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## The Legendary Cossacks: Anarchy and Nationalism in the Conceptions of Ilya Repin and Nikolai Gogol

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Abstract:

The *Zaporozhian Cossacks*, painted by Ilya Repin in the years 1880-1891, echoed some of the clichés found in Nikolai Gogol's historical tale *Taras Bulba* (1835-42). The diverse qualities ascribed to the legendary Cossacks made them a mirror of Russians' national identity and unfulfilled aspirations.

## The Legendary Cossacks: Anarchy and Nationalism in the Conceptions of Ilya Repin and Nikolai Gogol

by Walther K. Lang

Russia is all too readily associated in the Western European mind with the phenomenon of the exotic-seeming Cossacks. Yet in many ways these wild fellows were as alien to nineteenth-century Russians as they were to their Western neighbors.

Despite its past shimmering radiance, Cossack identity was only a fringe element of Russian history, originating in the farthest corners of the political sphere of power-in a vacuum, as it were. The self-governing Cossack communities were concentrated in three geographical areas: Ukrainian territory on the lower Dnieper; the Northern Caucasus; and Siberia. By profession the Cossacks were both farmers and warriors; their economy was based on hunting, fishing, and the breeding of livestock. Cossack self-government reached its peak in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Around 1530 individual groups of Cossacks along the Dnieper merged with the military unit of the Setch. Their fighting power was originally directed against the Islamic Tatars of the Crimea and the Turks. In the war between Poland and Russia for control of the Ukraine in the second half of the seventeenth century, the Zaporozhian Cossacks fought against the Poles. Soon after, however, they also took part in the Russian peasants' revolts, which ultimately brought about their downfall.[1]

The Cossacks were recruited in no small number from among runaway slave peasants or other oppressed groups.[2] The cliché of the runaway freebooter was the foundation for the myth of the wild Cossack: "Here were those about whose neck a rope had already been wound, and who, instead of pale death, had seen life, and life in all its intensity." [3] Despite their geographical remoteness and their gradual introduction into the authoritarian Russian state, the myth of the free Cossack was nonetheless a fundamental marker for Russian self-perception. The historian Nikolai Berdiaev gives symbolic expression to the paradoxically split Russian identity:

The self-governing Cossack community (*volnitsa*) demonstrates above all the dualism, the contradictory nature of the Russian national character: on the one hand they humbly helped the Russian people build the despotic, autocratic state, but on the other hand they retreated into their self-governing communities, turning their backs on the state and stirring up rebellion against it.[4]

The impetuous Cossacks were the stuff of both legend and wish-fulfillment, and were therefore a rich subject for artistic expression. They were taken up in literature by Nikolai Gogol and Leo Tolstoy and in painting by Ilya Repin, Vasily Surikov, and Sergei Ivanov, although the Cossack of legend, free and unfettered, had long since died out. The Cossack armies of the nineteenth century, in fact, were regular military units that had little in common with the restless spirit of their forefathers, and even though they had retained certain privileges—local self-government, for example—these were a mere shadow of their ancient freedom. There was no place in the modern state for an independent Cossack identity. As a result, artistic representations of the Cossacks almost always took as a point of reference the key moments in the history of these marauders.[5]

The Zaporozhian Cossacks in particular,[6] who lived by the rapids of the River Dnieper, were imbued in the popular imagination with a picturesque quality, a quality Gogol elevated to the level of a fixed topos in his historical tale *Taras Bulba* (1835–42).[7] In the 1880s, when Ilya Repin painted *Zaporozhian Cossacks* (1880–91), the democratic spirit of the Cossack communities stood in stark contrast to political reality. The socialist people's underground movement and its terrorist splinter groups nurtured rebellious thoughts. Although Repin cites his interest in Republican societies as the underlying idea behind *Zaporozhian Cossacks*, [8] it is not this aspect of the painting that strikes the viewer. Had it been, the work would likely not have been bought in 1891 by the conservative Tsar Alexander III for the new museum of Russian art, and certainly not for so high a price. Rather it was the blend of primeval vitality and patriotic content that encouraged the work's official recognition.

The subject of the *Zaporozhian Cossacks* has been treated frequently by other artists, most of them borrowing heavily from Gogol's popular account. In 1871 Viktor Vasnetsov completed a series of drawings illustrating Gogol's narrative,[9] and in 1873, ahead of Repin, Evgeni Lanceray created *Zaporozhian Cossack after the Battle*, a small bronze sculpture.[10] At the sixteenth Wanderers' Exhibition, held in 1888, the sculptor Leonid Pozen showed a piece entitled *Zaporozhian Cossacks on a Reconnaissance Mission*. [11] Other illustrations to *Taras Bulba* were executed by Sergei Ivanov in 1902 and 1903,[12] and Repin himself produced one in 1903.[13] Repin's illustration depicts an anecdotal episode from the glorious past of the Zaporozhian Cossacks: the drafting in 1676 of a partly amusing, partly offensive reply to a threatening letter from the Turkish sultan Mehmed IV which had demanded that the Cossacks submit to his authority. This curious epistle, briefly mentioned in Gogol's account, enjoyed a certain popularity in the nineteenth century even though doubts had been cast on its authenticity.[14] It is assumed that Repin was made aware of this anecdotal letter at Abramtsevo (near Moscow), home of the patron Savva Mamontov and his artistic circle; in any case that is where his first sketch for *Zaporozhian Cossacks Write a Letter to the Turkish Sultan* was executed.[15] (It is no accident that his interest in the letter coincided with the Russo-Turkish war of 1877–78.[16] ) After an enthusiastic start, however, progress on the work became difficult and during the 1880s Repin repeatedly put it aside to work on other paintings, among them *Procession of the Cross in the Kursk Province* (1881–83), *Ivan the Terrible* (1885), and *Saint Nicholas* (1888).

In 1887 Repin made the acquaintance of the Ukrainian archaeologist and historian Dmitri Ivanovich Evarnitsky, a keen student of the history of the Zaporozhian Cossacks.[17] This scholar, whose judgment was more than a little colored by his sense of local patriotism, put at Repin's disposal his collection of Cossack antiquities for use as study material. In 1888 Repin made a second study trip into the Caucasus, for the purpose of finding descendants of the legendary Zaporozhian Cossacks and to study their physiognomies.[18]

As they are in the first sketch, the signed 1891 painting, and the completed 1893 version, the Zaporozhian Cossacks are grouped around a table, some of them sitting, some standing. Except for the first sketch on paper, all versions show the men located in an open field. In a state of considerable amusement, they dictate their suggestions for the letter to the Ottoman sovereign to the scribe sitting in the middle.[19] The gathered Cossacks are a truly curious assembly—surly old campaigners, corpulent sanguine types, and bluff bald-headed men. Repin's particular skill in the representation of rugged people had been noted several

years earlier by his old friend and colleague Ivan Kramskoy, who attributed it to the artist's Ukrainian temperament. Kramskoy had formed the view in 1875 during Repin's time as an art scholar in Paris; he suggested that as a native Ukrainian Repin had what it took to paint "hefty, strong, more or less wild organisms" since he could easily empathize with them, which was not the case with his Parisian cocottes.[20] Repin, for his part, had guarded against such an assertion, although *Zaporozhian Cossacks* later seemed to prove that Kramskoy's assumption had been well founded.

During his study trips Repin assembled a large number of studies of Zaporozhian Cossack descendants, but it is clear from his figures that it was the lure of the exotic that was uppermost in the artist's mind. Clean-shaven heads with a single characteristic scalp lock are the rule. Only the scribe and a younger man on his right, described as a "runaway seminarian,"[21] have a full head of hair, and then with an equally typical "pudding basin" haircut. Most of the men sport very long mustaches, in some cases clipped back coquettishly behind the ears; some wear gold earrings, which can be seen glinting. Whereas some men wear fur huts and thick coats of wool, one man sits at the table with a bare upper body.[22] The musical instrument on his lap signifies the Cossacks' love of music.

The high spirits of these exotic people instantly engage the viewer. Their laughter is frank and good-natured, and the epistolary mocking of the Turkish sultan seems neither malicious nor venomous. Grim determination would not sit well with the relaxed and self-assured nature of these knights of the steppes. An engaging detail is the dog that crouches to one side, his quizzical look seeming to ask what his two-legged friends have yet again to laugh about.

The somewhat curt, but natural directness of the Cossacks finds expression in the foreground figure, who leans back over a large wooden barrel, exposing his large, clean-shaven skull to the viewer. Both he and his semi-clad neighbor have sabres hanging across their chests and from their belts hang powder horns, weapons, containers with Oriental engraving, and other strange implements.

The representation of these details is based on meticulous studies that Repin undertook with the help of collectors and specialists in Ukrainian antiquities. The artist was somewhat indignant when an acquaintance referred to the hooded white coat worn by the figure at right as a dressing gown. In fact it was a "*kobeniak* with a *budloga*, a very characteristic piece," wrote Repin. Many Zaporozhian Cossacks in the works of the eighteenth-century historian Riegelmann, he noted, were shown wearing them.[23]

Clothing and implements are intended not only for historical accuracy but also to reinforce the picturesque exoticism of the Cossacks. This was used and developed by both Gogol and Tolstoy, even though they were writing about quite diverse Cossack populations, from different regions and centuries. Gogol has them wearing "trousers wide as the Black Sea" and "jackets of scarlet cloth girt by flowered sashes into which were thrust engraved Turkish pistols, their swords clanking at their heels." [24] Tolstoy maintains that they "love to prance around in their dress, thus mimicking the Tcherkessians." [25] The Cossack clearly is aware of his own exotic charisma: "His clothing was not opulent, but he wore it with that particular Cossack dandyism, which consists in the imitation of the costume of the Dzhigits. A true

Dzhigit's dress was always loose, torn, careless, only the weapons being valuable."[\[26\]](#) Tolstoy was able to explain this historically: "Living among the Chechens, the Cossacks mixed with them and adopted the ways, lifestyles, and customs of these mountain people; but they retained the Russian language and the old beliefs in their original purity."[\[27\]](#) The appeal of the Cossacks for the Russian reader and viewer, therefore, was based on the double identity of the figure represented: outwardly alien, but inwardly familiar.

Repin's differentiation of the Cossacks grouped around the table in terms of their positions within the community borrows heavily from Gogol. Next to the historical Cossack captain Ivan Serko (alias Sirko), the picture depicts the same officers as are encountered in Gogol's tale.[\[28\]](#) In addition, it often has been assumed that Repin also adopted the main characters of Gogol's tale, namely Taras Bulba and his sons.[\[29\]](#) Taras Bulba has been identified as the hefty figure to the right with the full-throated and wearing the red coat and white sheepskin hat.

In 1926 Repin could recall precisely which models he had used for the figures of what he referred to as the judge, the scribe, and the *esaul* (a Cossack military rank roughly equivalent to that of captain).[\[30\]](#) The collector of Ukrainian antiquities Tarnovsky is immortalized in the figure of the judge, who is understood to be the figure sitting at the table and wearing the tall, black fur hat and who, of all the figures, appears the most composed. Evarnitsky, the scholar of the Zaporozhian Cossacks, is captured in the figure of the scribe. In his memoirs Evarnitsky endeavored to identify several other models for the picture,[\[31\]](#) though in many cases the comical quality of the individual characters is so exaggerated as to make identification impossible. It was precisely because of his use of distinctive character types that Repin's band of Cossacks was criticized as a funfair freak show. In his *History of Russian Painting* of 1902, Benois remarked with typical severity: "In the *Zaporozhian Cossacks* the expressions of some of the Cossacks are very cheerful, but overall the picture gives the impression of a coarse and ridiculous spectacle (*zrelishche*)."[\[32\]](#) Repin certainly did not intend to convey such an impression, however. In his mind the Zaporozhian Cossacks represented rather a noble ideal, an ideal that was not expressed through lofty countenances but through an adventurous life.

In response to the strong criticism of *Zaporozhian Cossacks* by the painter Nikolai Ghe concerning a presumed lack of idealism in Repin's Zaporoshtzy, Repin wrote that he must indeed have forgotten that "up until the formation of this popular knighthood-order our brothers were, in their tens of thousands, led and sold into slavery like cattle on the markets of Istanbul, Trebizond and other Turkish cities." But then among them were found "courageous types, heroes full of courage and heroism and moral strength. 'Enough,' they said to the Turks, 'we will settle by the rapids of the Dnieper, and from now on you will only get to our sisters and brothers over our dead bodies.' . . . And thus they did not affect humility like the Pharisees, but lived happily and simply."[\[33\]](#)

The Cossacks are thus at once Christian knights and joyful adventurers. The very same characteristics and ideals were attributed to them by Gogol, whose chosen medium allowed him to introduce these different characteristics at several points during the course of the story. To express such duality in a painting is more difficult. Repin does not represent the

Cossacks at the time of their heroic liberation as enslaved Christians, but at an atmospheric hour in which they snub the Turkish sultan in a way that is both patriotic and mocking.

Repin's choice of moment links the liveliness and exotic boisterousness of the Cossacks, which is represented in a visually striking way, and the non-material dimension—that is, the resistance of the West to Turkish-Islamic power—conveyed symbolically by means of the letter. Neither Repin nor Gogol has any doubt that the Zaporozhian Cossacks were the saviors of Western civilization. "The story is well known," Gogol wrote, "how their incessant warfare and restless existence saved Europe from the merciless hordes which threatened to overwhelm her."<sup>[34]</sup> According to Repin, they "defended Europe against the robbers from the East" and "laughed from the depth of their soul over Eastern arrogance."<sup>[35]</sup> That Ottoman lands in the Balkans in reality lay southwest of Zaporozhian territory clearly was irrelevant, for "Eastern" here refers not strictly to a geographical classification but rather in large measure to a cultural one. Wherever Russia borders Islam, it sees itself as an outpost of the West.<sup>[36]</sup>

What fascinated Repin, and before him Gogol, about the Cossacks was the combination of idealism and the sense of the bursting fullness of life—two things that in modern bourgeois society are a constant object of fantasy and wish fulfillment.

The paroxysmal side of Cossack life still occupied Repin's thoughts several years later; in 1926, at the advanced age of eighty-two, he wished to paint the Zaporozhian Cossacks once more, this time "the entire Setch in celebratory mood, a happy time, dances, the Hopak etc."<sup>[37]</sup> For him, the ability to celebrate is a gift that has almost metaphysical qualities. "This universal revelry," wrote Gogol, "had something fascinating about it. It was not an assemblage of toppers, who drank to drown sorrow, but simply a wild revelry of joy."<sup>[38]</sup> Repin, who was very keen to distance himself from any comparison between the Zaporozhian Cossacks and straightforward boozers, would agree.<sup>[39]</sup>

To the nineteenth-century mind the Cossack is essentially Dionysian. His world consists of wars and festivities, two modes of time and of being that, as Georges Bataille has stressed, exist completely outside the profane everyday world and instead communicate directly with the Holy One.<sup>[40]</sup> This image of the Cossack is also prevalent in the works of Tolstoy: "[He] almost never works at home. His presence in the Cossack village is an exception to the rule, and when he is there, he lives like a lord. The Cossacks are all winegrowers, and getting drunk is a characteristic predilection—a custom whose neglect could be regarded as rebelliousness."<sup>[41]</sup>

According to Gogol, the Cossacks were not familiar with the routine of adult life. They seemed to him like "children, always ready for anything."<sup>[42]</sup> It was their striking anti-bourgeois characteristics that also were emphasized by Tolstoy: "Their love of freedom, idleness, pillage, and war constitute the cornerstones of their being."<sup>[43]</sup>

The thrill of danger plays a fundamental role in this wild and romantic vision. The bloody headband of the stocky man puffing out the smoke of his pipe like a snorting horse very clearly underlines the perils of Cossack existence. "There were no very old men in the

Setch," Gogol remarked, "for none of the Zaporozhtzi ever died in their beds."[\[44\]](#) The old, wrinkled little man with a pipe in his mouth that Repin added to the Cossack group is surely the exception that proves the rule.[\[45\]](#)

Exactly as they are in Gogol's works, Repin's Zaporozhian Cossacks are a purely male society in which women have no place. Repin was aware of this male bonding when in 1891 he wrote to Elizaveta Zvantseva, with whom he was then in love, that thoughts of their meeting the previous day had led him to abandon his work: "I cannot concentrate today; I cannot transport myself to the Setch, where there are no women, where strong, hefty, free people lived for the defense of their fellow men and of the weak, for the defense of all the dearest interests of their homeland-faith, freedom, wellbeing (*blagodenstvie*)."[\[46\]](#) Repin never goes as far in his pronouncements as Gogol, for whom the cult of male friendship is accorded the very highest place.[\[47\]](#) As if to strengthen the precedence of the laws of the male bond-over-blood ties, it is logical that Taras Bulba must kill his youngest son, who has betrayed his community.[\[48\]](#)

The Cossack army or "popular knighthood-order," as Repin refers to them, despises the spirit of bourgeois materialism, which admittedly was prevalent in Russian society even at the time Repin was working on the painting. "Our Zaporozhians," states Repin, identifying himself closely with them, "fascinate me on account of this freedom, this revival of the chivalric spirit. With their bravery and strength the Russian people renounced material goods (*zhiteyskikh blag*) and founded an egalitarian brotherhood for the purpose of defending the best principles of the Orthodox faith and the human character."[\[49\]](#) The artist's transfiguration of the antimaterialistic spirit of the Setch is apparent.[\[50\]](#) The fact that within Cossack society there had once existed a landowner class, complete with the usual hierarchies and dependent relationships, had already been clearly shown by Soviet research.[\[51\]](#)

The ideals attributed to the Cossacks by Gogol are predominantly of a Slavophile nature. They consist in a typical synthesis of nationalistic and religious elements, with strong Messianic undertones. In Gogol's writings, in particular, the clash of these ideals with the decidedly unruly nature of the Cossacks and their cruelty toward their enemies is often strongly felt. Thus it seems somewhat unexpected when an older Cossack reveals that he has long prayed to God to allow him to end his life "in battle for a holy and Christian cause."[\[52\]](#) The enemy here is not, as in Repin, the Ottoman Empire, but Catholic Poland, which poses a similar threat to the Orthodox faith.

This synthesis of the Cossacks' capacity for drinking and their Christian Messianism is expressed by Gogol in a witty aside: "Therefore let us drink all together, let us drink before all else to the holy orthodox faith, that the day may finally come when it may be spread over all the world."[\[53\]](#) In Repin's painting, it must be said, the Zaporozhian Cossacks' Christian leanings are only hinted at, by the crosses that are visible on the bare chests of two of the men.

In *Taras Bulba*, the last words of the Cossack who falls in battle add up to a thoroughly Slavophile credo: "Farewell, brother gentles, my comrades! May the holy Russian land stand forever, and may it be eternally honored!"[\[54\]](#) The words of Taras Bulba at the moment of

his execution by the Poles are equally heavy with promise and threat: "Wait, the time will come when ye shall learn what the orthodox Russian faith is! Already the people scent it far and near. A czar shall arise from Russian soil, and there shall not be a power in the world which shall not submit to him!"<sup>[55]</sup>

This nationalism is based on the conviction that they possess distinctive national characteristics not found in any other people. In Gogol's eyes, the Cossacks' joviality is yet another mark of their superiority. Shortly before the decisive battle with the all-powerful foe, the feeling of apprehension among the Zaporozhian Cossacks subsides "in order that good cheer might return to the soul of each with greater strength than before. Of this only the Slav nature, a broad, powerful nature, which is to others what the sea is to small rivulets, is capable."<sup>[56]</sup> Their effervescent joyfulness thunders like the sea.

Their spirit of comradeship is likewise a national virtue: "There have been brotherhoods in other lands, but never any such brotherhoods as on our Russian soil."<sup>[57]</sup> The Russian soul itself is unique: "No, brothers," announces Taras Bulba with emotion, "to love as the Russian soul loves, is to love not with the mind or anything else, but with all that God has given, all that is within you. . . . No, no one else can love in that way!"<sup>[58]</sup>

Hand in hand with these virtues goes the capacity for tolerating intense stress and sorrow, as shown by Taras Bulba at the moment of his agonizing execution: "But fire had already risen from the fagots; it lapped his feet, and the flame spread to the tree. . . . But can any fire, flames, or power be found on earth which are capable of overpowering Russian strength?"<sup>[59]</sup>

The Cossacks in Repin's painting also demonstrate openness, camaraderie, and joviality; added to this is a confidence in their own power to stand up to the Turkish sultan. Vladimir Stasov assures Repin that *Zaporozhian Cossacks* can stand comparison with the finest passages of *Taras Bulba*.<sup>[60]</sup> Repin's fellow artist Chistiakov was equally enchanted by the painting. Although the work was "not fully thought through and was somewhat coarsely painted," it was nonetheless "authentically Russian."<sup>[61]</sup> Ultimately, the pictorial fulfillment of the Western European stereotype of the "wild Cossack" was what earned the painting success in Europe and America.<sup>[62]</sup>

The historical struggles of the Zaporozhian Cossacks against Poland and the Ottoman Empire encouraged their nationalistic stance in the nineteenth century. Yet Zaporozhian territory lies in the Ukraine, which in the course of the nineteenth century established its own sense of national identity. In the common parlance of that time the country was often called "Malorossiya" (Little Russia), and its inhabitants frequently referred to as Little Russians.<sup>[63]</sup>

The Ukrainian-born Gogol, however, emphasizes not merely the Slavic, but the rather explicitly Russian identity of the Zaporozhian Cossacks. He lets Taras Bulba reminisce how "our land" was once ruled by "princes of Russian ancestors/nobility, our own princes, not Catholic unbelievers."<sup>[64]</sup> The Orthodox community of faith is thus more important than



national differences between the East Slavic brotherhood. By contrast, Evarnitsky saw in a free Zaporozhe first and foremost an embodiment of local independence.

Though Ilya Repin was born and brought up in the Ukraine and spoke fluent Ukrainian, he considered himself a Russian.[65] On the design for a monument to the Ukrainian national poet Taras Shevchenko, the artist jokingly signed "the Moskal Ilya Repin," a disparaging term used by Ukrainians when referring to their Russian neighbors.[66]

Repin had angrily rejected Evarnitsky's suggestion to paint a picture that showed the Ukrainian hetman Ivan Mazepa's alliance with the Swedes in the Nordic war against Russia.[67] Repin set no store by the notion of an independent Ukraine with Polish backing, a situation that was called into play by this particular military alliance. In his harsh rebuff to the patriotic scholar, Repin wrote, "I despise the Poland of the Pans, and Mazepa is a wholly typical scoundrel, a Polish Pan, prepared to do anything for his own advantage and for Polish honor. No, I am a Russian and cannot be hypocritical. I love the Zaporozhian Cossacks as honest knights, who know how to fight for their freedom, for oppressed people, and who had the strength to shake off once and for all the abominable Polish Pantum and the Shlakhta." [68]

Nevertheless, the artist admitted that he would rather have painted the entry of the Ukrainian hetman Bogdan Khmelnytsky into Kiev after the victory over Poland.[69] In 1654 Khmelnytsky supported the union with Russia, after which he had to acknowledge that despite dazzling successes he could not have defeated Poland without Russian help.[70] In Repin's opinion Poland could never have been a reliable protector for Little Russia: "No, the majority were right that she could better rely on Moscow." [71] From this statement it is not entirely clear whether Repin took the union with Russia to be a natural association or only the lesser of two evils. The artist could not ignore the fact that, soon after the start of Russian rule over the Ukraine, the Zaporozhian Cossacks repeatedly fought against the Russian authorities during popular uprisings and peasant wars. Repin was also well aware that, at the time of the crushing of the Setch at the hands of Russia in 1709, the Zaporozhian Cossacks preferred to seek refuge in the lands of the Crimean Tatars, though in former times these had been their traditional enemies. After the liquidation of the new Setch in 1775 as a result of the Zaporozhians' participation in the Pugachov Revolt, many of their descendants found a new home in Turkish lands.[72]

The spiritual "dressing up" of the Zaporozhian Cossacks with strongly Slavophile convictions must therefore seem a clumsy nineteenth-century distortion, a charge against which Repin—despite distinct parallels—was eager to defend himself. In fact, Repin was outspoken in confirming the accuracy of everything that Gogol had written about the Zaporozhians. Yet over and above the Slavophile characteristics, Repin emphasized the Republican ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity, which no one in the world felt so deeply as the Zaporozhian Cossacks.[73] The Russian socialist Aleksandr Herzen was similarly interested in the democratic structures of this community, whose legacy he was keen to see as the original model for the future structure of Russian society.[74]

Leo Tolstoy, with whom Repin discussed the study for *Zaporozhian Cossacks* in his studio in 1880, detected in the Caucasian Cossacks of the "old belief" a deep dislike of the Russian

state.[75] The soldiers dispatched there from Russia would have been seen as an army of occupation. The Cossack "respects the hostile mountain dweller, but despises the soldier who is alien to him, his oppressor. In the eyes of the Cossack, the real Russian peasant is a strange, semi-wild and contemptible creature." [76]

The assessment of the Cossacks as a thoroughly Russian phenomenon is an extremely widespread convention. The cultural philosopher Georgi Fedotov cites "the wild freedom of the Cossacks" as one of the facets of the "authentic face of Russia." [77] The "Cossack myth" does not in the end correspond with the topos of the young, unspent Slavic peoples—a topos that Repin adopts occasionally, if rather unsystematically. Before going to Paris in 1873 as a scholar of the Imperial Academy of Arts, Repin wrote to Stasov: "Europe needs us, it needs the influx of new strength from the provinces—new juices that will give it new life." [78] This sounds very much like Odoevski, the Russian philosopher who in the 1840s cherished the idea of the Russian nation as one of those young barbarian peoples chosen by destiny to succeed the old sophisticated but worn-out cultures. Odoevski was sure that Western Europe urgently needed "fresh and powerful juices from the Slavic East." [79] Who could better incarnate this idea than the legendary Zaporozhian Cossacks? Yet in identifying itself with the mythology surrounding the Cossacks, hoping to share their vigorous, half-barbarian power, Russia overlooks the fact that the Russian Cossacks of the nineteenth century were much less formidable than their Zaporozhian predecessors.

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## Notes

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All advice will be appreciated.

[1] The Setch was crushed by Russian troops in 1709 following the rebellion of Bulavinsk, was subsequently reestablished, but was wiped out once and for all after the Pugachov Revolt of 1775.

[2] The Cossacks from the Greben region in the Northern Caucasus, at the foot of the Chechen mountains, were descendants of refugees persecuted as Old Believers. See Tolstoy, *Die Kosaken*, p. 141.

[3] Gogol, *Taras Bulba*, chap. 3, p. 26.

[4] Berdiaev 2000, p. 15.

[5] An exception to this was Leo Tolstoy's 1863 account, *The Cossacks*.

[6] The epithet is derived from the noun *porog* (rapids) in combination with the preposition *za* (behind). On the history of the Zaporozhian Cossacks, see Golobudsky 1957 and Evarnitsky 1892–97.

- [7] Gogol's tale *Taras Bulba* forms part of the collection *Mirgord*. The first version of *Taras Bulba* dates from 1835 and the definitive version from 1842; Gogol 1949–50, vol. 2, pp. 30–146. References to *Taras Bulba* in the text and notes of this article are to the English translation published in 1918 and reissued in 1962.
- [8] In 1889 Repin wrote to Nikolai Leskov, who had bemoaned the lack of spiritual content in *Zaporozhian Cossacks*, that "even when painting the Zaporozhtzi, I had a certain idea. . . . In the history of peoples . . . I have always been fascinated by manifestations of community life, in particular by societies with a republican structure." Repin, letter to N. Leskov, 19 February 1889, in Repin 1969, vol. 1, p. 359.
- [9] The Abramtsevo Museum-Estate has three *Taras Bulba* illustrations by Viktor Vasnetsov from 1871: *Taras Bulba in the Steppes with His Sons*; *A Square in the Setch (Dance)*; *Andrii's Execution*.
- [10] Evgeni Lanceray, *Zaporozhian Cossack after the Battle*, 1873, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. Reproduced in *Gosudarstvennaya Tre'iakovskaya Galereya* 2000, p. 186, no. 207.
- [11] Leonid Pozen, *Zaporozhian Cossacks on a Reconnaissance Mission*, 1888, plaster, whereabouts unknown. Illustrated in Goldshtein 1987, vol. 1, p. 338, no. 306.
- [12] Sergei Ivanov, *On the Way to the Setch. In the Steppe*, illustration to Gogol's *Taras Bulba*, 1903–4, whereabouts unknown; Granovski 1962, ill. p. 200. Ivanov further depicted *The Homecoming of Taras Bulba's Sons*, 1903–4, private collection; illustrated in *ibid.*, p. 199; *Andrii's Death*, 1903–4, private collection, and *Taras in Battle*, 1903–4, private collection, illustrated in *ibid.*, p. 201.
- [13] Ilya Repin, illustration to Gogol's *Taras Bulba*, 1903, watercolor, Russian Museum, Saint Petersburg; Grabar 1963–64, vol. 2, ill. p. 183. In addition to the previously cited *Hopak* (1927–28), another picture by Repin on the theme of *The Demise of the Black Sea Cossacks* (1908) is also known. When the artist's estate was divided up, the picture passed to his daughter Tatiana Repina-Yazeva. The estate inventory is reproduced in Brodsky and Moskvinov 1969, pp. 344–46. The painting is briefly mentioned in Valkenier 1990, p. 172. The Zaporozhian specialist Evarnitsky noted that, after the success of Repin's *Zaporozhian Cossacks*, the artist Konstantin Makovsky sought him out and asked him to suggest a pictorial subject on a similar theme; Yavornitsky [Evarnitsky] 1948–49, pp. 86f.
- [14] Gogol, *Taras Bulba*, chap. 1. On the issue of the letter's authenticity, see I. S. Zilbershtein, "Repin v rabote nad 'Zaporozhtsami,'" introduction to Yavornitsky [Evarnitsky] 1948–49, p. 68. The text of the letter is reproduced in Evarnitsky 1894, p. 98.
- [15] The drawing bears the inscription "The Zaporozhian Cossacks pen an answer to Sultan Ahmed III. Abramtsevo, 26 June 1878." The drawing is in the Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow; Grabar 1963–64, vol. 2, ill. p. 66.
- [16] It is somewhat surprising that this obvious chronological coincidence has not been mentioned in the literature before now, especially since Repin's Slavophile and pan-Slavic stance at the time of the Russo-Turkish war has been the object of detailed examination; see Zilbershtein 1948–49b.
- [17] Dmitri Ivanovich Evarnitsky (1857–1840), the author of numerous publications on the history of the Zaporozhian Setch, usually signed himself Yavornitsky after 1917. Despite long periods without contact, he was friendly with Repin up until the time of the latter's death and left written reminiscences of Repin's work on *Zaporozhian Cossacks*. These memoirs are certainly very subjectively colored and tend to over-emphasize his own role in the genesis of the painting; Yavornitsky [Evarnitsky] 1948–49. On the genesis of the painting, see also Davydova 1955; Zograf 1959; Liaskovskaya 1962, pp. 213–32; Grabar 1963–64, vol. 2, pp. 63–80; and Valkenier 1990, pp. 130–34.
- [18] Liaskovskaya 1962, p. 222. A further trip to Turkey to study the descendants of the emigrant Zaporozhian Cossacks had to be broken off in 1890 for reasons of ill health; see *ibid.*, p. 223, and Grabar 1963–64, vol. 2, p. 77.
- [19] The version in the Russian Museum in Saint Petersburg, which bears the dates 1880–91, should be regarded as the most mature and definitive version of the painting (fig. 1). A version possibly begun earlier but only completed in 1893 is to be found in the Museum of Fine Arts, Kharkov, Ukraine (illustrated in Grabar 1963–64, vol. 2, p. 80). There exist two smaller oil sketches: one is in the Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow (Sternin 1985, p. 31); the other, the whereabouts of which are unknown, is illustrated in Grabar 1963–64, vol. 2, p. 67). On the chronology of the different versions, see Davydova 1955 and Liaskovskaya 1962, p. 218.



Fig. 1, Ilya Repin, *Zaporozhian Cossacks Write a Letter to the Turkish Sultan*, 1880-91. Oil on canvas. Russian Museum, Saint Petersburg [\[larger image\]](#)

[20] Kramskoy 1965-66, vol. 1, pp. 311f.; cited in Valkenier 1990, p. 62.

[21] Yavornitsky [Evarnitsky] 1948-49, p. 76. On the figure of the seminarian and the model who posed for it, see Zhirkevich 1948-49, p. 147. In Gogol's *Taras Bulba* (chaps. 2 and 3), the Cossacks as a rule send their sons to be trained in the seminary in Kiev where they are most unwilling to learn, a love of theory not really being germane to them.

[22] Yavornitsky [Evarnitsky] (1948-49, p. 74 n. 3) gives the following explanation for the naked torso of the man sitting to the left—he is a card player, as the cards in front of him indicate, and is required to remove his shirt in order to eliminate any suspicion of possible deception. However, a man with a bare torso is also present in all other painted versions and oil sketches of *Zaporozhian Cossacks*, but cannot in those cases justifiably be described as a card player. The naked torso among this band of men is rather to be seen as a purely atmospheric element of the general ribaldry.

[23] Repin, letter to A. S. Suvorin, December 1891, in Repin 1969, vol. 1, p. 403.

[24] Gogol, *Taras Bulba*, chap. 1, pp. 11-12.

[25] Tolstoy, *Die Kosaken*, chap. 4, p. 142.

[26] *Ibid.*, chap. 6, p. 152.

[27] *Ibid.*, chap. 4, pp. 141f.

[28] "All formed in a ring; and at length, after the third summons, the chiefs began to arrive—the Koshevoy [i.e., commander, chief] with staff in hand, the symbol of his office; the judge with the army-seal; the secretary with his ink-bottle; and the esaul with his staff." Gogol, *Taras Bulba*, chap. 3, p. 31. On the resemblance between the ataman Sirko and the popular General Dragomirov, whom Repin admired and whose portrait he painted, see Yavornitsky [Evarnitsky] 1948-49, p. 76. On the role of this character in Repin's work, see Zilbershtein 1948-49a, pp. 185-98.

[29] Zhirkevich, diary, unpublished entry for February 2, 1888; cited in Zograf 1959, p. 62.

[30] By 1926 Repin himself could only remember the models for the scribe (Evarnitsky), the judge (Tarnovsky), and the esaul (Stravinsky). Repin 1948-49, p. 381.

[31] This certainly goes for the stocky, laughing man in the red coat, whom Yavornitsky [Evarnitsky] (1948-49, p. 74) identified as the professor of the Saint Petersburg conservatoire, A. I. Rubtsev. For identities of other models, see *ibid.*, pp. 74-76.

[32] Benois (1902) 1999, p. 272.

[33] Repin, letter to Stasov, 31 March 1892; in Repin 1969, vol. 1, p. 423. Compare this with Gogol: "And all the Setch prayed in one church, and were willing to defend it to their last drop of blood, although they would not hearken to aught about fasting or abstinence." *Taras Bulba*, chap. 3, p. 27.

[34] Gogol, *Taras Bulba*, chap. 1, p. 7.

[35] Excerpted from Repin's letter to Leskov of 19 February 1889; in Repin 1969, vol. 1, p. 359.

[36] The definition of Russia as the "bulwark of Europe" was already found in Pushkin and subsequently became common currency among Slavophiles. A. S. Pushkin, letter to Chaadaev, 19 October 1836, in Kefeli 2000, p. 72; Khomiakov 2000, p. 135.

[37] Letter to Yavornitsky [Evarnitsky], 30 November 1926; in Repin 1969, vol. 2, p. 381. The work that he then painted, *Hopak*, merely repeats in its principal character a figure that Repin

had removed from *Zaporozhian Cossacks*, having first made a copy. Ilya Repin, *Hopak*, 1927-28. The painting is in the Atheneum in Helsinki; Grabar 1963-64, vol. 2, ill. p. 245. Also illustrated in Grabar (*ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 81) is the copy of the Cossack removed from *Zaporozhian Cossacks*; the work is in the Monson Collection in Stockholm. Yavornitsky further relates that, while working on the painting, Repin went to Ukrainian evenings in Saint Petersburg and joined in folk dances from his homeland, making the crockery clatter on the table.

[38] Gogol, *Taras Bulba*, chap. 3, p. 25.

[39] "Why should we now turn away from these heroes and sling dirt at them and compare them to boozers at Palkin's inn?!!!" Repin, letter to Stasov, 31 March 1892; in Repin 1969, vol. 1, p. 423.

[40] Georges Bataille's theories concerning the paroxysmal situation of the feast and its relationship to the sacred are set out in his examination of "Prohibition and Transgression" ("Interdit et transgression"); Bataille 1957, pt. 1, chaps. 5, 6. See also Caillois (1939) 1988, esp. chap. 4, "Le sacré de transgression: Théorie de la fête," and app. 3, "Guerre et sacré."

[41] Tolstoy, *Die Kosaken*, chap. 4, p. 143.

[42] Gogol, *Taras Bulba*, chap. 3, p. 28.

[43] Tolstoy, *Die Kosaken*, chap. 4, p. 142.

[44] Gogol, *Taras Bulba*, chap. 3, p. 33. When Taras Bulba asks after his old friends, he learns that one has been hanged, another flayed, and yet another beheaded.

[45] In Gogol's account, too, a comical old Cossack comes forward and expresses his joy at still being able to find the opportunity—at such an advanced age—to end his life on the battlefield "for a holy and Christian cause." *Ibid.*, chap. 8, p. 89.

[46] Repin, letter to E. N. Zvantseva, 11 February 1891; cited in Grabar and Zilbershtein 1948-49, vol. 2, p. 69.

[47] "There is no more sacred brotherhood. The father loves his children, the mother loves her children, the children love their father and mother; but this is not like that, brothers. The wild beast also loves its young. But a man can be related (*poroditsya*) only by similarity of mind and not of blood. There have been brotherhoods in other lands, but never any such brotherhoods as on our Russian soil." Gogol, *Taras Bulba*, chap. 9, p. 95.

[48] *Ibid.*, chap. 9.

[49] Repin, letter to Leskov, 19 February 1889; in Repin 1969, vol. 1, p. 359.

[50] Gogol, too, idealized the antimaterialistic spirit of the Setch when he wrote that the Zaporozhian Cossacks often forgot where they had buried their treasure; *Taras Bulba*, chap. 8.

[51] See "Setch, Zaporozhskaya," in *Bolshaya sovetskaya entsyklopediya* (Moscow, 1976), vol. 23, p. 327.

[52] Gogol, *Taras Bulba*, chap. 8, p. 89.

[53] *Ibid.*, p. 92.

[54] *Ibid.*, chap. 9, p. 101. With patriotic phrases such as "Russkaya zemlya," the adjective is often given a capital letter in Gogol's writings.

[55] *Ibid.*, chap. 12, p. 135.

[56] *Ibid.*, chap. 8, p. 91.

[57] *Ibid.*, chap. 9, p. 95.

[58] *Ibid.*, p. 96.

[59] *Ibid.*, chap. 12, p. 135.

[60] V. V. Stasov, letter to Repin, 28 October 1891; cited by Zilbershtein in Grabar and Zilbershtein 1948-49, vol. 2, p. 72.

[61] ". . . zato zdorovo, po-russki." P. P. Chistiakov, letter to K. T. Soldatenkov, 31 December 1891; cited by Zilbershtein in Grabar and Zilbershtein 1948-49, vol. 2, p. 72.

[62] At exhibitions in Chicago, Munich, and Budapest, *Zaporozhian Cossacks* received a fair amount of attention and honors. Printed reproductions began to appear very early on, especially in Germany. See Zilbershtein in Grabar and Zilbershtein 1948-49, vol. 2, p. 72.

[63] The Austrian writer Leopold von Sacher-Masoch likewise refers to the fellow Ukrainians of his Galician childhood as "Little Russians," if not simply as "Russians."

[64] Gogol, *Taras Bulba*, chap. 9, p. 95.

- [65] Repin's ancestors came from Russia and were dispatched to the Ukraine as Strelets. Valkenier 1990, p. 10.
- [66] Yavornitsky [Evarnitsky] 1948-49, p. 102 n. 1. The drawing is in the Shevchenko Museum, Kiev.
- [67] *Ibid.*, pp. 89f.
- [68] *Pantum* is my German creation for the Russian *panstwo* (the social group of Polish gentlemen); *pan* is the Polish word for "Mr." *Panhood* might be a suitable alternative. *Shlakhta* is the Polish word for "nobility." Repin, letter to Evarnitsky, 14 April 1896; in Repin 1969, vol. 2, p. 110. In the same letter Repin does however stress that he respected present-day Poland for its refinement. Elsewhere he gets worked up about the "offensive hatred of the Poles" in chauvinistic circles, and even in Dostoevsky. See the letters to Stasov and to Kramskoy, both of 16 February 1881; *ibid.*, vol. 1, pp. 244-45.
- [69] Yavornitsky [Evarnitsky] 1948-49, p. 90. The draft of a Khmel'nitsky painting is documented, but the project was never taken beyond the first draft stage. *Ibid.*, p. 90, note 1.
- [70] See Sakharov and Novoseldtsev 2000, pp. 546-50.
- [71] Repin, letter to Evarnitsky, 14 April 1896; in Repin 1969, vol. 2, p. 110.
- [72] *Bolshaya sovetskaya entsiklopediya*, vol. 23, p. 327. Repin refers to the Zaporozhian Cossacks' migration to Turkey and stresses that there, too, they continued to live freely. Repin, letter to Stasov, 6 November 1880; in Repin 1969, vol. 1, p. 240.
- [73] "I took the palette and for two-and-a-half weeks have lived uninterruptedly with them and cannot prise myself away—a curious people. Not for nothing has Gogol written about them—everything he says is true! A hell of a people! . . . No one on this earth has felt liberty, equality and fraternity as deeply as they!" Repin, letter to Stasov, 6 November 1880; in Repin 1969, vol. 1, p. 240. The chauvinist version of the Slavophile idea, which after 1880 received fresh impetus, was deeply hateful to Repin. See letter to Stasov, 16 February 1881; *ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 244. Repin, who lived in a completely different kind of society, was fascinated by this highly idealized, imagined freedom and often enthused about it in domestic circles during those years. His younger son, Yuri, allegedly went around at that time with a shaven head and a scalp lock. This detail is recorded in the memoirs of Repin's daughter; Repina-Yazeva 1914, p. 572, cited in Liaskovskaya 1962, p. 214.
- [74] "Byloe i dumy," chap. 30, in Herzen 1988, vol. 2, p. 134.
- [75] The mistrust of the state as a matter of principle is in any case a characteristic of the Old Believers.
- [76] Tolstoy, *Die Kosaken*, chap. 4, p. 142. In 1880, on a visit to Repin's studio, Leo Tolstoy conveyed to the artist his impression that he did not really share the latter's view of *Zaporozhian Cossacks*, which Repin attributed to the lack of idealism of its content; Repin, letter to Stasov, 17 October 1880, in Repin 1969, vol. 1, p. 239.
- [77] G. P. Fedotov's "litso Rossii" is cited in Novikova and Sizemskaya 1999, p. 370.
- [78] Repin, letter to Stasov, 31 March 1873; in Repin 1969, vol. 1, p. 51.
- [79] Odoevski 1844; cited in Kefeli 2000, p. 122.

## Illustrations



Fig. 1, Ilya Repin, *Zaporozhian Cossacks Write a Letter to the Turkish Sultan*, 1880-91. Oil on canvas.  
Russian Museum, Saint Petersburg [\[return to text\]](#)