downplayed the visionary element in his letter to Garshin: "In all probability it was just a hallucination, in reality, we should assume that I didn't see him." Kramskoy never claimed that the man seen by him under this strange circumstance was Christ, but always spoke merely of a "figure." His narrative of the genesis of the painting, however, was an attempt to surround it with an aura of mystery and to provide it with a rhetorical underpinning. The artist had been reminded of Christ by the

brooding figure, sitting so still that he seemed to be made of stone. He claimed to have painted the stranger exactly as he encountered him: "I merely copied him. And when I had finished, I gave him the audacious designation... Was he Christ? I do not know. But who can really say who he was?" For Kramskoy, however, the answer seems to have been clear.

Kramskoy made a deliberate association between the brooding stranger and the Biblical episode of Christ meditating for forty days in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1–11). The experience of the wilderness, with its associations of spiritual reflection, inner struggles, and base temptations, has provided artists of a metaphysical bent, like Kramskoy, with a motif that strongly suggests the search for self-identity. It is therefore no surprise that even Ilya Repin, an artist who had strayed far from the Russian Orthodox church, would work for a long time on a *Temptation of Christ*, the various versions of which never satisfied him.^[15] Leo Tolstoy was of the opinion that "the heathen Repin" was naturally incapable of succeeding at such a subject.^[16] Other Russian artists, including Vasily Perov and Nikolai Ghe, likewise painted the Temptation or related subjects such as Christ on the Mount of Olives or Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane.^[17]

Kramskoy tried to deflect any possible criticism of his painting by explaining: "I have painted my own Christ, who belongs to me alone."^[18] Such claims to individual (and no longer collectively mediated) access to the person of Christ was typical of 1860s generation. To this we must add Kramskoy's personal understanding of Christianity, whose lesson—he believed—had not yet been learned. "I...maintain that Christianity, from the moment of its emergence until the present time, has never been organically assimilated by humanity, nor has ever been properly understood."^[19] While this remark might suggest to others that Kramskoy, notwithstanding all his insecurities and doubt, felt himself to be one step ahead of humanity, it in fact reveals his disappointment in the failure of man to live up to high moral principles.

The belief in miracles played no significant role in Kramskoy's conception of Christianity. For him, ethics, morality, and conscience were central, as they were for the entire generation living through the socio-political revolution of the 1860s. He did, however, marvel at the moments "when you come across an odd character who wakes your sleeping conscience and recommends that you act as the Creator has inscribed it in the human heart."^[20] His seemingly unshakable belief that there is good in each man was in tension, however, with the pessimistic view, expressed later in life and in another connection, that a wild animal lurks inside every human being.^[21] And perhaps it was precisely because of his awareness of the power of egoism and of inaction that to do the right thing seemed to Kramskoy to be the truly heavenly element of Christianity.

What Kramskoy missed in the Christ figures painted by the Old Masters was a sense of the absolute: "The Italian Christ is wonderful and, as it were, godly, but for some reason it is alien to me, in other words alien to our times and...it is dreadful to say so...profane."^[22] Kramskoy described Titian's *The Tribute Money* in the Dresden Gemäldegalerie (fig. 2) as one of the best depictions of Christ. But even this Christ seemed to him somewhat hard-hearted ("sukhoi serdtzem"). His "clever...cunning look cannot belong to any man of all-embracing love."^[23] In a letter to Repin written slightly later, Kramskoy rejected Titian's Christ altogether: "He is calm, elegant, rich, but is ...a king and god! Normal mortals do not live like

that! What concerns me about such a god, who has not lived through any tear-drenched nights, who is so happy, is that he has a halo and a bright aura around him."[\[24\]](#)



Fig. 2, Titian, *The Tribute Money*, 1518. Oil on canvas. Dresden, Gemäldegalerie Alter Meister [\[larger image\]](#)

Kramskoy's words clearly reflect the romantic revolt against a remote, unapproachable God. Tormented by doubts and troubles, the artist longed for a God who was like him, for a God who would renounce his divinity. As he explained to Repin: "My God—Christ—is the greatest of atheists, a person who has destroyed God in the universe and shifted him directly to the center of the human spirit and who, therefore, goes calmly to his death."[\[25\]](#) Against the objection of Repin, who did not have a high opinion of atheism, Kramskoy explained that what he meant by atheism was not what is popularly meant by the term. "Atheism as I understand it (but perhaps that is just my personal whim) is the last and highest level of religious sentiment...." The "godlessness" of Christ might even consist in the fact that he himself identified with God. "Christ repeatedly says: I am the son of God, I am one with the father. He felt and said that he was God, in other words, for him there was no God but himself."

This unconventional conception of the atheism of Christ is not without parallels in this age of religious skepticism. It shows a striking similarity with the tortuous and despairing theology that Fedor Mikhailovich Dostoevski puts into the mouth of his character Kirillov in his novel *Besy* of 1871 (English translations under the titles *Devils* and *The Possessed*). The existentialist dilemma of Kirillov's philosophy derived from the postulate of the inalienability of God and the simultaneous belief that he did not exist. "For me, there is nothing nobler than the idea that there is no God."[\[26\]](#) The lesson that Kirillov draws from this conviction is indicative of his pathological personality: "If there is no God, then I am God." Kirillov cannot comprehend the serene atheism of the Materialists: "I don't understand how an atheist can know that there is no God without killing himself on the spot. To recognize that there is no God, and not at the same time also recognize that one has oneself become God, makes no sense, so you would surely kill yourself." Even the knowledge of one's own divinity is no less self-destructive: "The attribute of my divinity is my own will! That is the only means by which I can demonstrate my rebellion and my dreadful new freedom. For it is dreadful indeed. I kill myself in order to show my rebellion

and my new dreadful freedom." For Kirillov, the matter is clear: "I must shoot myself because it is the fullest expression of my own will."

Dostoevski left no doubt as to the psychopathic, self-destructive nature of his literary character. But even for Kramskoy, the problem of God possessed a wholly existential acuity. He summed up the central idea of his *Christ in the Wilderness* with the formula "to be or not to be."^[27] Rather than a psychological decline, as in the case of Hamlet, the meditation of Christ at daybreak gives rise to—as Kramskoy would have it—an invincible vigor: "His prayer is the elemental condition of the human spirit in moments of tragedy. It is an immersion, it is God's conversation with himself. Not for nothing do people say that prayer works wonders. The state of prayer is one of the most mysterious laboratories in man."^[28] Kramskoy's theology of atheism can therefore not exist without mystery.

Given Kramskoy's unorthodox conception of Jesus, neither the criticism of his painting at the Peredvizhniki exhibition of 1872 by the then Russian Minister of the Interior nor the rumors circulating about the artist's possible heresy come as a surprise.^[29] But the work was not repressed. On the contrary, *Christ in the Wilderness* seems to have been well received by the official institutions. The Imperial Academy of Arts had attempted to purchase the painting prior to the exhibition, but Kramskoy had emphatically refused. He was vehemently opposed to the rules of the academy and he sought to quell rumors that the academy wanted to appoint him as professor. In contrast, the artist never broke with the Russian Orthodox Church; he collaborated on a number of commissions for the church, such as the decoration of the Cathedral of Christ the Redeemer in Moscow, which he worked on sporadically from 1863 to 1873.^[30]

Vasily Dmitrievich Polenov (1844–1927)

Kramskoy's colleague, Vasily Polenov, on the other hand, categorically rejected the kind of compromises that monumental religious painting demanded.^[31] Granted, Polenov was far more financially independent than Kramskoy and could afford to refuse official commissions. In Polenov's work, the figure of Christ always plays a central role, although the artist was skeptical toward Christianity and held the view that "so-called Christianity had little to do with the ethics of Jesus."^[32] Indeed, he was the author of a literary work, *Jesus of Galilee*, a linguistically simplified edition of passages from all four Gospels.^[33] Already in 1873, a year after the exhibition of Kramskoy's controversial *Christ in the Wilderness*, and two years after his own *Raising of Jairus's Daughter*, Polenov began to plan his large painting, *Christ and the Adulteress* (fig. 3).^[34] His choice of subject may have been inspired by Henryk Siemiradzki's painting, *The Adulteress* (1873), which caused a sensation when it was exhibited at the St. Petersburg Academy of Arts.^[35] Polenov's ambitious painting took over fourteen years to complete, and the work was not ready until the fifteenth Peredvizhniki exhibition in 1887.^[36] In contrast to Siemiradzki's academic Salon style, Polenov attempted to achieve a realistic representation of Christ. However, he was obviously fascinated by Siemiradzki's Orientalism, even if in this artist's hands it had become a superficial, decorative cliché. Unlike Siemiradzki, who represented Christ in a traditional, idealized manner, Polenov depicted him as an authentic Oriental.^[37] Thus he intended, just as Kramskoy had done, to emphasize the humanity of Jesus. Both artists were obviously influenced by Ernest Renan's *La vie de Jésus* (1863), a book that was widely popular, even in Russia.^[38] Polenov, in particular, praised Renan's work in the highest terms.^[39] But while Kramskoy tried to

express the psychological drama played out in the soul of a contemporary seeker of God, Polenov wanted to portray the historic reality of Jesus by depicting his Christ figure with Oriental features in an Oriental setting. From his first trip to Palestine in 1881–82, Polenov had brought back a wealth of sketch material that included a number of topographical and ethnographical studies, which served him to achieve his purpose.



Fig. 3, Vasily Polenov, *Christ and the Sinner*, 1887. Oil on canvas. St. Petersburg, State Russian Museum
[\[larger image\]](#)

Polenov's "realistic" Orientalism received mixed reactions. Even as the state censorship board had misgivings about his exotic Christ, Tsar Alexander III quickly bought *Christ and the Adulteress* from the exhibition of 1887.^[40] Criticism of the painting ranged from regrets about Christ's overly short hair^[41] to the fear that the painting might offend the religious sensibilities of the viewer.^[42] Fifteen years later, Benois believed it was possible to diagnose in Polenov's work the "Positivistic" outlook in Russian culture of the 1870s and 1880s: "That wandering pilgrim with the sour, blank look was very much to the taste of the then still innumerable Positivists, who saw in Christ an ordinary mortal, an ordinary dervish."^[43]

Once he had finished this monumental work, Polenov decided on an ambitious cycle of paintings from the life of Christ, set in the austere beauty of the Palestinian landscape. In 1888, he painted the canvas *Christ on the Lake of Gennesaret* (fig. 4), which shows a Bedouin striding along the stony shores of a lake. The same figure also appears in a later picture of 1894, which bears the title *Dreams or On the Rocks* (fig. 5), and is compositionally similar. A man, wearing a Bedouin cloak, sits on a boulder and gazes thoughtfully across a large lake. A thistle blooming among the rocks on the shore punctuates the desolate landscape, adding a poetic touch.



Fig. 4, Vasily Polenov, *On the Lake of Gennesaret*, 1888. Oil on canvas. Moscow, State Tretyakov Gallery
[\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 5, Vasily Polenov, *Dreams (On the Rocks)*, 1894. Oil on canvas. Saratov, Radishchev State Art Museum
[\[larger image\]](#)

Although the brooding figure seated in a stony wasteland recalls the lone figure of Jesus in Kramskoy's *Christ in the Wilderness*, the overall impression is fundamentally different: existentialist in Kramskoy, ethnographic (and even touristic) in Polenov. Whereas Kramskoy's figure can perhaps be claimed as a typically Russian Christ in the age of nihilism, Polenov's Jesus deliberately eschews any Russian element. Neither did Polenov intend to show an extraordinary individual. He explicitly stressed his desire that this cycle on the life of Jesus would make vivid "above all, the environment and context in which the events of the Gospels took place."^[44]

Nikolai Nikolaevich Ghe (1830–1884)

Nikolai Ghe was six years older than Kramskoy and thirteen years older than Polenov. In the 1860s, while living in Italy on a scholarship awarded by the Russian Imperial Academy of Art, he produced a great number of works on New Testament themes. The large *Last Supper* (1863) in particular was widely acclaimed in Russia.^[45] Ghe also engaged in a contemporary interpretation of the humanity of Christ, with all the psychological and physiological consequences for his work. This only emerged fully in the artist's late paintings—those from around 1890 executed under the influence of Leo Tolstoy, the best examples being *What is Truth?* (1890, fig. 6), which shows the meeting between Christ and Pilate, *The Judgment of the Synedrion* (1892, fig. 7), and *Golgotha* (1893, fig. 8), as well as various versions of the Crucifixion, on which Ghe worked from 1884 until his death in 1894.



Fig. 6, Nikolai Ghe, *What is Truth?*, 1890. Oil on canvas. Moscow, State Tretyakov Gallery [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 7, Nikolai Ghe, *The Judgment of the Synedrion*, 1892. Oil on canvas. Moscow, State Tretyakov Gallery [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 8, Nikolai Ghe, *Golgotha*, 1893. Oil on canvas. Moscow, State Tretyakov Gallery [\[larger image\]](#)

In 1884, after a long creative block, Ghe encountered the teachings of Tolstoy, which revived him. A Tolstoyan "plus royaliste que le roi"—as a friend of the artist put it^[46]—Ghe, like his master, became convinced of the reprehensibility of private property.^[47] He had already

been living a secluded life on his small estate in the Ukraine for a long time, but now—following Tolstoy's example—Ghe sought fulfillment in hard physical labor. He learned the trade of stove-fitting and practiced it free of charge for the needy.[48] His appreciation of Christianity was entirely focused on its ethical-moral teachings, and he was evidently in agreement with Tolstoy's views: in a letter to Ghe, Tolstoy expressed his doubt concerning the church's dogma on the resurrection of Christ: "I don't believe and never have believed that he was resurrected in body, but I have never lost the belief that he is resurrected through his teachings." [49]

Ghe represented Christ as an ordinary mortal and as the preacher of a new doctrine that stood in marked contrast to the socio-political system of his day. This pleased Tolstoy, who thought that many noteworthy representations of Christ as a God-man had been produced in the past, but that "Today's art cannot stand in such a relationship toward Christ. That is why we are now making attempts to represent the moral appreciation of the life and lessons of Christ." [50]

In *What is Truth?* Ghe allowed two worlds to collide, in the person of Pilate, the representative of state power, and of Christ, the idealistic protester. The title of the painting refers to the words in the Gospel of St. John, with which Pilate cuts short Christ's account of his mission in the name of truth: "Pilate said to him, 'What is truth?' And when he had said that, he went back again to the Jews and spoke to them, saying 'I find no fault with him.'" [51] The meeting between the two men takes place on a bright, smooth tile floor and in front of a bare wall. The thin, impenitent figure of Christ stands in the shadows, in tattered clothes, untidy, with unkempt hair and beard. His rigid torso, with invisible hands presumably bound together behind his back, strengthens the impression of verticality. Turned slightly to the side, Pilate stands before Jesus pontificating with a sweeping gesture, his figure in the glare of sunlight streaming in from the left. With his bent arm fanning out the fabric of his toga, Pilate takes up twice as much space as Christ does. Smoothly shaved, with a precise round haircut, worldly and expansive in his gestures, Pilate comes across as the exact opposite of Christ.

Tolstoy explained Pilate's bearing in Ghe's painting in a letter to one of his American followers: "What can such a ragged beggar say to him, the friend and interlocutor of Roman poets and philosophers, about truth?" For an educated skeptic like Pilate, "truth [was] an empty word." [52] Thus, the "good-natured and self-satisfied" Roman turned on his heel and left Jesus simply standing there. The critic Nikolai Mikhailovski came to a similar conclusion in his review of the eighteenth Peredvizhniki exhibition, where the painting was shown. According to Mikhailovski, Pilate posed his question "good-naturedly and while laughing skeptically," but also with "a certain mocking contemptibility." [53] He clearly expected no answer at all, since he immediately turned to go. For Mikhailovski, Ghe had interpreted the popular view of Pilate's question—which is generally read as contemplative and profound—in a completely new way, representing it as the thoughtless, throwaway remark of a sophisticated skeptic. According to Tolstoy, it is enough to look at "Pilate's face—groomed, self-satisfied, and dulled by a life of luxury" in order "to appreciate the chasm" that separates the two men. [54] In an 1890 review of the painting, the writer Danil Lukich Mordovtsev wrote that Ghe's Pilate corresponded to the "type of well-fed, corpulent Roman from the

time of Lucullus." To him, Pilate's question, posed "with smug irony," was as much as to say: "Your truth—what is it to me? And what are you talking to me about it for?"^[55]

The critic Alexei Suvorin believed that Pilate was shown in an unfair light by Ghe and was presented as the one solely responsible for Christ's death. Ghe had not succeeded, however, in discrediting Pilate as the incarnation of evil power, since, in Suvorin's opinion, his bias was all too transparent. The purpose of the picture was obviously to contrast in polemical fashion "on the one hand, wealth, power, satiety, and on the other, poverty and exhaustion." In Suvorin's view, the message of the painting was that truth could be found only through the path of poverty, while wealth bred contemptuous indifference. Suvorin's interpretation, however, is contradicted by his description of Ghe's Christ as a predominantly negative and repulsive figure: "His hair is straggly, his expression furious, his eyes flash with anger." Ghe had represented Christ as a "wholly ordinary worker, unkempt, in shabby clothes and with angry eyes."^[56] The critic alleged that, seeing the painting in the exhibition catalogue, an innocent child pointed to Christ and asked whether he was the Devil. Ghe could hardly have produced this image as propaganda for politically "tendentious" issues. For that, Jesus would have had to have positive features.

Another critic, Vladimir Kign, noted the aura of Ghe's Christ, whom he described as "a furious and half-crazy vagabond."^[57] Even Ghe's fellow artist Ilya Repin was quite disparaging about this Christ, remarking that Ghe gave the impression that Pilate approaches Christ in a disrespectful and aggressive way. Repin also remarked that perhaps this bedraggled Christ should look at himself in the mirror—to see what he looks like.^[58] Only Mordovtsev recognized in this figure of Christ the "godly sufferer," the tormented Jesus of the Passion, "beaten, spat at, ragged, barefoot," seeing in the painting a metaphysical dimension.^[59] Tolstoy, in contrast, saw Ghe's Christ as thoroughly real and human: "Christ is not as one would like to see him, but exactly as a man must be who has been tortured the whole night long and who is then led to new torments."^[60]

What Suvorin found lacking in Ghe's Jesus are the traditional features that he expected in representations of Christ in the art of the Old Masters: "Christ, however, was young, strong and beautiful ... That is why the Old Masters, who were devout, sought ideally beautiful and brave features for the God-man. And they were right. Today's artists have begun to democratize both the figure and the face of Christ."^[61] Suvorin reproached contemporary artists for representing Christ as just one of the crowd, echoing the words of Avvakum from the seventeenth century. Mikhailovki described Ghe's Christ as "excellently painted," but likewise had difficulty recognizing the Savior of the Bible in this figure. And this was merely the result of the extreme realism with which it was painted. The critic declared: "Young men used to follow Christ en masse, but Mr. Ghe's Christ has nothing of the leader about him."^[62] In his view, this shaggy outsider corresponded far more closely to the image of the introverted lone fighter of the revolutionary Narodniki movement and its terrorist splinter groups. Indeed, purely in terms of type, Ghe's Christ shares physiognomic qualities with earlier representations of the revolutionary in works by Repin: for example, the protagonist in *Spurning Confession* (1879–85)—which depicts a political prisoner condemned to death who refuses confession—and in *Arrest of the Propagandist* (1880–92).^[63] Mikhailovski particularly regretted, as did Suvorin, the lack of the qualities of goodness and mildness in

Ghe's Christ: "Christ was the preacher of love, gentleness and forgiveness—I do not see these qualities in Mr. Ghe's painting."[\[64\]](#)

Outwardly even more radical than Kramskoy's *Christ in the Wilderness*, Ghe's representation of Christ was classified as defamatory by the censorship authorities. The picture had to be removed from the Peredvizhniki exhibition and was not allowed to be shown in other cities. From then on, all further representations of Christ submitted by Ghe met a similar fate.[\[65\]](#) Leo Tolstoy came out strongly in support of his friend's banned work. Through his contacts with adherents of his teachings in America, Tolstoy sought to encourage a touring exhibition of *What is Truth?* in the New World. Before the canvas was sent to America, Tolstoy urged the collector Pavel Tretyakov to buy it, telling the patron that he had overlooked "a pearl amidst the dung."[\[66\]](#) Tretyakov replied that, though not altogether convinced, he would respect the "important and significant opinion" of the sage of Yasnaya Polyana, and buy the painting.[\[67\]](#) Notwithstanding, there remains some doubt whether Tolstoy unconditionally admired his friend's representations of Christ. For while Tolstoy shared Ghe's views regarding the humanity of Christ, in matters of artistic style and technique, he was more conservative. With regard to Ghe's ideas for his painting *Golgotha* (1893, fig. 9), conveyed to him in a letter, Tolstoy expressed the hope that the figure of Christ would be less eccentric and ugly than that in *The Judgment of the Synedrion* (fig. 8),[\[68\]](#) which had been banned the previous year. Indeed, Tolstoy suggested to the artist that he satisfy the "demands of the artistic throng," in order to deny the critics an easy target.



Fig. 9, Ivan Kramskoy, *Laughter (Hail, King of the Jews)*, 1877–82. Oil on canvas. St. Petersburg, State Russian Museum [\[larger image\]](#)

After the sudden death of Ghe nine months later, Tolstoy, while committed to the artistic legacy of his friend, wrote in a letter to Tretyakov that Kramskoy's *Christ in the Wilderness* was the best painting of Christ that he knew.[\[69\]](#) It is conceivable that the author wished to appease the collector, who two days earlier had praised Kramskoy's painting in the highest terms. Tolstoy, after all, hoped to convince Tretyakov to acquire the paintings remaining in Ghe's studio for his gallery, despite the fact the collector had little understanding for Ghe's late work. Yet one cannot rule out the possibility that Tolstoy, for all his ideological closeness to Ghe, did in fact prefer Kramskoy's *Christ*.

Benois later criticized "the thoroughly 'Protestant' dryness and narrowness of thought" in Ghe's conception of Christianity, which he compared with the religious dimension of mystery in the work of the painter Alexander Ivanov (1806–1858). According to Benois, Ghe had rejected the numinous as "superstition," just as Tolstoy had: "His work reveals a very narrow and earthbound understanding of Christ, who is represented rather as a stubborn preacher of human morals. Kramskoy's *Christ in the Wilderness*, continued Benois, derived in part from a similarly Positivistic spirit, although Kramskoy's work was far less pedestrian and bore a greater similarity to that of Ivanov.[70]

Kramskoy's "Laughter"

No sooner had he finished his *Christ in the Wilderness* than Kramskoy began a second, larger, multi-figure painting on the theme of Christ (fig. 9). In December 1872, Kramskoy informed his friend Fedor Vasilev that the new picture would not have Christ at its center, but rather the crowd that mocks and ridicules him. Just as he did when describing the vision of the brooding stranger at daybreak, here too Kramskoy referred to the subject in terms that almost suggest a persecution complex: "This laughter has been haunting me now for several years. It is not harsh that it is harsh, but it is harsh that they are laughing." [71] A year later, he wrote to Repin: "I don't know how it is with you, but for years now I have been hearing this laughter everywhere; wherever I go, I hear it without fail." [72] Kramskoy described it as "Homeric laughter." [73]

"Laughter" is the working title that Kramskoy used when referring to this larger painting in his letters. In 1877, he came up with the idea of entitling it "Hail, King of the Jews," which stuck. [74] He imagined a lively scene of Christ being mocked by boorish soldiers who, "in order to kill time," made Jesus "into a clown" (*shut gorokhovyy*), thereby amusing themselves. [75] To give the sense of Christ being encircled and closed in, Kramskoy chose an inner courtyard as the setting, which he described at times as the courtyard of Caiphas and at times as that of Pilate. [76] On the otherwise pale cheek of Christ is the "blood-red mark from a box round the ear," an image continually referred to in his letters. [77] This motif is reminiscent of the masochistic image of a box on the ear by the narrator in Dostoevski's *Notes from the Underground* (1864). [78]

Despite Kramskoy's obsession with the planning of this monumental new work, the painting was never finished. In 1874, two years after the first letter mentioning his idea for the painting, the artist described it as "finished in spirit," needing only to be "copied" onto the canvas. [79] It was not until 1877, however, that he had begun to paint, and in early 1880, Kramskoy reported inner struggles that stood in the way of the picture's completion. [80] At the end of 1885, he described it as merely started and then abandoned. He had not even looked at it now for more than five years. [81] Financial difficulties and numerous portrait commissions might partly account for his inability to work on the painting, but they cannot fully explain the breakdown of a project that had at one time been so important for him. [82] A fundamental reason must have been the deeply pessimistic spiritual meaning of the painting itself. The artist's disgust with the indifference of the crowd is revealed in a letter of 1874, in which he attributed the soldiers' cruel behavior to "human nature, which causes people to spontaneously and unanimously break out into laughter each time a person gets it into his head to act according to a higher sense of justice. This is the second (and last) volume of Christ in the Wilderness." [83] The solitary, reflective stranger at daybreak thus

finds his pendant in the boorish crowd, bawling with their "bestial lungs." The mocked Christ has become the plaything and "clown" of the crowd, which triumphs over him. Kramskoy placed the small figure of Christ in a back corner of the courtyard, reinforcing his powerlessness. At the end of his explanation of the picture, he arrived at this morbid conclusion: "Humanity is dying out, all ideals are vanishing...and infernal darkness prevails in the human heart. There is nothing that one can believe in, and one doesn't even need to! Live! And then cut open your veins and off with you ... Where? What a stupid question!"^[84]

Soviet art-historical research has connected Kramskoy's pessimism with the crisis of the Narodniki movement in the 1870s, when its adherents realized that their practice of "going among country people" had proved thoroughly fruitless.^[85] While Kramskoy undoubtedly sympathized with the Narodniki movement and was also disappointed over the failure to enlighten the people, there seems also to have been a more personal, existential pessimism at work.

Conclusion

During the second half of the nineteenth century, Russian artists became interested in the formulation of new images of Christ, different at once from traditional Byzantine icons and from the Renaissance and baroque conceptions of the Redeemer. The representations of Christ they created were profoundly influenced by individual artists' attitudes toward religion, history, and society. Ivan Kramskoy, Vasili Polenov, and Nikolai Ghe all emphasized in their paintings the humanity of Christ, although from quite different points of view.

Kramskoy was interested in Christ as the embodiment of both man and god. While in the Bible, Jesus was repeatedly said to have submitted his earthly destiny to the will of God the Father, Kramskoy imagined Christ as recognizing no god but himself. The inner tension between his boundless existential freedom and his strong ethical imperative makes Kramskoy's Christ a complex, contradictory, and almost pathological personality.

While Kramskoy's approach to Christ was essentially psychological, Polenov's avoided to create the impression that he was trying to penetrate the inner being of Christ. Instead, he fixed his attention on the ethnographic aspect of the historical Jesus, placing him in the context of the Palestine landscape. His image of Christ as a contemporary Bedouin is a model of simplicity, as deeply rooted in nature as he is in traditional society. Thus it even seems surprising that this tradition-bound man would pardon an adulteress. As Polenov painted him, Christ's wisdom derives from his calm demeanor and his natural goodness; it is not the result of feverish reflection as in the case of Kramskoy's nihilist thinker in the wilderness.

As for Nikolai Ghe, he focused primarily on the conflict between Christian teaching and worldly power. His Christ in *What is Truth?* is perhaps not as intellectual as Kramskoy's, but he has strong convictions and lacks any doubts. While Kramskoy's Christ is a prisoner of his own thoughts, Ghe's Christ is a threat to the established order, which ultimately makes of him a victim. With the help of the moral and ideological teachings of Tolstoy, Ghe acutely perceived the social dimension of Christ. Ghe's work, with its subjects of the arrested or

suffering Christ, remains viable today in its idealistic message of Christian love, which alone can challenge worldly power.

Walther K. Lang teaches art history at the Freie Universität in Berlin. His center of interest is cultural problems in painting from the Baroque to contemporary periods. His book, *Holy Russia. History, Folklore and Religion in Russian Painting of the Late 19th Century*, will be published in Autumn, 2003.

Email the author [wk.lang\[at\]web.de](mailto:wk.lang[at]web.de)

Notes

Translated from the German by Sara Kane.

[1] Exceptions are paintings that were produced by students of the Imperial Academy of Arts, St. Petersburg, according to a predetermined "history painting" theme. An example is Ilya Repin's *Raising of Jairus's Daughter*, 1871, St. Petersburg, State Russian Museum. Illustrated in Irina Nikolaevna Shuvalova, ed., *Repin. K 150-letiyu so dnya rozhdeniya. Sbornik statei* (St. Petersburg: Palace Edition, 1995), p. 39. Another is Vasily Polenov's painting of the same subject, for which see below.

[2] Cited in Yevgeni Nikolaevich Trubetskoy, *Umozrenie v kraskakh. Vopros o smysle zhizni v drevnerusskoi religioznoi zhivopisi* (Moscow: Respublika, 1994; orig. ed. 1915), p. 229.

[3] Originally, Kramskoy had intended to paint this landscape after travel sketches and photographic models from the Crimea, but he quickly abandoned the idea. See Ivan Nikolaevich Kramskoy, *Pisma, Statji*, 2 vols., ed. Sof'ya Noevna Gol'dshtein (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1965–66), vol. 1, pp. 121, 123, 520, 522. The 1872 painting was preceded five years earlier by a vertical version of the subject, for which a farmer from the province of Vladimir had sat as a model. Christ's pose is similar to that in the final painting, even if his expression is less intense. See Sof'ya Noevna Gol'dshtein, *Ivan Nikolaevich Kramskoy, Zhisn'i tvorchestvo* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1965), p. 83 f. This first version of the painting is known only from photographs.

[4] On the varied reactions of the press, see Gol'dshtein 1965, pp. 90 f, 337 f.

[5] Vsevolod Mikhailovich Garshin, *Pis'ma* (Moscow: 1934), p. 153 f. Cited in *Tatyana Ivanovna Kurochkina, Ivan Nikolaevich Kramskoy* (Moscow: Izobrazitel'noe Iskusstvo, 1980), p. 54.

[6] On this subject, see Gol'dshtein 1965, pp. 40–58. Kurochkina 1980, pp. 20–28.

[7] See, for example, Kurochkina 1980, p. 52 f.

[8] Compare Gol'dshtein 1965, pp. 97 ff., and Kurochkina 1980, p. 53.

[9] Aleksandr Ivanovich Benois, *Istoriya russkoi zhivopisi v XIX veke* (Moscow: Respublika, 1999, 3d ed.; orig. ed. 1902), p. 258.

[10] Ivan Kramskoy, letter to Fedor Vasilev, 10 October 1872, in Kramskoy 1965–66, vol. 1, p. 132.

[11] *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 133. See the letter of 18 February 1878 to Vsevolod Garshin for Kramskoy's subsequent views on his urge to communicate during work on *Christ in the Wilderness*: *ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 446.

[12] *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 133.

[13] Ivan Kramskoy, letter to Aleksandr Chirkin, 27 December 1873. *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 218.

[14] "I suddenly saw this figure sitting there lost in thought. I began to observe it carefully, went up to it, and during the whole period of my (very lengthy) observation, it neither moved nor noticed me." Ivan Kramskoy, letter to Vsevolod Garshin, 18 February 1878. *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 447. The following quotations also come from this same letter.

- [15] Ilya Repin, *Vade retro, Satanas*, 1895 (?), State Russian Museum. Illustrated in Shuvalova, ed., 1995, p. 91. On Repin's difficulties with this subject, see Elizabeth K. Valkenier, *Ilya Repin and the World of Russian Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), p. 145 f.
- [16] Cited in Valkenier 1990, p. 146.
- [17] Vasily Perov, *Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane*, 1878, Moscow, State Tretyakov Gallery. Illustrated in Vladimir Alexeevich Lenyashin, *Vasili Grigor'evich Perov* (Leningrad: Khudozhnik RSFSR, 1987), pl. 108.
- [18] Ivan Kramskoy, letter to Fedor Vasilev, 10 October 1872, in Kramskoy 1965–66, vol. 1, p. 133.
- [19] Ivan Kramskoy, letter to Aleksandr Chirkin, 27 December 1873. Ibid., vol. 1, p. 217.
- [20] Ibid., vol. 1, p. 218.
- [21] Ivan Kramskoy, letter to Alexei Suvorin, 21 January 1885. Ibid., vol. 2, p. 168.
- [22] Ivan Kramskoy, letter Aleksandr Chirkin, 27 December 1873. Ibid., vol. 1, p. 219.
- [23] Ibid, vol. 1, p. 219.
- [24] Ivan Kramskoy, letter to Ilya Repin, 6 January 1874. Ibid., vol. 1, p. 226.
- [25] Ivan Kramskoy, letter to Ilya Repin, 30 January 1874. Ibid., vol. 1, pp. 230–31.
- [26] Fedor Mikhailovich Dostoevski, *Besy (The Possessed)*. *Zapiski iz podpolya* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Moskva, 1994; orig. ed. 1871), part III, chap. 6, subchap. II, p. 384. The following pronouncements by Kirillov's are on pp. 383–85.
- [27] Ivan Kramskoy, letter to Aleksandr Chirkin, 27 December 1873, in Kramskoy 1965–66, vol. 1, p. 219.
- [28] Ivan Kramskoy, letter to Ilya Repin, 30 January 1874. Ibid., vol. 1, p. 231.
- [29] Ivan Kramskoy, letter to Fedor Vasilev, 13 February 1873. Ibid., vol. 1, p. 155.
- [30] On this, see Gol'dshtein 1965, p. 103.
- [31] In 1888, Polenov wrote to his Kiev-based colleague Viktor Vasnetsov that he was in no way inspired by monumental ecclesiastical painting. "You tell me that I have also painted a picture in which I have tried to represent Christ. The point is this: for me Christ and his ministry are one thing, but contemporary orthodoxy and its teachings are something else entirely; the one is love and forgiveness, the other...is far removed from it." Vasily Polenov, letter to Viktor Vasnetsov, 8 January 1888, in Yekaterina Vasilevna Sakharova, ed., *Vasily Dmitrievich Polenov. Pis'ma, dnevniki, vospominaniya* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1950), letter no. 214, p. 243.
- [32] Vasily Polenov, draft of letter, undated (after 1917), cited in Lyubov' Ivanovna Zakharenkova, *Evangel'skaya tema v tvorchestve Polenova*. In Eleonora Viktorovna Paston, ed., *Vasily Dmitrievich Polenov i russkaya khudozhestvennaya kul'tura vtoroi poloviny XIX– pervoi chetverti XX veka* (Moscow, St. Petersburg: Letni Sad, 2001), p. 53.
- [33] On this unpublished manuscript, see Ol'ga Dmitrievna Atroshchenko, *Neizdannaya rukopis' Polenova 'Iisus iz Galilei' i yeyo mesto v tvorchestve khudozhnika*. In Paston ed. 2001, pp. 57–61.
- [34] Vasily Polenov, *The Raising of Jairus's Daughter*, 1871, St. Petersburg, Museum of the Academy of Arts. Illustrated in Eleonora Viktorovna Paston, *Vasily Dmitrievich Polenov* (St. Petersburg: Khudozhnik RSFSR, 1991), pl. 1. The picture, just like Repin's painting of the same subject, originated as a diploma work on a predetermined subject for the Imperial Academy of Arts in St. Petersburg.
- [35] Henryk Siemiradzki, *The Sinner*, 1873, State Museum of Russia. Illustrated in P. Yu Klimov, *Genrikh Semiradzki* (Moscow: Art-Rodnik, 2001), pl. 5.
- [36] Vasily Polenov, *Christ and the Sinner*, 1887, State Museum of Russia. Illustrated in Paston 1991, pl. 43. On the theme of Christ in the work of Polenov, see Zakharenkova in Paston ed. 2001, pp. 49–56. On *Christ and the Sinner* in particular, see p. 51 f.
- [37] Benois nonetheless took Polenov's picture to task for its "weak painting and mawkish coloring" and described the "pretty sinner" as a morsel "for lovers of spicy contrasts." Benois 1999, p. 186.
- [38] For the influence on Russian artists of the work of Ernest Renan, as well as of David Friedrich Strauss's book *Das Leben Jesu* (orig. ed. 1835–36; popular edition for the general public, Leipzig, 1864), see Yelena Vladimirovna Nesterova, *Traktovka evangelskikh syuzhetov v russkoi i evropeyskoi zhivopisi vtoroi poloviny XIX veka*, in Paston ed. 2001, pp. 40–48. Dostoevski classed Renan's book as un-Christian and imputed its reading to a somewhat ridiculous

character, the Westerner Stepan Verkhovenski. See Dostoevski 1994, part III, chap. 7, subchap. I, p. 397.

[39] Vasily Polenov, letter to Yelena Polenova, 14 February 1884, in Yekaterina Vasilevna Sakharova, ed., *Vasily Dmitrievich Polenov, Yelena Dmitrievna Polenova, Khronika sem'i khudozhnikov* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1964), p. 336.

[40] See Vasily Polenov's letter to Mariya Polenova, 24 February 1887, in Sakharova ed. 1950, p. 226 f.

[41] Pavel Tretyakov, letter to Vasily Polenov, 16 February 1887. Sakharova ed. 1950, p. 221.

[42] S. S. Abamelek-Lazarev, letter to Vasily Polenov, 12 January 1887, in Sakharova ed. 1950, p. 220.

[43] Benois 1999, p. 186.

[44] Vasily Polenov, letter to Leo Tolstoy, June 1909, in Sakharova ed. 1964, p. 667. Benois was harsh, however, in his judgment of Polenov's Lake of Gennesaret and Dreams, "where the same pilgrim wandered or sat in sickly-sweet, Mediterranean landscapes." "From today's standpoint," Benois wrote in 1902, "the cycle on the life of Christ has already lost all meaning." Benois 1999, p. 186 f.

[45] Dostoevski, however, was extremely critical of the painting. Shouldn't he be asking himself how it was possible "that something so grandiose could result from such an ordinary dispute and such ordinary people as those Mr. Ghe had gathered together? Nothing is explained here, there is no historical truth, not once is there the truth of the genre, everything here is false." Fedor Mikhailovich Dostoevski, *Dnevnik pisatelya za 1873 god* (Paris: YMCA Press, n.d.), p. 283. The quotation here is taken from Valentine Marcade, *Le renouveau de l'art pictural russe* (Lausanne: L'âge de l'homme, 1971), p. 37. Nikolai Ghe, *The Last Supper*, 1863, State Russian Museum. Illustrated in Alla Glebovna Vereshchagina, *Nikolai Nikolaevich Ghe* (Leningrad: Khudozhnik RSFSR, 1988), pl. 26. Ghe produced several other works on biblical themes during this period, all now in the State Tretyakov Gallery: *The Return from Christ's Entombment*, 1859, (ibid., pl. 19); *Maria, the Sister of Lazarus, Receives Christ, Who comes to their House*, 1864 (ibid., pl. 35); *Messengers of the Resurrection*, 1867 (ibid., pl. 18); *Christ Brought before Annas*, 1868 (ibid., pl. 55); *Christ in the Synagogue*, 1868; *Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane*, 1869–80 (ibid., pl. 42).

[46] Yekaterina Fedorovna Yunge, *Vospominaniya o N.N. Ghe* (1894), in Ghe 1978, pp. 264.

[47] See Ghe's complaints about his wife's objections when he wanted to put Tolstoy's teachings into practice. Nikolai Ghe, letter to Leo Tolstoy, 16 July 1885. Ghe 1978, p. 125. Nikolai Ghe, letter to Pyotr Ghe, 14 March 1886. Ibid., p. 126.

[48] On Ghe's activities as a stove-fitter, see Ghe 1978, pp. 133–34, 136–37, 183.

[49] Leo Tolstoy, letter to Nikolai Ghe, 2 March 1884. Ghe 1978, p. 119.

[50] Leo Tolstoy, letter to George Kennan, 8 August 1890. Ghe 1978, p. 150.

[51] John 18: 38.

[52] Leo Tolstoy, letter to George Kennan, 8 August 1890. Ghe 1978, pp. 149–50.

[53] Mikhailovski 1978 (1890), p. 156.

[54] Leo Tolstoy, letter to George Kennan, 08.08.1890, in Ghe 1978, p. 149.

[55] Danil Lukich Mordovtsev, "*Chto jest istina?*" (1890). In Ghe, 1978, p. 155.

[56] Alexei Sergeevich Suvorin, *Malenkie pis'ma. XXXVII* (1890). In Ghe 1978, pp. 153–54.

[57] Vladimir Lyudvigovich Kign, *Vozrozhdayushchiesya "Peredvizhniki"* (1890). In Ghe 1978, p. 157.

[58] Alexandr Vladimirovich Zhirkevich, *Vstrechi s Repinym (strannitsi iz dnevnika, 1887-1902)*. In Igor Emmanuilovich Grabar and Il'ya Samoylovich Žil'bershtein, eds., *Khudozhestvennoe nasledstvo. Repin*, 2 vols. (Moscow: Institut Istorii Iskusstva, Akademiia Nauk SSSR, 1948–49), vol. 2, p. 141f.

[59] Mordovtsev in Ghe 1978, p. 155.

[60] Leo Tolstoy, letter to George Kennan, 8 August 1890. In Ghe 1978, p. 150.

[61] Suvorin in Ghe 1978, p. 154.

[62] Nikolai Konstantinovich Mikhailovski, *Ob XVIII Peredvizhnoi Vystavke* (1890). In Ghe, 1978, p. 157.

[63] Both these works by Repin are to be found in the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow. Grigori Yurevich Sternin, *Il'ya Efimovich Repin* (Leningrad: Khudozhnik RSFSR, 1985), pls. 40, 45.

- [64] See also the figure of the agitator in Repin's painting *The Revolutionary Meeting*, 1883, State Russian Museum. Ibid., pl. 37.
- [65] *The Judgment of the Synedrion* was barred from exhibition in 1892; The Crucifixion in 1894.
- [66] Leo Tolstoy, letter to Pavel Tretyakov, 11 June 1890. In Ghe 1978, p. 146 f.
- [67] Pavel Tretyakov, letter to Leo Tolstoy, 18 June 1890. In Ghe 1978, p. 147.
- [68] Tolstoy declared himself very taken with the pictorial idea of *Golgotha*: "Not only should Christ not be so extraordinary, but he should also not be so extraordinarily unattractive as in the last picture." Leo Tolstoy, letter to Nikolai Ghe, 5 November 1893. In Ghe 1978, p. 184.
- [69] Compare above. Leo Tolstoy, letter to Pavel Tretyakov, 14 July 1894. Cited in Kurochkina 1980, p. 54.
- [70] Benois 1999, p. 184. Despite their similar conceptions of how to portray the figure of Christ, Ghe assumed a disapproving stance toward Kramskoy. Stasov reported his surprise when he heard of Ghe's virtually hate-filled pronouncements over the then-dead Kramskoy and rejoiced that Ghe "finally" had the opportunity "to let slip the pastoral, Lenten, Christian mask." Vladimir Stasov, letter to Dmitri Stasov, 24 March 1892. In Ghe 1978, p. 168.
- [71] Ivan Kramskoy, letter to Fedor Vasilev, 1 December 1872. In Kramskoy 1965–66, vol. 1, p. 140 f.
- [72] Ivan Kramskoy, letter to Ilya Repin, 6 January 1874. Ibid., vol. 1, p. 227.
- [73] Ibid., vol. 1, p. 227. See also Kramskoy's letter to Aleksandr Nikitenko, 7 July 1876. Ibid., vol. 1, p. 342.
- [74] Ivan Kramskoy, letter to Pavel Tretyakov, 30 August 1877. Ibid., vol. 1, p. 421.
- [75] See Kramskoy's descriptions of his idea for the picture in the artist's letters to Fedor Vasilev, 1 December 1872; to Aleksandr Chirkin, 27 December 1873; to Ilya Repin, 6 January 1874; and to Aleksandr Nikitenko, 7 July 1876. In Kramskoy 1965–66, vol. 1, pp. 140, 219, 227, 342.
- [76] Ibid., vol. 1, pp. 219, 342. See also *ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 227.
- [77] Ibid., vol. 1, pp. 219, 227, 342.
- [78] Dostoevski 1994, chap. 1, section II, p. 448.
- [79] Ivan Kramskoy, letter to Ilya Repin, 23 February 1874. In Kramskoy 1965–66, vol. 1, p. 235.
- [80] Ivan Kramskoy, letter to Pavel Tretyakov, 9 January 1880. Ibid., vol. 2, p. 34.
- [81] Ivan Kramskoy, letter to Alexei Suvorin, 18 December 1885. Ibid., vol. 2, p. 221.
- [82] In late 1879, Kramskoy decreed that the picture should be destroyed if he had not completed it by the end of his life. Ivan Kramskoy, letter to Pavel Tretyakov, 29 December 1879. Ibid., vol. 2, p. 28. In 1883, in a desperate attempt to acquire funds, Kramskoy pawned all the works that remained in his possession "apart from the picture," that is, *Hail, King of the Jews*. Ivan Kramskoy, letter to Pavel Tretyakov, 11 January 1883. Ibid., vol. 2, p. 99.
- [83] Ivan Kramskoy, letter to Aleksandr Nikitenko, 7 January 1876. Ibid., vol. 1, p. 343.
- [84] Ibid., vol. 1, p. 343.
- [85] Compare Gol'dshtein 1965, p. 113.

Illustrations

Photographs are courtesy of the Photostudio Kleinsorge, in Arnsberg.



Fig. 1, Ivan Kramskoy, *Christ in the Wilderness*, 1872. Oil on canvas. Moscow, State Tretyakov Gallery
[\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 2, Titian, *The Tribute Money*, 1518. Oil on canvas. Dresden, Gemäldegalerie Alter Meister
[\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 3, Vasily Polenov, *Christ and the Sinner*, 1887. Oil on canvas. St. Petersburg, State Russian Museum
[\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 4, Vasily Polenov, *On the Lake of Gennesaret*, 1888. Oil on canvas. Moscow, State Tretyakov Gallery
[\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 5, Vasily Polenov, *Dreams (On the Rocks)*, 1894. Oil on canvas. Saratov, Radishchev State Art Museum
[\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 6, Nikolai Ghe, *What is Truth?*, 1890. Oil on canvas. Moscow, State Tretyakov Gallery
[\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 7, Nikolai Ghe, *The Judgment of the Synedrion*, 1892. Oil on canvas. Moscow, State Tretyakov Gallery
[\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 8, Nikolai Ghe, *Golgotha*, 1893. Oil on canvas. Moscow, State Tretyakov Gallery [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 9, Ivan Kramskoy, *Laughter (Hail, King of the Jews)*, 1877–82. Oil on canvas. St. Petersburg, State Russian Museum [\[return to text\]](#)