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# The Origins of Russian Scenery: Volga River Tourism and Russian Landscape Aesthetics

Christopher Ely

Волга описано, переописано, и все-таки не дописано.

—N. S. Tolstoi

Scenic tourism, like so many of Russia's cultural importations from western Europe, developed at a relatively late date and was partly initiated from above. In 1838 the Ministry of the Imperial Palace under Tsar Nicholas I commissioned two landscape painters—the brothers Nikanor and Grigorii Chernetsov—to travel the length of the Volga River from Rybinsk to Astrakhan' on an internal Russian "voyage of discovery."<sup>1</sup> According to ministry documents, the Chernetsovs had received funding "to draw from nature in panoramic views the beautiful places on both banks of the Volga."<sup>2</sup> Since Russian landscape painters had previously exhibited little interest in depicting their native countryside, preferring to paint landscaped parks or foreign terrain, the Volga trip was to constitute a watershed in Russia's appreciation of the provincial landscape. "[The painters] must take for their subjects," stipulated the ministry, "general views of the cities, sizable villages, other picturesque sites, places marked by historical events, vestiges from antiquity, clothing, and other finds that merit attention in any way."<sup>3</sup> Part Lewis and Clark explorers, part academic aesthetes, and part wide-eyed tourists, the Chernetsovs outfitted a "floating studio" for themselves and set out in early May 1838 to discover a picturesque Russia somewhere along the banks of the great river.

The Chernetsovs' quest for Russian scenery took place at a time when scenic river travel had already become firmly established as a leisure activity in the west. The Rhine and Hudson Rivers, for example, had become regular destinations for European and American tourists by the 1830s.<sup>4</sup> Whereas travelers on these rivers were staying in elegant hotels, riding on well-appointed steamships, and admiring the sights with the help of pub-

This statement was first used by V. I. Ragozin as the epigraph to his multivolume study entitled *Volga* (St. Petersburg, 1880). It was printed earlier in N. S. Tolstoi, *Zavolzhskaiia chast' Makar'evskago uezda Nizhegorodskoi gub.* (Moscow, 1857), 1: 118.

1. For a more extensive description of the Chernetsovs' journey, see Christopher Ely, *This Meager Nature: Landscape and National Identity in Imperial Russia* (DeKalb, 2002), 76–78. The present discussion of the Chernetsovs derives in large measure from this text.

2. Cited in G. V. Smirnov, "Grigorii Grigorovich Chernetsov i Nikanor Grigorovich Chernetsov," in A. I. Leonov, ed., *Russkoe iskusstvo: Ocherki o zhizni i tvorchestve khudozhnikov* (Moscow, 1958), 562.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Overviews of picturesque travel in Europe and the United States during the early nineteenth century include Lynne Withey, *Grand Tours and Cook's Tours: A History of Leisure Travel, 1750 to 1915* (New York, 1997), and John F. Sears, *Sacred Places: American Tourist Attractions in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1989).

lished guidebooks, the Chernetsovs undertook nothing less than a trail-blazing adventure (not, in fact, without its share of perils and mishaps).<sup>5</sup> Neither the practice of domestic travel, nor the sense that Russia's landscape possessed its own unique scenic appeal had yet made significant inroads in Russian culture. As readers of Nikolai Gogol's *Dead Souls* (1842) and Vladimir Sollogub's *Tarantas* (1845) will have observed, Russian travelers during the reign of Nicholas I typically conceived of the provincial landscape as a vast expanse of unappealing territory. While western Europe presented a spectacle of unsurpassed natural beauty and historical importance to visiting Russians, their native countryside seemed an undifferentiated mass of flat and monotonous terrain, an environment with its own quiet beauty perhaps, but unspectacular, unpicturesque, and ill-suited to scenic tourism. One of Sollogub's tarantas passengers expresses this indifference concisely: "People travel in foreign countries, in those German places. But what kind of travelers are we? Just gentlemen going back to our country homes."<sup>6</sup>

We have grown accustomed to thinking of the admiration of scenery as an innate, unlearned faculty. Indeed, the word *nature* initially conjures up a visual, often scenic, image. "It is precisely the visual, or pictorial, conception of nature," writes a recent commentator, "that dominates the use of the word today."<sup>7</sup> It is well worth keeping in mind, then, that beneath such unassuming words as *scenery* and *landscape* lie assumptions and practices that say a good deal about the way we have been conditioned to perceive the world around us.

The idea that natural terrain constitutes an aesthetic object in and of itself, a landscape rather than a piece of land, is fundamentally a product of modern times, dating from the sixteenth century.<sup>8</sup> Scenery itself, defined as discrete sections of land aestheticized for the visual stimulation of

5. The Chernetsovs saw their journey as an endeavor requiring "constant labor and anxiety." "In our fragile craft," they wrote, "we struggled with furious waves and immovable ice." See A. I. Korobochko and V. Ia. Liubovnyi, "Panorama Volgi akademikov G. i N. Chernetsovykh," in Grigorii and Nikanor Chernetsov, *Puteshestvie po Volge* (Moscow, 1970).

6. V. A. Sollogub, *Tarantas* (Moscow, 1955), 13. Gogol' had already made similar statements about the Russian countryside in *Dead Souls*, but both writers found other means through which to reanimate the landscape and make it meaningful for their readers in ways that did not conform to European practices of scenic tourism.

7. Gina Crandell, *Nature Pictorialized: "The View" in Landscape History* (Baltimore, 1993), 3.

8. Among theoretical works on the historical development of landscape aesthetics, English-language scholarship has dominated in recent years. See, for example, Malcolm Andrews, *The Search for the Picturesque: Landscape Aesthetics and Tourism in Britain, 1760–1800* (Stanford, 1989); John Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place* (Cambridge, Eng., 1972); Ann Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology: The English Rustic Tradition, 1740–1860* (Berkeley, 1986); Denis Cosgrove, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape* (Totowa, N.J., 1984); Stephen Daniels, *Fields of Vision: Landscape Imagery and National Identity in England and the United States* (Princeton, 1993); Nicholas Green, *The Spectacle of Nature: Landscape and Bourgeois Culture in Nineteenth-Century France* (Manchester, 1990); Angela Miller, *Empire of the Eye: Landscape, Representation and American Cultural Politics, 1825–1875* (Ithaca, 1993); Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting, 1825–1875* (New York, 1980); and Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York, 1995).

the tourist or outside onlooker, was an even later invention, associated with leisure travel and the pursuit of picturesque (or picture-like) beauty in nature. That we can conceive of nature as scenic, as a series of more and less attractive landscapes, depends on certain conditions of modern life: we must be sufficiently detached from the use-value of the land so that we can observe it from a removed, aesthetic point of view, and we must be able to travel easily and often enough to build a basis for aesthetic comparison. In this respect, tourism, the practice of visiting different locations for pleasure or edification, has historically been closely connected to scenic viewing. The eyes that see nature as scenic are the eyes of the modern tourist, scanning the world as a source of interest and aesthetic pleasure.<sup>9</sup>

Scenery, then, has its history, and Russian scenery has its place in that story. The history of the scenic gaze in Russia does not, however, conform to the standard pattern established in western Europe. To begin with, there is no equivalent word for natural scenery in Russian, *vidy* (views), *kartiny* (pictures), or *peizazh* (landscape) being the best-possible substitutes. Readers of Russian literature and viewers of Russian art, of course, will be familiar with a certain image of the open Russian countryside: the vast, level plains, the rustic roads and villages, the gray skies and the thick forests so well known from the writings of Aleksandr Pushkin, Gogol', and Ivan Turgenev, or from the paintings of Aleksei Savrasov, Ivan Shishkin, and Isaak Levitan. But in most of these cases, images of the central Russian landscape were intentionally aligned against the spectacular and beautiful (that is, the scenic or touristic) landscapes of western Europe, the Caucasus, and the Crimea.<sup>10</sup>

The attempt to demarcate a scenic or touristic image of Russian terrain has a rather different trajectory than that of landscape imagery in literature and art, and the Chernetsovs' Volga River journey provides a useful starting point. The journey ultimately resulted in an enormous panorama (or, properly speaking, cyclorama) around 2,000 feet in length. The Chernetsovs displayed it in a room in St. Petersburg decorated to resemble a shipboard cabin, to which they added sound to simulate the effect of river travel.<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, frequent unwindings badly damaged the vast work, and it did not survive. Some sketches and oil paintings remain, however, as do the painters' journals and a set of travel notes

9. On the relationship of tourism and scenery, see in particular, Andrews, *The Search for the Picturesque*; Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology*; Jeremy Black, *The British Abroad: The Grand Tour in the Eighteenth Century* (New York, 1992); A. J. Burkart and S. Medlik, *Tourism: Past, Present and Future* (London, 1974); Green, *The Spectacle of Nature*; Sears, *Sacred Places*; Withey, *Grand Tours*.

10. On Russian landscape in art and literature, see M. Epshtein, *Priroda, mir, tainik vselennoi* (Moscow, 1990); Dmitri Likhachev, *Poeziia sadov* (St. Petersburg, 1991); F. I. Mal'tseva, *Mastera russkogo peizazha* (Moscow, 1951); Georges Nivat, "Le Paysage russe en tant que mythe," *Rossia/Russia* (1987): 7–20; K. V. Pigarev, *Russkaia literatura i izobrazitel'noe iskusstvo: Ocherki o russkom natsional'nom peizazhe seredini XIX veka* (Moscow, 1972). On scenic images of the Caucasus, see Susan Layton, *Russian Literature and Empire: Conquest of the Caucasus from Pushkin to Tolstoy* (Cambridge, Eng., 1994).

11. Chernetsov, *Puteshestvie po Volge*, 8.

compiled from them.<sup>12</sup> From these notes a clear picture emerges of the Chernetsovs' voyage and the successes and failures they encountered along the way.

Admiration for the Volga River was a common theme in Russian folk songs, and it had already been almost a half-century since Nikolai Karamzin and Ivan Dmitriev had established the Volga as a valid theme for sentimental, nationalistic poetry. Virtually no artist, however, had yet attempted to depict the river and its surroundings in paint, certainly not in the systematic form the Chernetsovs planned. They conceived of their trip down the Volga in the language common to travelers of the day as a "picturesque journey." For landscape painters this expression carried a heavy burden. It meant seeking out, in the Chernetsovs' terms, "beautiful pictures," "magnificent, panoramic views," and "astonishing or wondrous phenomena."<sup>13</sup> Along the banks of the more populous upper Volga, they turned their attention to the built environment, almost exclusively painting views of cities and monasteries. But the comparatively level and sparsely populated terrain on the banks of the lower Volga presented a serious problem. The Chernetsovs' struggles to incorporate these natural spaces into their preexisting aesthetic sense of picturesque scenery foretells the difficulties painters and other travelers would often confront in trying to envision the Russian countryside as scenic space.

Neither of the brothers seems to have had much interest in uncultivated nature. The highest praise they expressed for any natural area in the text of their travel notes concerned an island near Iaroslavl': "Here nature itself has arranged a wonderful garden with alleys, walkways, and flowerbeds; the bright green grass, the aroma of flowers, the warm summer day, and the clear, quiet weather so delighted us that we took leave unwillingly of this wonderful, uninhabited island."<sup>14</sup> In other words, the island produced a familiar scenic impression. Its beauty was consonant with its evident similarity to the idyllic, well-maintained garden parks on the grounds of Russia's imperial palaces or the estates of its wealthier nobility.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, the painters admired some unusual rock formations on the southern Volga specifically for their resemblance to architectural monuments. Not surprisingly, they shunned the most familiar kinds of Russian terrain. They described forests as primordial wilderness, and the steppe was depicted as an empty waste: "Not a sapling nor a shrub, only the bitter sage waves in this desert."<sup>16</sup>

12. These notes, "Vospominaniia iz puteshestviia po Volge," were recompiled in 1970 in the above-mentioned volume. I am grateful to Irina Lapshina at the Russian Museum Archive for pointing out to me the existence of the original manuscript journals and for helping me decipher them.

13. Chernetsov, *Puteshestvie po Volge*, 7.

14. *Ibid.*, 32.

15. For a history of estate parks and gardens, see Priscilla Roosevelt, *Life on the Russian Country Estate* (New Haven, 1995). See also Likhachev, *Poeziia sadov*, and the series entitled, *Russkaia usad'ba: Sbornik Obshchestva izucheniia russkoi usad'by* (Moscow-Rybinsk, 1994–2001).

16. Chernetsov, *Puteshestvie po Volge*, 151. In the supplement to these notes, which may have been written as late as 1862, a different portrait of the forest exists than what is to be

The most important element in the Chernetsovs' sketches and paintings was the river itself. It provided the proper perspective to transform a distant church, city, or riverbank into a view. Elevated terrain proved less accommodating. The highest elevation on the river is found at the Zhiguli Range, a series of hills that rise steeply from the right bank of the Volga just upriver from Samara. These hills project bluntly from the banks of the river, making them difficult to view from a distance; they are also covered by a thick, unbroken forest. Thus, although the Zhiguli Range is one of the most prominent natural features of European Russia, it lacks the kind of perspective and variety that was conducive to conventional landscape depiction. The Chernetsovs spent two days climbing these hills in order to find the sorts of views they could conceive of as picturesque. "Wishing to survey the circumference of the space occupied by the mountains," they reported, "we somehow scrambled to the top of one of the hills less covered by forest, but our plan was in error: the mountains, rising higher by degrees, overshadowed one another, entirely concealing the distance." Finally they discovered the village of Morkvash where the valley and surrounding hills were more open. On a summit above the village the view of the river and the village environs was deemed "remarkable for its picturesqueness."<sup>17</sup>

The problematic search for Russian scenery did not trouble the Chernetsovs alone. Until the final third of the nineteenth century, travel writers who portrayed European Russia as a scenic, touristic space enjoyed little success. Reading nineteenth-century Russian travel literature, one encounters time and again the complaint that Russians habitually shun their own countryside as a result of a misguided preference for European tourism.<sup>18</sup> If domestic tourism had become common practice in western Europe in the early nineteenth century, in Russia it still scarcely existed at midcentury. But during the latter half of the century, domestic tourism did finally develop a significant presence in the Russian countryside. It came into its own on the same site that had originally been chosen for this purpose—the Volga River. And precisely as tourism began to flourish in Russia, a new vision and language of Russian space ultimately emerged that represented the river as a scenic location. Between 1850 and 1900 travel writers published more than forty separate books and numerous articles and pamphlets about the Volga. In the evolution of these publica-

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found in the original travel journals. But since the period between 1838 and 1862 would witness major changes in Russian conceptions of nature, it is not surprising that the Chernetsovs' perspective would have altered as well. In this article, I am only using the published version of the original notes.

17. *Ibid.*, 107–9.

18. See, for example, D. I. Matskevich, *Putevyie zametki* (Kiev, 1856); O. P. Shishkina, *Zametki i vospominaniia russkoi puteshestvennitsy* (St. Petersburg, 1843); Vadim Passek, *Putevyia ocherki Vadima* (St. Petersburg, 1838) and *Ocherki Rossii* (Moscow, 1838–1840); and Stepan Shevyrev, *Pozdka v Kirillo-Belozerskii monastyr': Vakatsionnye dni professora S. Shevyreva v 1847 godu* (Moscow, 1850). As late as 1837, Nestor Kukol'nik complained that books of picturesque sights were published "in France, England and even in Switzerland; but we . . . translate and reprint the old ones, so that we only respect foreigners and are all the more convinced we have nothing good of our own." *Khudozhestvennaia gazeta*, 1837, no. 2:32.

tions we see the image of Volga space transformed from a location of national significance, but no special beauty, into a scenic landscape shaped for the consumption of tourists. Although these works do not tell us how anyone other than specific individuals conceived of, analyzed, or marketed the river, collectively they reveal the Volga's gradual recreation as a scenic terrain. In that capacity, these guidebooks demonstrate how a touristic conception of Russian nature finally took shape in the late nineteenth century.

The earliest descriptive works on the Volga drew on folk sources and poetry to convey the majesty of the river and on foreign studies for detailed ethnographic and geographical information.<sup>19</sup> These early descriptions interpreted the Volga, first and foremost, as a distinguishing feature of the national territory. They invoked its size and its connection to the folk. "The greatest of Russia's rivers," began an 1866 essay by I. K. Babst, "is our river Volga, the wet nurse of the Russian people."<sup>20</sup> The first descriptive work written intentionally as a tourist guidebook, N. P. Bogoliubov's *The Volga from Tver' to Astrakhan'* (1862) promoted interest in the river by recalling its geographical, historical, economic, and ethnographic significance. In Bogoliubov's plain language, he aspired to give the traveler, "as clear and true an understanding of the remarkable Volga region as possible."<sup>21</sup> At the beginning, then, river guidebooks sought to arouse the traveler's interest almost exclusively in terms of factual information.

Perhaps sensing they lacked a good hook with which to draw in a large public, such guidebooks also reminded readers of their patriotic duty to become acquainted with the native land by getting to know its great river. P. P. Neidgart's *Guide to the Volga* (1862) proclaimed that all educated Russians had an obligation to familiarize themselves with the Volga.<sup>22</sup> One of the best-known works on the river, V. I. Ragozin's encyclopedic three-volume study entitled simply *Volga*, admonished well-to-do readers to bring their children on a trip to the Volga so they might get to know it at an early age.<sup>23</sup> The populist writer A. N. Molchanov, in a more refined version of "going to the people," presented a plan to rent a Volga steamer with room for five hundred passengers in order to acquaint educated, urban Russians with the rural environment and the Volga peasantry. He envisioned using the services of a staff that would include ethnographers, zoologists, and botanists.<sup>24</sup> Approaches to the river that emphasized oblig-

19. I. K. Babst, for example, in *Rechnaia oblast' Volgi* (Moscow, 1852), took some of his information from a German study entitled *Historisch-geographische Darstellung des Stromsystems der Wolga* (1839). The playwright A. N. Ostrovskii was commissioned in 1856 by the Naval Ministry to join a party studying life and industry on the Volga. The article of travel notes he published drew from (and in part refuted) a French version of Haxthausen's *Studies on the Interior of Russia* (1847).

20. I. K. Babst, "Volga," in D. D. Semenov, ed., *Otchiznovedenie: Rossiia po razskazam puteshestvennikov i uchenym izsledovaniam* (St. Petersburg, 1866), 2:39.

21. N. P. Bogoliubov, *Volga ot Tveri do Astrakhani* (St. Petersburg, 1862), v.

22. P. P. Neidgart, *Putevoditel' po Volge* (St. Petersburg, 1862), 3.

23. V. I. Ragozin, *Volga*, 3 vols. (Moscow, 1880), 2:237.

24. A. N. Molchanov, *Po Rossii* (St. Petersburg, 1876), 93. To sweeten the appeal of this trip, Molchanov also proposed bringing along an orchestra!

ation and education over pleasure and entertainment predominated during the reform era, but toward the 1880s, this perspective would begin to be replaced by a new hook: guidebooks that stressed the traveler's personal pleasure.

Commissioned by the passenger shipping firm *Samolet*, Bogoliubov's guide was certainly intended to stimulate an interest in Volga scenery. This is evident from its explicitly stated aim to convey "the beauty of Russian nature," and even more so by Bogoliubov's selection of his own brother, the landscape painter A. P. Bogoliubov, to do the illustrations. Yet, for all these good intentions, Bogoliubov's guidebook utterly failed to construe the river as a scenic space. At times Bogoliubov mentions the "picturesque" banks or appreciates the "placement" (*mestopolozhenie*) of a city or monastery, but he never gets beyond abstract declarations. Although Bogoliubov certainly believed the Volga *ought* to be seen as beautiful, he remained unable to find a means of expressing its beauty in descriptive terms. Nor did the illustrations surpass the animation and variety attained by the Chernetsovs more than twenty years earlier.

It bears repeating here that scenic description was stigmatized in Russian literature and slow to develop in Russian painting. Andrew Durkin's study of Russia's prototypical nature writer, Sergei Aksakov, has described the way Aksakov opposed "the sense of nature" to "the love of landscape." Aksakov argued that a feeling for nature could not rely on conventional admiration of its pictorial qualities; for him an interest in scenery was little more than the external and artificial gesture of insensitive urbanites.<sup>25</sup> This attitude was characteristic of Russian writers who sought to carve out a unique image of Russia's landscape that would stand in contrast to European terrain. Pushkin's poem "The Countryside," for example, connected the admiration for nature to the brutality of serfdom, and a famous passage in Gogol's *Dead Souls* valorized the Russian countryside for its very lack of picturesque beauty. Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin, Nikolai Nekrasov, and the "itinerant" landscape painters, among others, carried the idea of an admirably unpicturesque Russia into the latter half of the century. Locating Bogoliubov's guidebook within this larger vision of Russian nature helps explain the absence from his work of a scenic evocation of the landscape. It also explains the continuing resistance to scenery in other works. Ragozin may have dedicated a multivolume study to interesting Russians in the Volga, but in it he wrote that "from an aesthetic standpoint neither the Volga itself, nor its banks present anything particularly remarkable."<sup>26</sup> Molchanov went so far as to call the river variously "dirty," "gray," and "monotonous."<sup>27</sup>

By contrast, a guidebook published only three years after Bogoliubov's work chose to accentuate the river's scenic qualities. Ia. P. Kuchin's *Guide to the Volga* (1865) remarked that Russians accustomed to "the enormous

25. See Andrew Durkin, *Sergei Aksakov and Russian Pastoral* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1983), 84–85. Also S. T. Aksakov's "Zapiski ob uzhen'e," in S. Mashinskii, ed., *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh* (Moscow, 1966), 4:288–89.

26. Ragozin, *Volga*, 2:120.

27. Molchanov, *Po Rossii*, 92.



expanses of desolate plains” would be pleased by the “variety and grandeur” of the Volga’s views.<sup>28</sup> Kuchin’s was the first guidebook to express admiration for the scenic properties of the Zhiguli Range, which would subsequently become the pride of Volga scenery. It makes sense that this short, sturdy, pocket-sized guide, clearly intended for use by the tourist en route, was the first work to express an essentially scenic admiration for Volga landscape. The practice of leisure travel went hand in hand with a shift in how the river was envisioned.

Scenic tourism on the Volga was predicated on technological and economic innovations in river travel. In 1860 there were more than three hundred steam-powered ships in Russia, but still only a handful of dedicated passenger vessels in use.<sup>29</sup> By the mid-1870s, however, at least three firms had begun to operate passenger ships on the Volga.<sup>30</sup> When the first “American-type” paddle-wheel steamer was launched in 1872, competition for speed and luxury appointments got under way. One source claims that passenger shipping shot up dramatically during the 1880s.<sup>31</sup> Although most river travelers were not tourists, their numbers remained steadily above 200,000 in 1885, 1886, and 1887.<sup>32</sup> An 1884 advertisement for one of the new steamers emphasized the comfort and extras provided: “On all the river ships there are separate cabins (heated by steam when it is cold), fine food at moderate prices, and wine from recognized Petersburg, Moscow, and foreign makers.”<sup>33</sup>

Guides to the river did not begin to focus consistently on scenery until passenger shipping got off the ground. The most influential pattern for scenic Volga travel was set down in 1877 by the prolific journalist and travel writer, Vasilii Nemirovich-Danchenko. Nemirovich-Danchenko’s career embodied the latest trends in daily journalism. His articles were relatively brief, exciting, and easily consumable for daily gleaning; as such they often infuriated writers for thick journals, who found in them a sign of cultural degradation and political flaccidity.<sup>34</sup> In his journalism, Nemirovich-Danchenko served as an avatar of incipient Russian consum-

28. Ia. P. Kuchin, *Putevoditel' po Volge* (Saratov, 1865), 44. Kuchin was not the first travel writer to describe the Zhiguli Range in scenic terms, however. One year earlier, for example, Babst and Konstantin Pobedonostsev had published a collection of letters describing the 1863 journey along the Volga of the young heir to the throne. Although little of their work invoked scenic description to sing the praises of provincial Russia, the section describing the Zhiguli Range used touristic language and picturesque descriptions. See I. Babst and K. Pobedonostsev, *Pis'ma o puteshestvii Gosudaria Naslednika Tsesarevicha po Rossii ot Peterburga do Kryma* (Moscow, 1864), 264–65.

29. Richard Mowbray Haywood, *The Beginnings of Railway Development in Russia in the Reign of Nicholas I, 1835–1842* (Durham, 1969), 21.

30. For information on the history of passenger transportation on the Volga, see G. P. Dem'ianov, *Putevoditel' po Volge* (Nizhnii-Novgorod, 1889), 10–13.

31. A. F. Leopold'ov, *Obshchie svedeniia o Volge* (Saratov, 1890), 10.

32. Nikolai Lender, *Na Volge* (St. Petersburg, 1888). According to Lender, numbers of passengers in these years ran as follows: in 1885, 201,213; in 1886, 242,522; in 1887, 238,179.

33. From an advertisement found at the end of S. Monastyrskii, *Illustrirovannyi sputnik po Volge* (Kazan', 1884).

34. See Louise McReynolds, *The News under Russia's Old Regime: The Development of a Mass-Circulation Press* (Princeton, 1991), 87–92.

erism, and his approach to reporting the news went hand in hand with his travel guide *Along the Volga*, which he happily referred to as “the sketches of a tourist.”<sup>35</sup> An unprecedented appreciation of the scenic landscape appears in this work. Nemirovich-Danchenko intentionally sought out “the grand portrait of wide-open Volga space.”<sup>36</sup> “The Volga,” he declared, “is an endless poetic song, an endless epic poem. Nature is such a poet and artist that [the Volga] only has especially striking places and no prosaic details.”<sup>37</sup> Nemirovich-Danchenko’s open-armed embrace of Russian scenery marked the turn toward a new visual aesthetic in Russia and an early sign of the popular acceptance of domestic tourism.

Regardless of what one might think of his writing, Nemirovich-Danchenko was pioneering a new style, and his scenic approach to the Volga involved a certain amount of struggle and effort. *Along the Volga* succeeds in conveying a visually satisfying image of the river, but in certain passages Nemirovich-Danchenko seems to be grappling with the same pictorial problems that beset the Chernetsovs:

If you like, there is no landscape here, no frame for the pictures, no mountains to restrict the wandering gaze; there are no focal points, as artists call them, around which one might assort the charming details of this sublime panorama. No matter where you look, everywhere is breadth and distance, everywhere is greenery, water, and sky. But you must see these compositions, you must see these bends in the river, these pearly clouds reflected in the peaceful mirror of the Volga, these early growths of spring, in order to instantly feel happy and content. No matter what kind of sorrow you may feel, come to the Volga and you will forget it!<sup>38</sup>

In short, as one detects in this excerpt, *Along the Volga* took the image of an unspectacular, open, and flat Russian landscape and combined it with a breezy and frankly pleasurable search for picturesque scenes and views in order to establish a unique form of touristic vision in Russia.

As guidebooks to the river proliferated in the following years, Nemirovich-Danchenko’s touristic approach became the commonly used format. Among the most often reprinted guides were Nikolai Lender’s *On the Volga* (1888) and *Volga Companion* (1892).<sup>39</sup> These guidebooks offered Russian tourists the same double reward promised in Nemirovich-Danchenko’s travel notes. A Volga trip would reaffirm the tourist’s connection to Russia while at the same time affording the benefits of relaxation and escape from daily life that modern tourism typically promises. “All along the way are such purely Russian, unpretentious but deeply sympathetic landscapes,” Lender tells the tourist, “looking at them, every lover of quiet country backwoods feels something native and close to the heart.”<sup>40</sup> He also addressed his readers in a language reminiscent of twen-

35. V. I. Nemirovich-Danchenko, *Po Volge* (St. Petersburg, 1877), iii.

36. *Ibid.*

37. *Ibid.*, 104.

38. *Ibid.*, 96.

39. Lender, *Na Volge*, and *Volzhskii sputnik* (St. Petersburg, 1892).

40. Lender, *Na Volge*, 109–10.

tieth-century travel advertisements: “If you want to be refreshed, to relax your soul from the cramped, enclosed ceaseless activity of urban life—travel on the Volga: it will calm you, it will arouse new thoughts, new impressions. . . . The Volga has become more visible, more accessible, and more understandable to timid and unbelieving urban eyes.”<sup>41</sup>

Tourism, of course, was not solely the result of technological advancement and changes in literary style. It required a consumer market. The existence of Russian tourism in Europe and the southern parts of the Russian empire from the late eighteenth century onward precludes any argument that it was economically unfeasible to build a market for domestic tourism much earlier than the late nineteenth century. But postemancipation urban Russia was growing at a rapid rate, and it was in this period that a restricted economic middle stratum began to make its presence felt in the opening of new markets and new activities.<sup>42</sup> The relatively inexpensive option of Volga river travel may well have appealed to a new group of consumers who found it both financially and culturally daunting to travel abroad and yet desired the refreshment and personal improvement that tourism promised. The simply phrased and practical Volga guidebooks of the 1880s and 1890s were probably addressed to this population more than to any other.

In an 1895 guidebook, V. M. Sidorov commented, “only recently have Russians begun to acquaint themselves with their wide and beautiful native land.”<sup>43</sup> By the 1890s the shift to a scenic representation of the Volga was complete: almost every guidebook represented the river as a uniquely Russian, and especially picturesque, natural space. By this time travel writers were no longer convinced that Russians never toured their own country; they cautiously admitted that Volga travel had “come into fashion.”<sup>44</sup> Descriptive landscapes constituted an increasingly extensive part of these guides in the 1890s. Interestingly, the new image of Russian scenery was less driven by an interest in spectacular views than by an appeal to a kind of national nostalgia. For Sidorov the Volga landscape merited a visit because it was “sweet, native, and dear.”<sup>45</sup> Another often republished guidebook writer, E. P. Tsimmerman, wrote of the Volga that it is impossible to encounter “such strikingly and picturesquely wild views on any river in western Europe.”<sup>46</sup>

Such appeals to nationality helped make the landscape accessible as touristic space. A. P. Subbotin’s 1894 tourist guide still considered appreciation of the Volga to be a patriotic duty, but now Subbotin had in mind the Russian obligation to admire the Volga’s scenic beauty. Decades

41. *Ibid.*, 235.

42. For a summary of Russia’s expanding urban population in the late imperial period, see Hans Rogger, *Russia in the Age of Modernization and Revolution* (London, 1983), 125–27. Stephen Lovell’s, *Summerfolk: A History of the Dacha, 1710–2000* (Ithaca, 2003) provides a comparable perspective on the impact of urbanization on Russian leisure patterns.

43. V. M. Sidorov, *Volga* (St. Petersburg, 1895), iii.

44. A. S. Razmadze, *Volga* (Kiev, 1896), 5.

45. Sidorov, *Volga*, 337.

46. E. P. Tsimmerman, *Vniz po Volge* (Moscow, 1896), 100.

earlier James Fenimore Cooper had argued that the Hudson possessed a claim to aesthetic appreciation equal to that of the Rhine because of its abundance of uncultivated natural terrain.<sup>47</sup> Subbotin similarly celebrated the Volga for its uninhabited natural spaces, which differentiated its own pictorial character from the scenic appeal of Europe's major tributaries:

The Volga must be especially near to Russian hearts, not only for its historic and economic significance, but also for its purely Russian physiognomy; everybody who has not yet become utterly westernized, who has not yet begun to feel the *taedium vitae*, would never trade it for any sort of Danube with its *Rauberfelsen* and ruins of robbers' castles, nor for the Rhine with its theatrical landscapes, badly spoiled by industrial culture. There such wide open plains cannot be found as those on the Volga, which are so expressive of breadth and flatness and of the unspoiled state of Russian nature. Before the eyes of the traveler, across its whole expanse pass the typical pictures of all the places in Russia: the poetic valleys, hillocks, and copses of the north, the wide meadows, hills, and forests of the middle provinces, the boundless steppes of the east and south, and the mountain lands and dark ravines; in a word—whatever you want, just ask.<sup>48</sup>

Following Subbotin's nationalistic logic, the beauty of Volga scenery depended more on one's preexisting admiration for Russia than on any notion of a universal or impartial aesthetic of picturesque scenery. Another guidebook writer, A. P. Valueva-Munt, emphasized this subjective response in *Along the Great Russian River*:

The Volga has meaning for us not only as one of the largest and most interesting rivers on the globe: it is a purely Russian river and on that basis endlessly admired by all Russian people. Notice with what love the third-class passenger looks at it—the peasants, the artisans, the poorer merchants. To them the Volga is fine not only in those places where it strikes one with its picturesqueness, like at Nizhnii-Novgorod, Zhiguli, or Vasil'sursk. For the majority of the Russian people it is beloved even in those places where there are only bushy willows and white sand banks with snipes running along them. Something native, heartfelt, and poetic breathes out from these places.<sup>49</sup>

Valueva-Munt's vision of an untutored aesthetic admiration for the Volga among the less-educated travelers worked to underline the national authenticity of the river's scenery, thus rendering its beauty all the more unimpeachably genuine. At the same time, the desire to portray the Volga as both uniquely Russian and universally admirable could cause problems for some interpreters of the river's scenery. A. S. Razmadze's 1895 guidebook began by comparing the Rhine unfavorably to the Volga. Razmadze disdained the Rhine's "decorative ruins of ancient castles," calling it "care-

47. See James Fenimore Cooper, "American and European Scenery Compared," in *The Home Book of the Picturesque* (Gainesville, Fla., 1967).

48. A. P. Subbotin, *Volga i Volgari* (St. Petersburg, 1894), 4.

49. A. P. Valueva-Munt, *Po velikoi russkoi reke* (St. Petersburg, 1895), 64.

fully maintained in its half-ruined condition, in essence reminding one of the cement cliffs and models put up in an aquarium." On the Volga, on the other hand, "there is nothing cleaned up, manicured, or smoothed over; everything is natural and everything is beautiful in its natural state."<sup>50</sup> Yet when Razmadze arrived at the Zhiguli Range, he resorted to the familiar language of scenic description he had held in contempt with reference to Germany: "You will see," he wrote of these hills, "something like towers and castles, or, if you like, the ruins of towers and castles."<sup>51</sup>

Descriptive landscapes constituted an increasingly extensive part of these guides in the 1890s. E. A. Predtechenskii's *Volga Keepsake* was the first Russian guidebook to introduce the peasant as a constituent part of the scenic landscape. Here is an example:

Meadows and grainfields come right up to the banks. You constantly encounter groups of people—men and women at work in the fields. Depending on the time of year, you will see ploughing, haymaking, or harvesting here. At every step the artist and photographer meet beautiful groupings, interesting scenes, and charming landscapes. Over there groups of women in bright red dresses, with beautiful kerchiefs on their heads, will place the dry hay on top of the haystacks with pitchforks; the men stand on top, also with pitchforks in hand, simultaneously acting as architects and workers. The perfectly symmetrical, geometrically arranged haystack will be finished in a few minutes, but at this moment its builder cannot tear his eyes away from the beautiful steamship, and this presents him in the most natural of living poses . . . all this begs to be photographed.<sup>52</sup>

Many readers accustomed to the image of peasants as dignified rural inhabitants or as a suffering, pitiable population would have been dismayed to find peasants reduced to picturesque photographic subjects.<sup>53</sup> Considering them as a constituent element of the tourist's gaze did not correspond to predominant representations of peasants in Russia, but it did reflect long-standing European practices of scenic tourism in England or France.<sup>54</sup>

The appearance of this type of travel writing shows how the touristic impulse could be sharply at odds with different constructions of the peasant and the landscape. Predtechenskii's book was published in 1892, during a period of large-scale famine in the countryside. With the deadly famine and attempts to alleviate it, sympathy for the struggling peasant masses reappeared in Russia's cities with renewed vigor. Yet the vast discrepancy between the growing Russian "bourgeoisie" and the struggling

50. Razmadze, *Volga*, 3.

51. *Ibid.*, 88.

52. E. A. Predtechenskii, *Na pamiat' o Volge* (St. Petersburg, 1892), 42–43.

53. On the various images of the peasant in late nineteenth-century Russia, see Cathy Frierson, *Peasant Icons: Representations of Rural People in Late Nineteenth-Century Russia* (New York, 1993).

54. See, for example, Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape*, or Green, *The Spectacle of Nature*.



**Figure 1.** Il'ia Repin, *Boathaulers on the Volga* (1870–1873). Photo courtesy The Russian Museum.

rural population continued unabated. In this environment, it is not surprising that the dominant approach to the representation of peasants in the landscape, even in travel literature, remained that of P. Konchalovskii, whose 1897 guide to the rail line between Moscow and Iaroslavl' still found its admiration for Russian scenery in an appeal to populist themes. "The Russian landscape," he insisted, "helps foster the feelings of the people. Its contours strongly affect a person's moral essence; therefore the feeling of this open space . . . also forms a typical trait in our national consciousness and character."<sup>55</sup>

A similar uneasy balance of folkish authenticity, on the one hand, and the removed appreciation of well-to-do urbanites, on the other, also found its way into the visual arts of late imperial Russia in painting and photography. Probably the most familiar portrayal of the Volga landscape remains that carried out in the late nineteenth century by Levitan.<sup>56</sup> Levitan spent several summers on the river, navigating the tricky waters of representation as guidebook writers had before him. When Levitan came of age as a painter, the prototypical visual image of the river was Il'ia Repin's *Boathaulers on the Volga* (figure 1).<sup>57</sup> Repin's painting memorialized a downtrodden (though hopeful) portrait of the Russian peasantry. To accentuate the hard lot of his boathaulers, he depicted the riverbank as a hostile, almost desert-like expanse. Inspired by such *Peredvizhniki* painters as Repin, Levitan's early landscapes often evoked dreary, run-down villages and empty, open fields in which he sought to capture the hard, but

55. P. Konchalovskii, *Ot Moskvy do Arkhangel'ska: Po moskovskogo-iaroslavsko-arkhangel'skoi zheleznoi dorogi* (Moscow, 1897), viii.

56. See A. A. Fedorov-Davydov, *Isaak Il'ich Levitan: Zhizn' i tvorchestvo* (Moscow, 1966), and Fedorov-Davydov, *Isaak Il'ich Levitan: Dokumenty, Materialy, Bibliografiia* (Moscow, 1966).

57. For a biography of Repin, see Elizabeth Kridl Valkenier, *Ilya Repin and the World of Russian Art* (New York, 1990).



**Figure 2.** Isaak Levitan, *Evening. Golden River* (1889). Photo courtesy The Tret'iakov Gallery.

ennobled, rural environment his predecessors had conveyed so effectively. Beginning in the late 1880s, however, his confrontation with the Volga brightened his palette and ushered in the creation of a far more scenic imagery (figure 2). Whether or not Levitan was influenced by the new touristic approaches to the river, his light-filled, panoramic Volga landscapes of the late 1880s found him at a significant remove from the solemn populism of such landscape painters as his teacher Savrasov. His Volga paintings also laid the foundation for the almost sacred approach to national space he would develop in subsequent years in such works as *Lake* and *Above Eternal Rest* (figure 3).

If one could at times “tour” the Volga River at the exhibit hall with the aid of paintings such as those by Levitan, a kind of armchair tourism also became available to Russian consumers toward the end of the century in published collections of photographs. Like many of the above travel writers, photographers sought out a form of expression capable both of satisfying a demand for the pleasures of scenic imagery and conveying a kind of national originality. Particularly ingenious in this respect was E. P. Vishniakov’s *Volga Headwaters*, which sidestepped the problem of grand, panoramic views by concentrating on the obscure ponds, streams, and rivulets at the furthest northwestern reaches of the river (figure 4).<sup>58</sup> By such means Vishniakov managed to retain the popular interest and implication of national grandeur associated with the river while still expressing a somber, earthy nativism in his close-up depictions of its source waters. Similarly, the photographs in M. P. Dmitriev’s *Landscapes of the Volga Region around Nizhnii-Novogorod* (1894) seem to seek a middle ground be-

58. E. P. Vishniakov, *Istoki Volgi: Nabroski perom i fotografiiu* (St. Petersburg, 1893).



**Figure 3.** Isaak Levitan, *Above Eternal Rest* (1894). Photo courtesy The Tret'iakov Gallery.

tween the scenic postcard and the more familiar image of an unsophisticated, thus all-the-more-authentic, terrain (figure 5).<sup>59</sup>

In the visual arts, as in tourist description, a scenic conception of the Volga River never stabilized into an unproblematic subject in prerevolutionary Russia. For one thing, the vision of an unspectacular and desolate, yet proud and distinctive, national geography remained the dominant image of rural Russian landscape, and the scenic Volga had to fit in with that special aesthetic conception of Russia's national terrain. Moreover, the prerevolutionary Russian tourism industry was always a relatively restricted enterprise. Even during World War I, the newly formed Russian Society of Tourism and Fatherland Study was still hoping the war would turn Russians away from European travel and finally interest them in domestic tourism.<sup>60</sup>

Nevertheless, the scenic Volga did come into being along with the advent of a new Russian tourist industry in the late nineteenth century. As economic growth facilitated a gradual shift toward the practice of domestic tourism, new kinds of language and imagery were invented to arouse and maintain touristic interest in the Russian countryside. The new scenic imagery had to conform to an older and quite different aesthetic of

59. M. P. Dmitriev, *Peizazhi nizhegorodskogo Povolzh'ia: Fototipii s natury* (Nizhnii Novgorod, 1894).

60. Russkoe Obshchestvo Turizma i Otchiznovedeniia, *Predlozhenie ob organizatsii ekskursii na Urale* (Petrograd, 1916), 4–5.



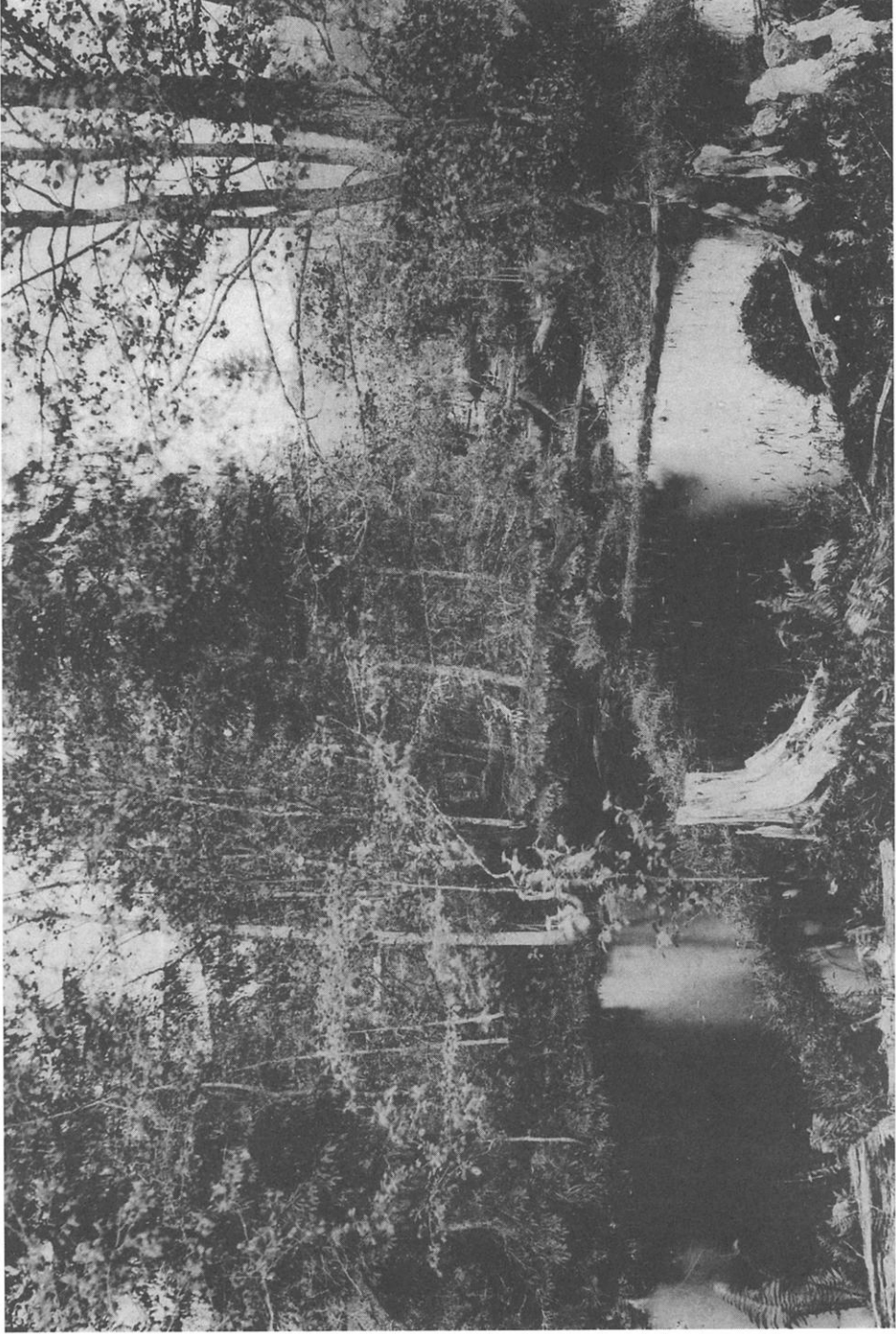
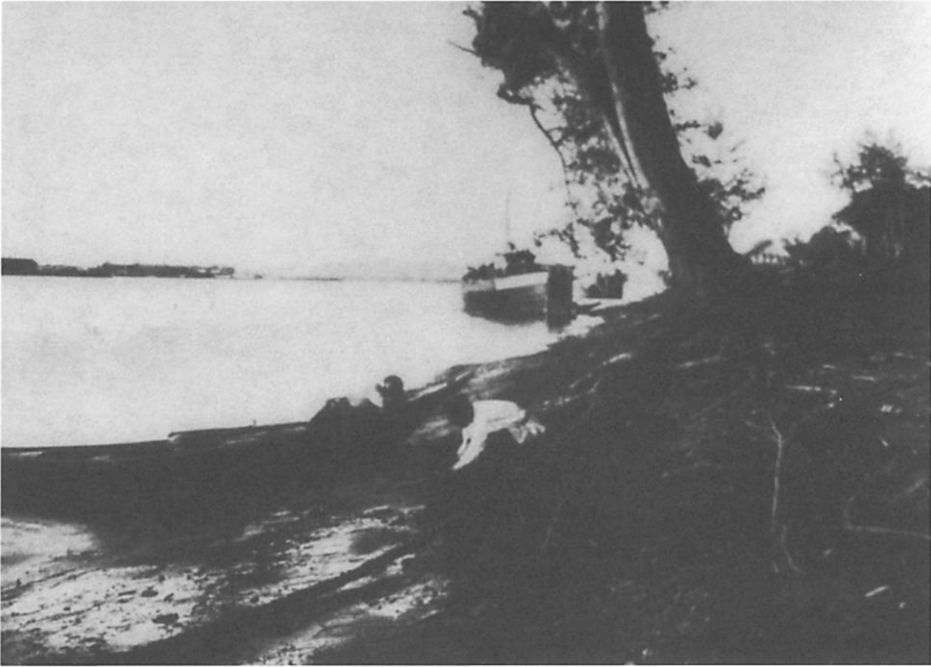


Figure 4. E. P. Vishniakov, *The Volga Chattered with Fallen and Rotting Trees*. From *Istoli Volgi, Nabroski perom i fotografiiu* (1893).



**Figure 5.** *Landscape of the Volga Region around Nizhnii-Novgorod.* From M. P. Dmitriev, *Peizazhi nizhegorodskogo Povolzh'ia: Fototipii s natury* (Nizhnii-Novgorod, 1894).

Russian nature as well as a national valorization of the Russian countryside. At the same time it had to function as a stimulus to tourism. Volga scenery assumed its special form in negotiating these diverse influences. It was, all at once, pointedly non-European, uniquely reflective of the entire native land, humble and unspectacular, striking and wild, and well worth a visit.