



Rivers as Nation-Builders

Embedded in a historical memory spanning centuries and cultures, the Volga and Mississippi Rivers entered a new era in the nineteenth century. Straddling two worlds—the pragmatic and aesthetic—the rivers were still celebrated for their physical prowess based on long-standing roles as transportation arteries, unifiers, nurturers, and oppressors. Juxtaposed with the pragmatic and utilitarian needs the rivers served, the aesthetic properties of each river grew more pronounced throughout the century. Already iconic presences in the United States and Russia through folklore and mythology, the Volga and Mississippi Rivers evolved into nationalist symbols by the mid nineteenth century as the twin forces of industrialization and modernization transformed the rivers. (Paradoxically, the shift to nationalist symbol was marked by a diminishing local knowledge of each river's regime with the advent of steamboats and railroads.) Paralleling the changes—prompted by technology and resulting in locks and dams, hydrostations, and improved navigation channels—was a visual and print culture that valorized the rivers. Artists, poets, writers, and musicians celebrated the rivers, leaving a cultural imprint in Russian and American society with nostalgic depictions of pastoral and idyllic rivers.

For artists, using the genre of landscape art, nature and space are controlled and rationalized, and in the instance of both rivers, by the nineteenth century competing images of a serene, unspoiled river contrasted with images of steamships plying through the placid waters. Thus the Mississippi might be depicted as the ancestral home of Native American villages or the harbinger of progress as steamships dominated river trade by the middle of the century. Other artists portrayed a river that nurtured a free spirit while retaining the idyllic images of a sleepy, rustic landscape. In Russia, artists shaped the national narrative as the expansive Volga was often depicted winding alongside the traditional onion-shaped dome and the vast steppe—a trilogy of national symbols. Contributing to the Volga's centrality in nation-building were those cities located on the banks of the Volga, along the Golden Ring, long associated with Russia's rise. Golden Ring cities such as Yaroslavl, situated at the confluence of the Volga and Kotorosl Rivers, or Kostroma, at the confluence of the Volga and Kostroma Rivers, represent a Russia considered traditional and still revered. Accompanying the images was prose or poetry inspired by

national sentiment, further immortalizing the Volga and Mississippi Rivers as school children memorized verse by poets such as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and his well-known poem, *The Song of Hiawatha*, a work that became part of the American canon. In Russia, the nineteenth-century poet A. Nekrasov paid homage to “Mother Volga,” in verse still studied by Russian students. Musicians and writers also contributed to the growing body of literature that anchored both rivers in the national narrative. Not limited to the United States and Russia, landscape ideals participated in the nation-state mythology, ranging from the English garden, Italian Alps, Dutch canals, the Wild West, and the German Rhine. In each of these examples, a distinctive landscape contributed to an evolving national identity.

Thus as part of the larger landscape aesthetic, the Mississippi and Volga Rivers informed a nationalist discourse emerging in Russia and the United States. Reflecting nineteenth-century movements across Europe where a nascent nationalism was coming into full bloom, Russia and the United States looked to their unique, exceptional landscapes for contributions to the developing narrative. Unlike many European nations where a distinct landscape was already associated with the culture, such as the Italian Alps, the United States and Russia were discovering their landscapes in the nineteenth century. For both cultures, valorization of the rivers contributed to the discourse. As major arteries, the rivers were already cultural centerpieces and commemorated for their utilitarian as well as mythological status. Known as “Mother Volga” and the “Father of Waters,” journalists, novelists, and poets drafted the rivers into the emergent national narrative and assigned attributes to each ranging from nurturer to liberator.

This reciprocal relationship between landscape and culture is an area explored by a number of scholars as many studies show. Using the prism of landscape, a broader context for social and political history is revealed as seen in the works of Denis Cosgrove, Martin Warnke, and Kenneth Robert Olwig. Adding to their conclusions is Simon Schama’s work as he uncovers the existence and perseverance of a nature mythology in the nation’s memory.¹ Building upon their arguments but also taking their conclusions a step further and singling out rivers—the Mississippi and Volga—in the dialectic, a more nuanced story emerges. For example, through the study of nineteenth-century Russian artwork, the Volga River worked in tandem with another major characteristic of Russian national identity, namely space, to forge an identity that incorporated the boundlessness and vastness of the Russian terrain. In the case of the Mississippi River, nineteenth-century artwork of the river moved the national identity westward and contributed to a growing frontier myth that shaped an American mentality. In studying the artwork of each, the inhabitants, at times, occupied very different roles. These differences were products of the culture’s interactions with the river and ranged from the celebration of

the individual as portrayed by George Caleb Bingham in his *Jolly Flatboatmen* to the oppression of the burlaki, or barge haulers, as seen in Ilya Repin's, *The Volga Boatmen*. Alternative portrayals, however, tout the barge hauler's freedom in contrast to the peasant farmer and lament the hardscrabble life of the flatboatmen. Regardless of the portrayal, however, the river influences the dominant narrative whether as nurturer, liberator, or oppressor.²

But the rivers also emerge as historical actors, informing a national discourse that is captured by artists, poets, and writers. Numerous illustrations of the Volga and Mississippi Rivers during the nineteenth century reveal more than an artist's aesthetic choice as the characterizations complement a singularity of place and an emergent national pride. This budding national identity incorporates earlier mythology and folklore that celebrated and valorized the rivers. The persistence of these earlier paeans to the rivers, despite an unreconciled relationship with the despoiling effects of industrialization and modernization, presents a new dynamic. Part of the awe that comes when witnessing hydro-modernization works and their subsequent harnessing of rivers can be attributed to the revered place that rivers occupied for centuries. This continuity, a refrain of awe, is based on a historical memory of the rivers dating back centuries as successive generations express their own understandings of the Volga and Mississippi Rivers as each evolve into national icons.

Yet before idealizing their own landscapes in the nineteenth century, particularly the waterscapes of the Volga and Mississippi Rivers, Russian and American landscape artists relied upon European images of landscapes as the predominant aesthetic. A relatively recent art form, beginning in the seventeenth century, landscapes and their celebration of the natural world replaced earlier views of nature as menacing and frightening. (For an example of this earlier imagery, see Gozzoli's *Trial by Fire*, painted in 1444, where nature is bleak and forbidding.) But by the end of the seventeenth century, the perceptions of nature went from threatening to serene and tranquil and during the transition art served as a medium in the process. Prompted in large part by the new technique of linear perspective, developed during the Renaissance, nature was framed and became the view. Dramatically changing the viewer's perception of the natural world, this new technique "glorifies the spectator by organizing everything in the picture in relation to the location of the eye of the beholder." Thus, with the arrival of linear perspective, the depiction of rivers changed radically. The technique allowed more freedom for the artist to craft a view while the observer, in turn, associated the view with an aspect of the landscape. In other words, by framing the image, perceptions can be shaped regarding the content. So, to paraphrase the landscape scholar Gina Crandell, in landscape portraits the viewer must be cognizant that what is termed nature has often been "mediated by pictorial activities such as appropriation, framing and re-presenting."³

Another result of this negotiated view is the distance that ensues between the viewer and nature. The depicted scene loses its independence and becomes a constructed view. Ownership of the scene belongs to the viewer, which in turn introduces a sense of control over the surroundings and ultimately, nature. Or in other words, “the spectator has moved inside and the landscape is outdoors.” Crandell cites two excellent examples of these phenomena with Leonardo da Vinci’s *Annunciation* (late 1470s) and Lorenzo di Credi’s *Annunciation* in the late fifteenth century. The removal of the spectator and the coinciding sense of mastery over nature led to an objectification of resources, allowing a civilization to simultaneously valorize the river while exploiting it for hydropower. This is not to say that early Egyptian and Indian society, for example, did not see the Nile and Ganges in utilitarian terms, as they did, but the distance between utilitarian and sacred widened in the modern era. The artwork beginning in the eighteenth century is of special value in realizing the difference among these civilizations’ ongoing dialectics with their rivers.⁴

As a result, the new genre of landscape painting, first popularized by Claude Lorrain with his scenic portraits of the Italian landscape, allowed another lens for the portrayal of water and rivers. Initially Claude’s landscapes gave ascendancy to the Italian landscape which remained the predominant landscape aesthetic for many years.⁵ But the depiction of landscapes evolved and was influenced by intellectual movements such as the Romantic Movement in the nineteenth century. For example, in the United States in the 1820s, poets called upon artists to paint the New World and part of this synergy no doubt produced the Hudson River School, which existed from 1825 to 1876. In many ways similar to what occurred in Russia, artists in the Hudson River School underscored the exceptionalism of the American environment. But in emphasizing American uniqueness, their points of comparison were always the European landscapes. Some of the more notable artists in this school included Thomas Cole, Frederic Edwin Church, and Martin Johnson Heade.

Further evidence of efforts to tout the American landscape and its superiority over its European counterpart, particularly through one of its most scenic rivers, can be found in the following commentaries. Beginning with William Cullen Bryant, a well-known nineteenth-century poet, he encouraged Americans to visit “the western shore of the Hudson” as “worthy of a pilgrimage across the Atlantic as the Alps themselves.” This was during a period when the wealthy chose Europe as their destination for extended vacations. Another paean to the American landscape came from Thomas Cole, a prominent Hudson River School artist, who when visiting Italy and other parts of Europe said that he did not think Europe’s scenery could compete with an American vista and that the Rhine was “infinitely inferior to the Hudson in natural magnificence and grandeur.” Cole and Bryant worked together in producing *The American Landscape*, a collection of landscapes that in the words

of one scholar “was an effort to capitalize on the growing taste for picturesque scenery in the context of cultural nationalism.”⁶

Although the initial efforts of Bryant, Cole, and others to celebrate the American landscape began in the East, it was not long before the Mississippi River became part of the discussion distinguishing America’s physical beauty. Complementing the work of the Hudson River School and its promoters were general histories of the new republic’s geography, such as Timothy Flint’s popular 1832 work, *The History and Geography of the Mississippi Valley*. Flint echoes Cole’s words when he compensates for the perceived lack of American culture by comparing landscapes where the Mississippi and its tributaries figure prominently. In Flint’s words:

Our country has been described abroad, as sterile of moral interest. We have, it is said, no monuments, no ruins, none of the colossal remains of temples, and baronial castles, and monkish towers ... [but] when our thoughts have traversed rivers of a thousand leagues in length; when we have seen the ascending steamboat breasting the surge, and gleaming through the verdure of the trees; when we have imagined the happy multitudes, that from these shores will contemplate this scenery in days to come; we have thought, that our great country might at least compare with any other, in the beauty of its natural scenery.

In the same passage, Flint also pays tribute to the achievements of past Native American civilizations in the Mississippi Valley who would later be known as the mound builders. Together the Hudson River School, with its emphasis on American New World beauty, and histories, such as Flint’s, set the stage for the Mississippi and its iconic place in American culture, reinforcing the celebration of what is perceived as American exceptionalism. Thus, in the nascent national narrative, rivers figured prominently in America’s story.⁷

As Flint’s history indicated, the Mississippi like the Hudson River became a bellwether for American exceptionalism as nineteenth-century artists produced numerous paintings of the waterscape. A popular art form in the mid nineteenth century was the panorama. Capturing the imagination of a mass public, the panoramas were part theater and part painting, requiring large areas for display. The topics were numerous and in England, one popular panorama entitled “Eidometropolis” by Girtin was the city of London along the Thames. In this panorama, the Thames “was the commercial artery signifying Britain’s maritime prowess.” In the United States, several artists painted panoramas of the Mississippi River with the first well-known one publicly identified as *Banvard’s Panorama of the Mississippi, Painted on Three Miles of Canvas, exhibiting a View of Country 1200 Miles in Length, extending from the Mouth of the Missouri River to the City of New Orleans, being by far the Largest*

Picture ever executed by Man. According to one contemporary, John Putnam, Banvard was inspired by an article in a “foreign journal” that lamented while “America could boast the most picturesque and magnificent scenery in the world” the country did not have an artist to prove it. Not only did his panorama address this oversight and showcase American scenery but according to Putnam, Banvard’s painting also reflected the superiority of the Mississippi over “the streamlets of Europe.” Initially disinterested, the American public soon attended showings in large numbers. Following Banvard’s painting was the panorama by Henry Lewis that was allegedly four miles long. He referred to his undertaking as the *Great National Work*. In contrast to Banvard, Lewis included part of the Upper Mississippi River in an area near Minneapolis. Both artists showed their panoramas to audiences in the eastern part of the United States and Europe. In addition to these two major panoramas, three others were painted during this period.⁸

As the panoramas of the Mississippi River drew large crowds, nationally and internationally, these creations also served educational and entertainment purposes. One beneficiary of the panoramas was America’s first renowned poet, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, who after seeing Banvard’s work immortalized the river in poems, such as *The Song of Hiawatha*, one of the most well-known poems in the United States in the nineteenth century. In addition to seeing the panorama, Longfellow chose the setting of Minnehaha Falls on the Mississippi River after seeing a daguerreotype of the falls. The falls are memorialized in these famous lines from *The Song of Hiawatha*:

“Hark!” she said; ”I hear a rushing,
Hear a roaring and a rushing,
Hear the Falls of Minnehaha
Calling to me from a distance!”

In another well-received Longfellow poem, *Evangeline*, part of the setting is again the Mississippi River Valley. He describes Evangeline’s journey here:

It was the month of May. Far down the Beautiful River,
Past the Ohio shore and past the mouth of the Wabash,
Into the golden stream of the broad and swift Mississippi,

In this epic poem, Longfellow goes on to describe the lower Mississippi Valley after studying its flora and fauna from Banvard’s panorama. The importance of these poems, particularly *The Song of Hiawatha*, cannot be underestimated as every school child was expected to memorize sections of this work of Americana. As a result, the Mississippi River was becoming embedded in the

historical memory associated with a national narrative that distinguished its landscape and heritage from the well-established Europe.⁹

Further contributing to the rich folklore surrounding the river was the Mississippi's role in shaping what became known as the frontier identity evidenced through doctrines such as Manifest Destiny that celebrated and rationalized the westward movement. One of the foremost nineteenth-century artists who immortalized the Mississippi in this arena was George Caleb Bingham. Not possessing the artistic ability of landscape artists associated with the Hudson School, Bingham was more of a popularizer in large part due to the support he received from the American Art-Union. This organization, although only in existence for twelve years during the mid nineteenth century, influenced American culture significantly. One of the Union's presidents was William Cullen Bryant (mentioned earlier for his belief in the singularity of the American landscape) who was a strong and vocal advocate for the American arts. Bryant was a likely spokesperson as the mission of the Union was "to accomplish a Truly National Object through the promotion, distribution and exhibiting of paintings and sculptures by native or resident artists." Inherent in the mission and often discussed in union publications was the claim that a republican society could cultivate an appreciation of the arts as the association sought to break with European models "by favoring native subjects." Many of the works promoted by the Union were landscapes, and in comparing American and European landscapes, one 1844 Union report asked, "Is not Nature's home everywhere? And does she not here spread forth landscapes lovely as those of Claude."¹⁰

Yet more evidence of the Union's mission to develop an American landscape aesthetic came in 1844 when the Union distributed the P.F. Roethermel work, *De Soto Discovering the Mississippi*. With that end in mind, namely the promotion of American art, the Union sponsored exhibits that were free and open to the public. Union activities were a success with large numbers attending their exhibits. Despite competition from other art organizations, such as the National Academy of Design (founded in 1825 with the goal to promote fine arts in the United States), the American Art-Union remained the most influential in the United States with memberships reaching 20,000 in 1849.

It was through the American Art-Union that several of Bingham's works became well-known in the late 1840s, including *Jolly Flatboatmen*, *Raftsmen Playing Cards*, and *Stump Orator*, although Bingham also exhibited with the National Academy of Design. The Union, however, provided him the greatest exposure through their wide distribution of engravings to members. In an 1849 Union bulletin discussing Bingham, his paintings were described as "thoroughly American in their subjects and could never have been painted by one who was not perfectly familiar with the scenes they represent." Despite

later criticism of his work in a Union article entitled “Development of Nationality in American Art,” the author still acknowledged that Bingham produced “some good studies of the western character.”¹¹

In Bingham’s paintings, he depicted an image of the river that was already capturing the American imagination, namely the Mississippi River as the gateway to the West. In one of Bingham’s more famous paintings, *Fur Traders Descending the Missouri* (the Missouri is a major tributary of the Mississippi), he portrays, in the words of one critic, “a historical past mingling with an almost mythical existence along the frontier riverbanks.” In this painting, the waterscape shares an identity with corresponding nineteenth-century portraits of the Volga—the river is functional, serving the young nation’s commercial needs. But the river as a boundary between civilization and the frontier is also the producer of a world fast disappearing—the fur trader and the opening of the Western frontier. A nostalgia and a sense of what the new country should be pervades Bingham’s works, similar in many respects to the Russian artist, Isaak Levitan’s depiction of the traditional Russian village situated alongside the Volga. In both, the rivers are a major part of the idealized past.

Another well-known Bingham work is his *Raftsmen Playing Cards*. This work shows the rough and tumble world of the raftsmen. A frontier actor, similar to the legendary Daniel Boone, the raftsmen’s marginal existence is



Figure 2.1. George Caleb Bingham, *Raftsmen Playing Cards*, 1847, oil on canvas. Source: Saint Louis Art Museum, bequest of Ezra H. Linley by exchange 50:1934.

comparable to that of the burlaki in that both types were known for their lawlessness and living on the fringe of society. While the raftsmen and burlaki led lives, punctuated by hard work with minimal material rewards, the raftsmen's outsider status translated into an idealized image of rugged individualism or in the words of one contemporary critic the men possessed a "vitality," all made possible by the river. The wildness of the river and the frontier allowed for a freedom that marked American exceptionalism. In contrast, at certain historical points, the vastness of the steppes that surrounded the Volga produced a labor force that was depicted as the oppressed burlaki, although prior to the nineteenth century the burlaki also enjoyed an outsider status separating them from the land-bound serfs. In both instances, the frontier, whether the American West or the steppes, worked in tandem with the rivers to shape a labor force that shared an imagery of freedom at the cost of being outside traditional society. Again, these were all popular images and while embedded in a budding national consciousness, the reality between American and Russian workforces, despite the celebration of an American individualism, may have been more similar than different. (For example, paintings of slaves working in the lower Mississippi, along with their numerous work songs, offer a competing image to the flatboatmen and one much closer to those of the burlaki.) Still, the popularization of the freedom of the flatboatmen persisted as seen in another Bingham painting, *Jolly Flatboatmen*. As the title implies, the painting

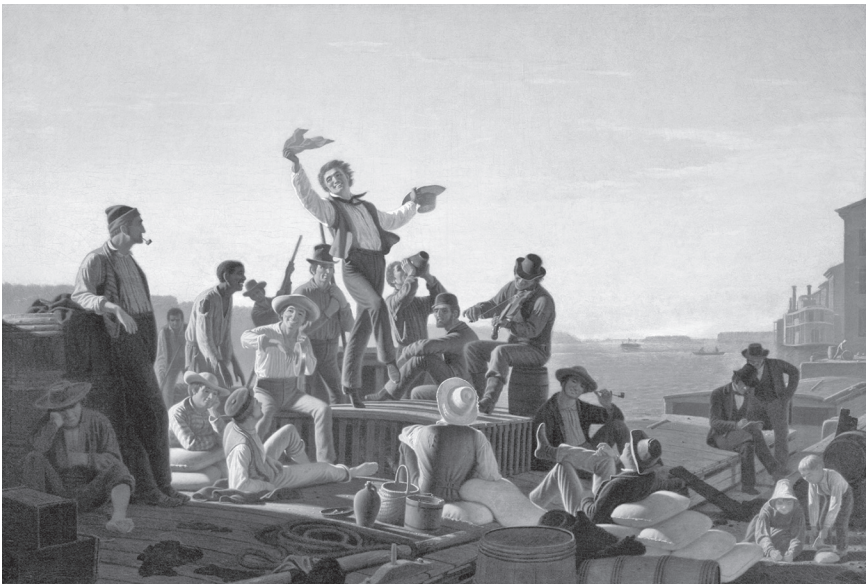


Figure 2.2. George Caleb Bingham, *Jolly Flatboatmen in Port*, 1857, oil on canvas.
 Source: Saint Louis Art Museum, Museum Purchase 123:1944.



Figure 2.3. John Frederick Kensett, *View on the Upper Mississippi*, 1855, oil on canvas. Source: Saint Louis Art Museum, Eliza McMillan Trust 22:1950.

conveys the same message in that the flatboatmen are touted for their rugged individualism, which in turn contributed to a carefree existence that many Americans equated with the frontier identity.¹²

In studying Bingham's work, scholars surmised that many nineteenth-century Americans considered the world Bingham illustrated as passing and fueled by nostalgia, the paintings depicted a recent past that man wanted to commemorate. As a result, this is the river culture they wanted to remember. But Bingham's portrayals of the Mississippi River also revealed the evolution of a river initially perceived as wild and unpredictable to the present-day perceptions of a scenic, pastoral waterway. Other painters, such as Seth Eastman, John Frederick Kensett, and Ferdinand Richardt, followed Bingham and reinforced the image of a romantic, quiet river. Underlying these portraits, however, was the closely held belief that the United States, with its major rivers such as the Mississippi and Hudson, were distinct from Europe. American landscape painters of the American West, such as Albert Bierstadt, Thomas Moran, and John Mix Stanley reflected these convictions.

Coinciding with nineteenth-century representations of the landscape was a growing folklore of the exploits of various river pilots or the earlier keelboatmen such as the legendary Mike Fink. (The river pilots were the successors to the raftsmen in Bingham's paintings.) Stories about Fink's "rough and tumble" exploits, often mirroring the volatility and strength of the Mississippi, are renowned. Some of the most common accounts referred to his prodigious alcohol consumption—contemporaries claimed he could drink up to a gallon

of whiskey a day without any effects—to the oft-told tale of his target shooting a bottle perched on his brother’s head. According to one 1828 account, typical in its celebratory tone: “He was the hero of a hundred fights, and the leader in a thousand daring adventures. From Pittsburg to St. Louis and New Orleans, his fame was established. Every farmer on the shore kept on good terms with Mike—otherwise there was no safety for his property. . . . On the Ohio, he was known among his companions by the appellation of the ‘Snapping Turtle’; and on the Mississippi, he was called ‘The Snag.’”¹³ Complementing the colorful stories about Fink and keelboatmen were songs that illuminated their reputations as roustabouts. One song described their lives: “Dance all night, till broad daylight / And go home with the gals in the morning.”¹⁴

But inherent in the stories in which Fink represented the common moniker for keelboatmen as “half horse and half alligator” was a grudging admiration for his abilities in navigating the river. Merchants entrusted the transport of their goods to the keelboatmen and knowledge of the river was critical. Accounts of storms on the river and boats losing all of their goods were common. In one incident, a passenger going downstream near St. Louis recounts the ferocity of thunder-gusts that “twisted the cotton trees in all directions, as though they had been rushes.” He goes on to say that while he and his family survived, two other boats became unlashd and one was “dashed in pieces” while the other sunk. Both boats were carrying “four or five hundred barrels of flour, porter and whiskey,” all lost.¹⁵

While the river appealed to young men, disillusioned with the demands of farm work, experienced raftsmen knew the serene, slow-moving river portrayed by Bingham could easily be interrupted by a snag or sandbar and claim the lives of those unprepared for the “Wicked River’s” unpredictability. Fink’s reputation and that of other keelboatmen, advertised through venues such as “The Crockett Almanacs,” and specialty books published throughout the nineteenth century derived from this relationship with the river and the other traits, bordering on lawlessness, were in large part a product of a riverine environment. Again similar associations were made with the Volga and the barge haulers, who were often depicted in Russian prose, poetry, and song as freedom-loving, lawless men living on the margins of Russian society. The Volga, in turn, allowed for this lifestyle.¹⁶

Mark Twain echoed the same themes as his writings further immortalized characters such as Fink. Through Twain’s writings, these men became mythological figures known for their skill in navigating, their rootlessness, love of the river, and of course their tendency for “brawling.” Again, the folklore—oral and written—was similar to the myths surrounding the burlaki. In the following passage from *Life on the Mississippi*, Twain illustrates the necessary skill of the river pilot in navigating a river known for its fluctuating depths: “You’ve got to have good fair marks from one end of the river to the other, that will

help the bank tell you when there is enough water in each of these countless places—like that stump, you know. When the river first begins to rise, you can run half a dozen of the deepest of them; when it rises a foot more you can run another dozen, the next foot will add a couple of dozen, and so on: so you see you have to know your banks and marks to a dead moral certainty.”¹⁷

Skilled river pilots were also needed because of the river’s volatility and savagery in creating new channels. In the following passage, Twain evoked the river’s constant movement: “The Mississippi is remarkable in still another way—its disposition to make prodigious jumps by cutting through narrow necks of land, and thus straightening and shortening itself. More than once it has shortened itself thirty miles at a single jump! These cutoffs have had curious effects: they have thrown several river towns out into the rural districts, and built up sand bars and forests in front of them.”¹⁸

Foreign visitors in the first half of the nineteenth century frequently mentioned an ongoing theme—the river’s ability to surprise with its unpredictable twists and turns. Two of the most well-known visitors, Alexis de Tocqueville and Charles Dickens, remarked upon these impressive features. In Tocqueville’s 1839 visit, he observed that “the Mississippi itself sometimes seems in doubt which way it is to go; it twists backward several times, and only after slowing down in lakes and marshes seems finally to make up its mind and meander toward the south.” But Tocqueville also recognized the river’s role in the emerging nation when he predicted a prosperous future for the United States, including “the inexhaustible valley of the Mississippi” as one of the contributing sources.¹⁹

In many ways, a less flattering portrait—Dickens referred to the Mississippi as “this foul stream”—he nevertheless registered a sense of wonder at the river’s physical strength. Dickens begins his assessment:

But what words shall describe the Mississippi, great father of rivers, who (praise be to Heaven) has no young children like him! An enormous ditch, sometimes two or three miles wide, running liquid mud, six miles an hour: its strong and frothy current choked and obstructed by huge logs and whole forest trees: now twining themselves together in great rafts, from the interstices of which a sedgy lazy foam works up, to float upon the water’s top; now rolling past like monstrous bodies, their tangled roots showing like matted hair; now glancing singly by like giant leeches; and now writhing round in the vortex of some small whirlpool, like wounded snakes.

The power, precariousness, and explosive nature of the Mississippi were staples of the river’s folklore. Unlike the Volga, where the dominant imagery is its calmness despite the challenge of shoals and sandbars when traveling the river’s course, the Mississippi’s volatility becomes one of its trademarks.²⁰

The river's precariousness, however, did not preclude the growth of river traffic and as Twain indicated with the arrival of the steamboat; a new actor emerged in the landscape. (The same would be true for the Volga.) Now many of the riverscapes of the Mississippi included images of steamboats docking or a steamboat surrounded by a riverine landscape. The steamboat also prompted tours of the river, and public figures, such as Henry David Thoreau, traveled up the river. In 1854 the Upper Mississippi River was celebrated through the Grand Excursion, a public relations campaign concocted by two railroad financiers who built the Rock Island Railroad. This tour up the river, beginning at Rock Island, included 1,200 guests with many well-known names such as former president Millard Fillmore and Charles A. Dana of the *New York Tribune*. Praise for the scenery came from several of the passengers, and one compared the Upper Mississippi to the Rhine River. But the most glowing description came from a *New York Times* reporter when he wrote: "Perhaps you have beheld such sublimity in dreams, but surely never in daylight waking elsewhere in this wonderful world. Over one hundred and fifty miles of unimaginable fairyland, genie-land, and world of visions, have we passed during the last twenty-four hours... Throw away your guide books; heed not the statement of travelers; deal not with seekers after and retailers of the picturesque; believe no man, but see for your-self [*sic*] the Mississippi River above Dubuque."²¹

The Grand Excursion was the beginning of "boom times in the Upper Mississippi Valley" as other celebrities traveled up the river with similar praise, such as Rufus King who in the following year proclaimed, "The 'Father of Waters' has no peer among all the mighty rivers which furrow the surface of the globe." The period was short lived, however, as railroads began to dominate the transportation industry in the Midwest by the late nineteenth century. With the advent of the railroads and the decline of logging in the Upper Mississippi River Valley, the Mississippi was "deserted by the end of the nineteenth century except for the occasional excursion boat" sparking a new dialogue about the role of the river. But regardless of its diminished role as transportation artery, the Mississippi River, through art, prose, and poetry, was firmly entrenched in the historical memory.²²

In turning to the Volga River, Russia entered the nineteenth century with a longer history on the river than their American counterparts on the Mississippi. Burlaki labor, although comparable to the keelboatmen, was well established by the 1800s and trade on the river under the Russian tsars dated back to Ivan's time in the mid-1500s. The commonality, however, between both rivers was the role each played in shaping the emergent national narrative. Further, in developing a national identity both Russia and the United States drew upon European vistas for comparisons and found in their own respective landscapes an exceptionalism, exemplified in part by the Mississippi and Volga

rivers. In forging an identity, however, Russia also labored under the Enlightenment-constructed idea of Eastern Europe where the Volga often served as the marker between a European and Asian Russia. Similar to the Mississippi and its defining line between the civilized East and frontier West, the Volga represented the division between a developing Europe and the barbaric East. But for Russia, events in the nineteenth century radically changed perceptions of the sprawling empire. Externally, events such as the successful outcome of the Napoleonic Wars juxtaposed with the crushing Crimean War defeat and internally the push for reform all contributed to a Russia in the midst of substantial change. Entering the century as the sleeping giant, Russia's greatness was reaffirmed with Napoleon's defeat and humiliating retreat from Moscow. But less than a half-century later the Crimean War exposed the fragility of the image as Russia suffered a devastating blow to its pride, witnessed by the European powers. Yet at the same time Russia experienced change internally as a growing educated class clamored for reform. Tsar Alexander II responded to the demand for reform through the abolition of serfdom, and throughout the century a gradual economic liberalization occurred resulting in a middle class that had the means to travel and offer new impressions about Russian identity. Still, the call for reform dominated the latter half of the century and Russian intellectuals, including artists, poets, and musicians, played a significant role in this dynamic.²³

Coinciding with the call for reform was an emergent national conversation regarding Russian identity similar to discussions throughout Europe. For the Russian community the discourse regarding identity was divided as intellectuals pondered whether Russia was a product of Eastern or Western influences. A number of nineteenth-century scholars weighed in on the subject, ranging from Pyotr Chaadaev, who questioned whether Russia possessed any cultural legacy, to those rising number of Slavophiles who prided themselves on Russia's Slavic past and sought to distance Russia from an identity that duplicated Europe. The tension persisted up into the early twentieth century as intellectual Velimir Khlebnikov asked: "And will we remain deaf to the land as it cries 'A voice! Give me a voice!' Will we forever remain mockingbirds, imitating Western songs?" In reviewing the profuse literature of this era, contemporary scholars, such as Sara Dickinson, contend that Russian ties to a Western European identity were reinforced after Russia gained control of the Crimea in 1783. At this juncture, combined with a visit by Catherine the Great in 1787, Russian literature emphasized the "Orientalism" of the territory distinguishing the area and culture from a Russian Western European identity. Still another scholar, Olga Maiorova, suggests that the problem with Russian identity was the blurred distinction between empire and nation. Others credit the multi-ethnic aspects of Russia, together with its immense geographical reach, from overshadowing any one, single identity. Because of its size which includes so

many diverse landscapes, the question was posed: “What is or can be ‘symbol’ of the Russian landscape? Is it a birch forest? The Siberian tundra? The vast rivers of the Don and the Volga? The frozen North?” Complementing these inquiries has been recent scholarship into nineteenth-century travel and guide books. Moving beyond the question of identity being rooted in an Orthodox, Slavic, or European past, contemporary Russian scholars are looking at the formation of identity, in part through representations of space.²⁴

Returning, however, to the nineteenth century, Russians had mixed views regarding their landscapes. Prior to the century, Russians associated a landscape aesthetic with Western European vistas, especially Italy and the Alps. Even the one area in Russia considered scenic—the Crimea—was referred to as the “Russian Italy.” Mentioned earlier, this was not unique to Russia as landscape art in many European countries began with a celebration of the Italian landscape through the works of Claude Lorrain but by the nineteenth century, Britain, France, and Germany had begun to tout their own geographies. Although Russian artists initially ignored their own landscapes, the genre of landscape painting allowed another lens for the portrayal of water and rivers. Up until the nineteenth century, Russians considered their own landscapes, such as the peaceful Volga River winding through the bleak, unbroken steppe country, as inferior.²⁵

Others, outside of Russia shared the sentiment, as an 1839 travel account by the Marquis de Custine illustrated. In summarizing his trip to Russia, Custine lamented: “In this country, different from all others, Nature herself has become the accomplice of the caprices of the man who has killed liberty in order to deify unity. Nature too is everywhere the same: two types of trees, blighted and thinly scattered farther than the eye can reach in the boggy or sandy plains—the birch and the pine—make up the entire natural vegetation of northern Russia, that is to say in the vicinity of Petersburg and the surrounding provinces which include a vast expanse of territory.” Even Custine’s description of Moscow evokes a bleak, unremitting landscape when he writes, “You have before you a sad landscape, but vast like the ocean, and to animate the emptiness, a poetic city whose architecture has no name, just as it has no model.”²⁶

During this period, the English traveler Robert Bremner visited the same area with an even more damning critique. Bremner begins his account: “Russia is the largest and the ugliest country in the world. Nature seems to have lavished all her deformity on this one empire, which, without question, covers the least beautiful portion of the whole habitable globe.” Still Bremner surprises the reader when he recounts his first impression of the Volga in which he also draws upon the imagery of calmness when describing the river. Bremner observes: “The demeanor of this river sovereign is worthy of a king. Leaving less powerful rivals to raise themselves into importance by fuming and brawling—

secure in his might and uncontested dignity—he moves calmly but restlessly on. There is no noise, no surge—the glassy tide lies as peaceful as a lake, and, on the first glance, from its great breadth, bears some resemblance to one.”²⁷

Still, as late as 1874, visitors offered less-than-flattering descriptions. An 1874 travel booklet, *A Trip Up the Volga to the Fair of Nijni-Novgorod*, comments upon the diversity of the Russian population, which the author, a British tourist, calls “picturesque,” in contrast to the landscape. In the author’s words, “Russia is in this respect the most picturesque of countries—picturesque not certainly in its natural scenery, which consists for the most part of monotonous and endless plains, but in the races which people them.” The supposed lack of a landscape aesthetic paralleled the absence of a nationalism that was emerging throughout Western Europe. European intellectuals iterated this view while other critics prompted Russians artists to examine their own surroundings so that art in Russia “becomes more of a national culture.”²⁷

But perceptions were evolving—at least internally—and two of the first Russians to recognize and popularize the beauty of the Volga landscape were the Chernetsov brothers, Grigory and Nikanor. In 1838, they traveled down the Volga and similar to the 1840s artists of the Mississippi, Banvard and Henry Lewis, produced a panorama of the river, comprised of seven parts. Another similarity was the challenge of river travel as the brothers commented upon the numerous shoals, sandbars, and strong winds. Like early-nineteenth-century travelers on the Mississippi, they recognized the skill of the riverboat pilot in reaching their destination. In writing about their experiences, they reinforced the Volga’s historic role, when they observed that “the Volga is the fertile vein of Russian lands and deserves the name, Matushka.” But their most important contribution might have been that “[t]hey raised the undescribed beauty of the Russian land toward the level of classical beauty of West and East.”²⁹

Still other changes were affecting Russian perceptions of their environment. In the Russian Imperial Academy of Arts in St. Petersburg, the premier institution for established and budding artists, a revolt was staged when a small group of art students left the Academy in the early 1860s and formed their own group called the Society of Wandering Exhibitions. Members of the group were called the *Peredvizhniki* or the Wanderers. Known for their emphasis on Russian life, “they [the Wanderers] intended to reconnect their art with their homeland” through portrayals of the Russian people, Russian landscapes, and Russian history. The Wanderers, however, were only the beginning as Russian intellectuals and artists throughout the late nineteenth century debated the place of art in an emergent national culture. Many, such as Ivan Kramskoy and Vladimir Stasov urged artists to serve the larger society. The Volga was part of the national awakening as artists that were products of the break with the Imperial Academy, such as Isaak Levitan and Ilya Repin, portrayed the river in

scenes that illustrated Russian everyday life. Levitan, a contemporary of Anton Chekhov, is considered by many Russians to be the greatest landscape artist of his time. To Chekhov, his work showed a spiritual response to the natural world. During Soviet Union times, critics were divided over Levitan's legacy. Some, such as Fedorov-Davydov, upheld Levitan's landscapes for their "lyricism and boundless love for one's native land," while others during Stalin's era dismissed the imagery in his art as "nationalistic trifles." But whether a critic or fan, both recognized the nationalist element in his art.³⁰

Levitan contributed to the evolving culture of national landscape painting with his Volga paintings, drawn in the 1880s while he summered on the banks of the Volga in the village of Plyoss. In one of his works, *Golden Evening* (1889), Levitan portrays the village of Plyoss with the symbolic onion-shaped dome of the Russian Orthodox Church overseeing a terrain of trees broken by bush vegetation, all on the banks of the Volga. The river is the main actor in the painting as it conveys a sense of boundlessness and immense space; a spaciousness that would be associated with a unique Russian identity. The placement of the Russian Orthodox Church in the painting, perched above the Volga, succeeds in capturing two national icons and in this work, Levitan evokes the spiritual response that Chekhov recognized. Complementing the spiritual response is a sense of timelessness and the quietude associated with village life, prompting one critic to remark: "Do not the slow, tranquil flow of the big river and the sunset haze of a summer day conjure up another image, the image of a country blessed with peace, happiness and plenty?"³¹

But Levitan did more than master the pastoral idyll as he was also a master at unifying what were often conflicting themes as seen in his 1889 work *After the Rain*. In this painting, he again shows the sleepy village of Plyoss on the banks of the Volga but this time with fishing boats and a distant steamship on the river. While Levitan continues to display a spaciousness, the Volga in this painting is a working river; its utilitarian value whether through transportation or as a resource provider is the predominant theme. The Volga as highway is even more pronounced in his 1891 painting *Fresh Wind Volga*, in which barge ships are centrally represented. As one scholar noted, "the Volga is shown in its role as the mighty and important thoroughfare it represents for Russia."³² In most of Levitan's paintings, however, the balance between the river's aesthetics and utilitarian use is more even. For example, in *Evening on the Volga* (1888) three fishing boats are visible on the shore but they are dwarfed by the river's grandeur, illustrated through its width in conjunction with an endless sky and the steppes that are seen on the other side. The colors in combination with a peaceful evening setting all contribute to an image that is serene and peaceful; an association with the Russian village and countryside.

Another well-known Russian artist who painted scenes of Russian village life and the Volga is Alexei Savrasov. Claimed by many to be Russia's greatest land-



Figure 2.4. I. Levitan, *After the Rain*, 1889, oil on canvas. Source: The State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

scape painter, Savrasov is best known for his work *The Rooks Have Returned* (1871). Savrasov's mastery at capturing the everyday in Russian life without diminishing its significance is evident as he places the rooks in detail in the forefront with images of a Russian village in the background. In his painting *End of Summer on the Volga River*, Savrasov presents an agricultural scene with threshed piles of grain dotting a farm field. The Volga and an immense sky are off in the distance. The painting offers a sense of space alongside a rural setting that taken together provide a coherent image of the Russian landscape while the Volga serves as the unifying theme in this national narrative. The agricultural idyll that Savrasov depicts will be celebrated again in Socialist Realist art.

All of the Russian artwork discussed thus far was produced during the last half of the nineteenth century. Contributing to a coherent image of the Russian landscape, these landscape portraits were always part of the narrative regarding identity and one of the unifying themes within this narrative was the Volga River. In the works of Levitan and Savrasov, the Volga's role is two-fold. The river as highway contributes to commerce while its beauty and immensity offer sustenance for the Russian soul. In a departure from the celebratory and traditional riverscapes, however, is another Russian painting where the Volga is a major actor but in a very different sense. Through the provocative work of Ilya Repin in his painting *The Volga Barge Haulers* (1873), the Volga is part oppressor. Interestingly, this work was painted in a very different landscape in the Lower Volga Basin near the village of Shiriaev Burak with the closest city being



Figure 2.5. I. Repin, *Evening on the Volga*, 1888, oil on canvas. Source: The State Tretyakov Gallery.

Stavropol. Considered a classic in the pantheon of Russian art, the painting is one of the leading works of the Peredvizhniki and is credited by many as the inaugural work of the realist school in Russia. Claimed by many as one of their own, ranging from those promoting art's role to serve the nation in the 1880s to the Soviets in the 1930s, Repin tried to remain outside the debates as he saw himself as an artist and not allied to any one political or social trend. (In later Soviet reviews of his work, critics said that Repin, like the “advanced Russian intelligentsia ... had a feeling of personal responsibility for the fate of ordinary people and for the historical destiny of the country.”)³³

In this specific painting, “*The Volga Barge Haulers*,” studied primarily for its realist theme of nineteenth-century Russian life, the river is seen as an oppressor in the lives of the eleven burlaki who with leather harnesses strapped across their chests struggle to pull a barge, full of goods, up the river. Largely a social and political statement, as the burlaki were often depicted in a different light, the painting conveys the oppression and despair of the burlaki. This group of laborers, already known in Russian folklore, assumed further status with Repin's portrayal. Repin took two years to complete the masterpiece in which critics often comment upon the quiet dignity of the men's faces despite the appearance of a barely subsistence existence. In his reminiscences of the painting, Repin writes about one of the burlaki in particular, Kanin, who “with a rag on his head, with clothing patched together by his own hand and worn through again, was a man who inspired much respect: he was like a saint un-

dergoing an ordeal.” In this same passage, Repin compares the burlak to early Greek philosophers sold into slavery after the fall of Hellas.³⁴

Repin’s portrayal, however, reflected only one nineteenth-century perspective of the laborers. In earlier centuries Russians associated the burlaki with lawlessness from living on the margins of society. They were associated with the river in that the river embodied a freedom of movement and in earlier centuries travel on the river was also associated with danger because of the lack of law. Unlike the land-bound serfs, the burlaki, like the keelboatmen, were perceived as being free of the constraints of conventional society and as a result, often envied. By the nineteenth century, however, the burlakis’ economic status had changed. While in earlier centuries they had entered this lifestyle because it allowed more freedom, by the 1800s the choice to be a burlaki revealed the desperate economic situation in the villages. Repin’s work illustrates the dire economic circumstances of this laboring class as their numbers on the Volga swelled in the early nineteenth century before the arrival of steam.³⁵

But the river is also an actor in Repin’s painting. The Volga is immense and Repin’s use of light, in which he “caught the broad white light of the Volga region,” communicates the spaciousness of the steppe, so the river, steppe, and sky appear as one. As one art historian noted, “Here is the mighty river that flows through Russia’s past and lands; here are the people that have labored for centuries along its banks.” While the vista in the painting is never-ending, the portrayal of the burlaki gives the work a bleakness, which is also overlaid on the landscape. The river, or nature, is viewed as overpowering and later depictions of Russian resources in the Soviet era revisit the theme of nature’s power but with the Soviet goal of taming and “bridling” their river. Soviet reviewers project this vision of man versus nature into Repin’s work; one critic said Repin



Figure 2.6. Ilya Repin, *Bargemen on the Volga*, 1873, oil on canvas. *Source:* State Russian Museum, Saint Petersburg.

chose the subject because of “the courage of the barge haulers in the battle with the elemental force of the river.” But during the Soviet era, the worker’s face is depicted as contented as he is “joyful” in his labor. One of the first posters to present the worker in this light resulted from work on the Dnieper River project with a smiling laborer, with arm raised standing in front of the river and dam—a stark contrast to the wretched lives of the burlaki. Still the Soviets, with their own school of Socialist Realist art often emulated nineteenth-century landscape art in their efforts to tout the Soviet state. The difference, however, is that the country’s resources, such as the Volga, were ultimately subdued in the Soviet success story and the landscapes had an ideological purpose.³⁶

Paralleling the art work of the mid to late nineteenth century, were folk songs and literary works memorializing the Russian landscape and the Volga River. The classic folk song, “Volga Boatman,” reached a larger audience after Mily Balakirev’s trip down the Volga River. (Balakirev was one of several Russian musicians seeking to learn more about Russian folk music.) Folklore about the burlaki was popular and often presented a different imagery than Repin’s portrait. Similar to Mike Fink on the Mississippi, the Volga barge haulers had their own celebrities. One, known as Nikituska Lomov, was memorialized for his ability to do the work of four men as well as stories of his protecting those less fortunate. Another famous tale, “The Barge Hauler’s Contest with the Frost,” shows the barge hauler’s strength and endurance in the face of cold. While the nobleman has to wear a fur coat to protect him from the elements, the barge hauler wears only a short peasant’s coat and no hat or gloves. But another similarity they share with Fink is a reputation for alcohol consumption and lawlessness. Often depicted as bandits and robbers, their lives were grist for popular folk lyrics in which one has the burlaki cutting off the head of the governor of Astrakhan and throwing it into the “Mother Volga.” In another folk lyric, robbers are on the “Mother Volga; along the wide expanse,” when they spot a boat with a well-dressed captain who they intend to rob. Still another folk song follows the story of an orphan who “was nursed and fed by Mother Volga,” and went on to become a robber from the land of Astrakhan.³⁷

But the burlaki also immortalized the Volga through their work songs, sung in sync with the rhythms of pulling the barge and its heavy load up the river. In these folk lyrics, the work is exacting with singular heavy movements required of the barge hauler. The river, itself, is an oppressor as the demands of pulling the barge upstream take a deadly toll on the burlaki. In these lyrics, the burlaki are working against the river, much like the keelboatmen did with the Mississippi. Through the words, the sense of constant pulling against the river’s current is expressed and the tedious motions of their work:

Eh, uxnem! Eh, uxnem!
Once more, once again!

Eh uxnem! Eh, uxnem!
 Once more, once again
 We will swing the birch!
 We will toss the curly birch!
 Aj-da, da, aj-da, aj-da, da, aj-da,
 We will toss the curly birch!

This song, known as “Dubinuska” became very famous and its refrain was associated politically as a revolutionary song during the 1905 Revolution.³⁸

The well-known Russian writer, Maxim Gorky, also had a special interest in the lives of the barge haulers as his grandfather told him stories about his life pulling a barge by himself up the Volga. In his grandfather’s words: “The barge was there, in the water, and I was on the bank pulling it, barefoot, over the sharp stones. I kept at it from dawn to dusk with the sun broiling the back of my neck and my head bubbling as if it were a pot of melted iron. The torments piled on me. I had an ache in every little bone till I could hardly see straight, but I had to hang on; and the tears ran and I cried my heart out.” Gorky’s grandfather also recalled the songs the barge haulers sang at the end of the day while preparing their meal. Songs, that in his words were “heartbreaking” and would “send a shiver through you to hear it, and you’d feel the Volga current was like a racing horse and that it was heading up to the clouds; and then troubles didn’t matter any more than specks in the wind.”³⁹

Still, the lives of the barge haulers represented freedom and a sense of lawlessness to many. In one folk song, the governor of Astrakhan pleads: “Oh, you’re barge haulers, free people. Take all the golden treasure you need” In response the barge haulers told the governor it was not his riches they were interested in but instead his head and so:

They cut off the governor’s wild head,
 They threw the head into the Mother Volga,
 The young men laughed at him:
 “You well know, governor, you have been harsh toward us,
 You beat us, you destroyed us, sent us into exile,
 Shot our wives and children at the gates!”⁴⁰

An 1862 report on the lives of the barge haulers reveals how the land-bound peasants saw barge hauler life as representing freedom. Recent scholarship, however, shows the freedom was often fleeting. According to one source, as Russia’s economy grew so did the labor force of burlaki so by 1815, there were 400,000 burlaki on the Volga. Because of the nature of their work, the mortality rate was high (with an annual rate of 7,000) and of those who survived,

many were in broken health.⁴¹ In recalling their harsh lives, one well-known poet, N.A. Nekrasov, who grew up in a village near the Volga, lamented:

Go out to the bank of the Volga: whose moan
Is heard above the greatest Russian river?
This groan we call a 'song'
Barge-haulers go by tow-path!
Oh Volga, Volga! Even in full-watered spring
You water the field not as much as
Great national grief overfilled our land.
Where there's a nation—there is a groan.

But Nekrasov also remembers the Volga in another light as he wrote:

Oh, Volga! ... My cradle!
I wonder if anybody loved you as much as I do.
Alone, at early dawn,
When everything in this world was sleeping
And scarlet shine was gliding on the dark-blue wavers,
I ran away to the native river.

To Nekrasov, the Volga is nurturing, sustaining the imagery of “Mother Volga,” but also part of the tyranny associated with Imperial Russia. (Although Repin was not familiar with Nekrasov’s work, his painting of the burlaki complements the poet’s emotional rendering of life for the burlaki.) Whether nurturer or tyrant, pastoral or utilitarian, the river remained integral to an emergent national consciousness.⁴²

Adding to the newfound appreciation of the Russian landscape, the Volga River was giving rise to another activity—tourism. By the 1870s, around 500 steamboats, many a Mississippi model, traveled up and down the river and the steamships that provided cargo were also beginning to serve tourists. Earlier perceptions of the river as being unsafe and a haven for bandits changed as river travel had become more common by the mid nineteenth century. Excursions on the river offered a respite from city life for many of Russia’s nobility, and similar to excursions on rivers such as the Mississippi, the experience cultivated a growing national identity. In travel brochures promoting Volga River cruises, comparisons were made with other major rivers of the world, such as the Rhine, Nile, and Jordan. This phenomenon was not unique to the Volga as numerous travel brochures on the Mississippi and Rhine, in particular, celebrated the uniqueness of their rivers, evincing a national pride. The Rhine River, however, was often the standard by which Russian promoters compared their respective rivers. But in the Volga travel brochures, often

written by French authors, the Volga was pronounced more serene than their German counterpart.⁴³

Complementing the travel literature was the work of Vasily Rozanov, a Russian critic in the second half of the nineteenth century who referred to the Volga as the “Russian Nile.” In describing his trip down the Volga, he writes: “I want to call our Volga, the Russian Nile. But what is the Nile, not in a geographical or physical sense but in a different, deeper sense which was given to it by humans who were living on its banks?” He continues to compare the greatness and divinity of the Nile with its life-giving properties—seen through its annual inundation leaving behind a rich layer of silt—to the Volga. In ascertaining the essence of both rivers, he perceives a similarity as the Volga, like the Nile, has nurtured those living along its banks since ancient times. It is in this role, the Volga earned the epithets, “Kormilitsa-Volga” and later “Matushka Volga.” In further arguing the Volga’s revered place in Russian consciousness, Rozanov observes that through the river the Russian people realize their insignificance and mortality, prompting the saying, “we are born and die as flies and Matushka Volga keeps flowing.” According to Rozanov, the connection to the river is such that the Russian people believe Russia is where the Volga is and it’s not truly Russia without the Volga. Popular literature in the nineteenth century supported Rozanov’s claim with works such as Volgin’s *Vasil Chumak* in which the Volga is presented as “the greatest river in the Russian Empire.”⁴⁴

Further adding to the work of philosophers were writers such as Ivan Bunin who immortalized the Volga in his 1916 short story “The Riverside Tavern,” when he describes the Russian provinces. One of his characters observes: “[T]he Russian provinces are pretty much the same everywhere. There’s only one thing in them that’s quite unique, and that’s the Volga itself. From the early spring right up to winter it is always and everywhere extraordinary, in all weathers and whether its day or night. At night you can sit ... and look out of the windows ... and when they are open to the air on a summer night you look straight into the darkness, into the blackness of the night, and somehow you sense especially keenly all the wild magnificence of the water wastes outside.”⁴⁵

Thus when Russia entered the twentieth century, the Volga, as part of the larger Russian landscape, contributed to an emergent national narrative that established Russia as unique and distinct as other nations; possessing a charm that was at least equal to Russia’s European neighbors. Paralleling the Mississippi’s role in shaping identity, the Volga was firmly entrenched as part of the national identity. Much more than transportation routes, the rivers were part of a larger national discourse that celebrated each country’s exceptionalism while simultaneously promising economic potential. Similar to the Nile and Ganges, the rivers were personified and served multiple purposes with the culture.

Inherent in the valorization of each river, however, and their subsequent shaping of a national identity, lie all the contradictions at the heart of the national and cultural identities of Russia and the United States. While the Mississippi and Volga Rivers offered freedom, both rivers also contributed to the oppression and exploitation of labor. While both rivers afforded numerous vistas, ranging from scenic bluffs on the Mississippi to sweeping steppes on the Volga, both were also havens for disease, particularly with repercussions for populations that had already been marginalized. While both gave rise to a national pride that rested, in part on the uniqueness of each river, this pride was often riddled by the need for comparisons. Finally, while each river was celebrated for its beauty coupled with a nineteenth-century idealization of each, the long history of despoiling the riverine environment with human debris persisted, intensifying throughout the century. These dualities continued into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries with a discourse always bent on reconciling the scenic and useful, the aesthetic and disease-ridden, and liberation and oppression. As a result, multiple narratives evolved as different populations experienced the river differently. All of these contradictions mirror the broader histories of Russia and the United States.

But the twentieth century introduced a more strident rhetoric with a heightened faith in modernization infusing the political regimes of the United States and the recently created Soviet Union. Consequently, the rivers' histories took another turn and by the 1930s both rivers underwent major construction projects that subdued the natural flow and outwardly transformed both into predominantly navigation routes with a series of locks and dams. Yet, the nineteenth-century rhetoric that valorized the rivers persisted. When undertaking large-scale projects in the race toward hydro-modernization, the state appropriated the cultural symbolism of the rivers. As a result, the construction of the Moscow-Volga Canal was not merely a series of locks and dams but a project that "constrained 'Mother Volga.'" With the advent of modernity, the symbolic representations of the Volga and Mississippi remained but the message was conflicted. Serving a nationalist agenda, the rivers fell victim to the abstract realm that touted nature as nationalist conceit while harnessing the river's energy for commerce, whether through transportation or hydropower. Art and literature have faithfully captured all of these uses and representations.

Notes

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- York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995). The scholarship in this field is rich and provocative with contributions from a number of scholars. A useful synthesis of many of the ideas regarding representation can be found in John R. Gold and George Revill, *Representing the Environment* (London: Routledge, 2004).
2. One of the most well-known scholars to publish on landscape and identity in Russia is Christopher Ely in *This Meager Nature: Landscape and National Identity in Imperial Russia* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2002). Other scholars include Orlando Figes, *Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of Russia* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2002); and George Heard Hamilton, *The Art and Architecture of Russia*, 3rd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992). For a discussion on the Mississippi and American landscapes in the nineteenth century, see Ron Tyler, *Visions of America: Pioneer Artists in a New Land* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1983); Jason T. Busch, Christopher Monkhouse, and Janet L. Whitmore, *Currents of Change: Art and Life Along the Mississippi River, 1850–1861* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); and Elizabeth Johns et al. *New Worlds from Old: 19th Century Australian and American Landscapes* (Canberra: National Gallery of Australia and Wadsworth Atheneum, 1998).
 3. Gina Crandell, *Nature Pictorialized: "The View" in Landscape History* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 4, 9.
 4. *Ibid.*, 67, 83.
 5. Claude Lorrain's pioneering work is cited in Klaus Reichold and Bernhard Graf, *Paintings that Changed the World: From Lascaux to Picasso* (Munich: Prestel, 2003), 102–103.
 6. Robert Boyle, *The Hudson River: A Natural and Unnatural History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1969), 60–61; *Kindred Spirits: Asher B. Durand and the American Landscape*, ed. Linda Ferber (Brooklyn: Brooklyn Museum, 2007), 129. For a comparative study of the Rhine River, see Mark Cioc, *The Rhine: An Eco-Biography, 1815–2000* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002).
 7. Timothy Flint, *The History and Geography of the Mississippi Valley*, vol. 1, 2nd ed. (Cincinnati: E.H. Flint and L.R. Lincoln, 1832), 129.
 8. Stephen Eisenman, *Nineteenth-Century Art: A Critical History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994), 120; *A Treasury of Mississippi Folklore: Stories, Ballads and Traditions of the Mid-American River Country*, ed. B.A. Botkin (New York: American Legacy Press, 1955), 117. Further commentaries about the Mississippi panoramas can be found in Bernard Comment, *The Painted Panorama* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 2000); Busch, Monkhouse, and Whitmore, *Currents of Change*; Walter Havighurst, *Voices on the River: The Story of the Mississippi Waterways* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1964).
 9. Christopher Monkhouse, "Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and the Mississippi River: Forging a National Identity Through the Arts," in *Currents of Change*, 140–179.
 10. Carol Troyen, "Retreat to Arcadia: American Landscape and the American Art-Union," *American Art Journal* 23, no. 1 (1991): 20–37; Proceedings of the American Art-Union, 1844 Report (Part of the Transactions of the American Art-Union), 3–24. (these are now online, http://archive.org/stream/jstor-20568401/20568401_djvu.txt)
 11. Proceedings of the American Art-Union, 1849, 21–65, p. 28; *Bulletin of the American Art-Union* 2, no. 5 (August 1849): 10–12, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20646629/>; *Bulletin of the American Art-Union*, no. 9 (December 1851): 137–139.

12. Janet L. Whitmore, "A Panorama of Unequaled Yet Ever-Varying Beauty," in *Currents of Change*, 12–62. Other works that discuss Bingham's place in nineteenth-century American history include Angela Miller, "The Mechanisms of the Market and the Inventions of Western Regionalism: The Example of George Caleb Bingham," in *American Iconology*, ed. David C. Miller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); John Francis McDermott, *George Caleb Bingham: River Portraitist* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1959).
13. *Half Horse, Half Alligator: The Growth of the Mike Fink Legend*, ed. Walter Blair and Franklin J. Meine (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1956), 53.
14. *Ibid.*, 10.
15. Timothy Flint, *Recollections of the Last Ten Years in the Valley of the Mississippi*, ed. George R. Brooks (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1968), 158.
16. Blair and Meine, *Half Horse, Half Alligator*, 17.
17. Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi* (1883; repr., New York: Signet Classic, 1961), 59. In addition to Twain's remembrances, there are numerous early accounts describing the Mississippi River by explorers such as Zebulon Pike, James Duane Doty, and Stephen Long.
18. *Ibid.*, 2.
19. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 1–2 (1848; repr., Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966), 24, 30.
20. Charles Dickens, "Boz's Description of the Mississippi," in *Parley's Magazine*, vol. 10 (New York: C.S. Francis and Co., 1842), 390.
21. Quoted here from Nancy and Robert Goodman, *Paddlewheels on the Upper Mississippi, 1823–1854* (Stillwater: University of Minnesota Printing Services, 2003), 2–3, 6–10. One of the best collections of steamboat photos can be found at the Special Collections Room and Area Research Center, Murphy Library, University of Wisconsin–La Crosse. This collection is part of the University of Wisconsin Archives.
22. Busch, Monkhouse, and Whitmore, *Currents of Change*, 12; Goodman, *Paddlewheels on the Upper Mississippi*, 327.
23. For a discussion of Enlightenment thought and the "idea" of Eastern Europe, see Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994). Numerous scholars and writers have considered the construction of an American frontier mentality and the arbitrary one-hundredth meridian as being the division between a cultured East and the "Wild West." The classic text to introduce this idea is Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (New York: Vintage Books, 1950).
24. In discussing the contributions of Pyotr Chaadaev to the discourse on national identity, see Robin Aizlewood, "Revisiting Russian National Identity in Russian Thought: From Chaadaev to the Early Twentieth Century," *The Slavonic and East European Review* 78, no. 1, (January 2000): 20–43; Susanna Rabow-Edling, *Slavophile Thought and the Politics of Cultural Nationalism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2006); *Collected Works of Velimir Khlebnikov*, vol. 1, *Letters and Theoretical Writings*, ed. Charlotte Douglas (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 234; Sara Dickinson, "Russia's First 'Orient': Characterizing the Crimea in 1787," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 3, no. 1 (Winter 2002): 3–25; *ibid.*, *Breaking New Ground: Travel and National Culture from Peter I to the Era of Pushkin* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006); Olga Maiorova,

- From the Shadow of Empire: Defining the Russian Nation through Cultural Mythology, 1855–1870* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010); *National Identity in Russian Culture*, ed. Simon Franklin and Emma Widdis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 39. Further proof of Russia's focus on forging a national identity can be found in Katia Dianina, "Displaying the Nation and Modernity in Russia: Directions in Museum Studies—Museum and Society in Imperial Russia: An Introduction," *Slavic Review* 67, no. 4 (2008): 907. Dianina convincingly argued how widespread the discussion for a national museum was, going from initial proposals in the 1820s to an exhibition boom in the 1870s. *Ibid.* For an interesting discussion of the historiography of Russian national identity, see Stephen M. Norris, *A War of Images: Russian Popular Prints, Wartime Culture, and National Identity, 1812–1945* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2006).
25. Robert Bremner, *Excursions in the Interior of Russia*, vol. 2 (1839; repr., London: Elibron Classics, 2005), 11.
 26. *Journey for Our Time: The Journals of the Marquis de Custine*, ed. Phyllis Penn Kohler (London: Phoenix Press, 2001), 228, 170. A more flattering view of Russia can be found in August von Haxthausen's *Studies on the Interior of Russia*, ed. Frederick Starr (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972). After Custine's critical assessment, Haxthausen was invited by Tsar Nicholas I to visit Russia in 1842 in the hope that Haxthausen would see Russia in a more positive light, which he did.
 27. Bremner, *Excursions in the Interior*, 11, 217.
 28. Henry Alexander Munro-Butler-Johnstone, *A Trip Up the Volga to the Fair of Nijni-Novgorod* (Philadelphia: Porter & Coates, 1875), 14. According to the prominent Russian historian, Geoffrey Hosking, "neither the imperial state nor Orthodox Church had succeeded in projecting an image of Russianness or generating a narrative of Russia's history and traditions which was capable of appealing to Russians across a wide spectrum." *Russia and the Russians: A History* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2001), 344. Elizabeth Kridl Valkenier, *Ilya Repin and the World of Russian Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 103.
 29. A. Korobochko, V. Liubovnyi, *Chernetsovy G.G. i.N.G. Puteshestvie po volge* (M., Mysl', 1970), 10.
 30. Elena Duzs, "Russian Art in Search of Identity," in *Russia and Western Civilization: Cultural and Historical Encounters* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2003), 182; Valkenier, *Ilya Repin and the World of Russian Art*, 33; Mastera iskusstv ob iskusstve, vol. 7, (Moscow, 1970) as quoted in *Levitan* (Leningrad: Aurora Art Publishers, 1981); Mark Bassin, "I Object to Rain That is Cheerless: Landscape Art and the Stalinist Aesthetic Imagination," *Ecumene* (2000): 7, 313–336, 331. One Russian critic, however, did not see a true "Russianness" in Levitan's work. According to Georges Nivat, Vasily Rozanov questioned Levitan's work because of his Jewish background. See Nivat, "The Russian Landscape as Myth," *Russian Studies in Literature* 39, no. 2 (Spring 2003): 53. For a general discussion of Russian art, I consulted George Heard Hamilton, *The Art and Architecture of Russia*, 3rd ed. (1954; repr., New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983); Orlando Figes, *Natasha's Dance*; Rosalind P. Blakesley and Susan E. Reid, eds., *Russian Art and the West: A Century of Dialogue in Painting, Architecture and the Decorative Arts* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2007). In addition, several visits were made to many Russian art galleries and museums including the State Tretyakov Gal-

- lery in Moscow, and the Hermitage and the Russian Museum in St. Petersburg. All three include works by Levitan, Savrasov, and Repin.
31. The literature on the characterization of space in Russian landscape painting is rich as an increasing number of scholars recognize its place in Russian national identity. A few noteworthy studies include: Jeremy Smith, ed., *Beyond the Limits: The Concept of Space in Russian History and Culture* (Helsinki: Studia Historica, 1999); Katarina Hansen Love, *The Evolution of Space in Russian Literature: A Spatial Reading of 19th and 20th Century Narrative Literature* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994); Evengy Dobrenko and Eric Naiman, eds., *The Landscape of Stalinism: The Art and Ideology of Soviet Space* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003); and Jane Burbank, ed., *Russian Empire: Space, People, Power, 1700–1930* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007). In Emma Widdis's exploration of space and identity, she contends that space, itself, becomes a virtue in Russian consciousness. See Franklin and Widdis, *National Identity*, 139–140. Levitan, 13.
 32. Averil King, *Isaak Levitan: Lyrical Landscape* (London: Philip Wilson Publishers, 2004), 42.
 33. Grigory Sternin, Maria Karpenko, Yelena Kirillina and Sheila Marnie, *Ilya Repin: Painting Graphic Arts* (Leningrad: Aurora Art Publishers, 1985), 9.
 34. Valkenier, *Ilya Repin and the World of Russian Art*, 43.
 35. Jerome Blum, *Lord and Peasant in Russia: From the Ninth to the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 283. Foreign visitors also noted the dire circumstances for the burlaki as Baron Von Haxthausen observed the following in his 1856 visit, "A Burlak, when fortunate, can perform the journey between Samara and Ribinsk three times in the course of a summer; he has then perhaps £3 left; but if, through adverse circumstances, he only makes the trip twice, he generally consumes all he earns." Haxthausen, *The Russian Empire: Its People, Institutions, and Resources* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1856), 146.
 36. Valkenier, *Ilya Repin and the World of Russian Art*, 39; Sternin, *Ilya Repin*, 9. For an excellent discussion of landscape art in Socialist Realist art, see Mark Bassin, "The Greening of Utopia: Nature, Social Vision, and Landscape Art in Stalinist Russia," in *Architectures of Russian Identity: 1500 to the Present*, James Cracraft and Daniel Rowland, eds. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 150–172. Hamilton, *Art and Architecture of Russia*, 383; For a discussion of Soviet portrayals of workers and the Dnieper River project poster, see Victoria E. Bonnell, *Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters under Lenin and Stalin* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), Plate I.14.
 37. Y.M. Sokolov, *Russian Folklore* (Hartboro, Pa: Folklore Associates, 1966), 489; *Down Along the Mother Volga*, ed. Roberta Reeder (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975), 200.
 38. Reeder, *Down Along the Mother Volga*, 194. A parallel to the burlaki and their work songs can be found in John Randolph's work, "The Singing Coachmen or, The Road and Russia's Ethnographic Invention in Early Modern Times," *Journal of Early Modern History* 11, no. 1–2 (2007): 33–61. Randolph's thesis also reinforces the arguments regarding the importance of the Volga as a transportation route, as his work reveals the significance of Russia's roads or iams "in shaping the first ethnographic conceptions of Russia as a land united by a common set of customs and manners." *Ibid.*, 37.

39. Maxim Gorky, *My Childhood* in *The Autobiography of Maxim Gorky* (Secaucus, New Jersey: Citadel Press, 1949), 20–21.
40. Reeder, *Down Along the Mother Volga*, 198.
41. Blum, *Lord and Peasant in Russia*, 283.
42. Nikolai Nekrasov, *Lyric Poetry* (Moscow: Detskaja Literature, 1976), 81–89.
43. Thomas W. Knox, *The Boy Travellers in the Russian Empire* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1887), 284; Guido Hausmann, “Historic Memory and Culture in the Russian Empire and Soviet Union,” International Colloquium, 25–28 June 2007; Christopher Ely, “The Origins of Russian Scenery: Volga River Tourism and Russian Landscape Aesthetics,” *Slavic Review* 62 (2003): 666–682. For a good discussion of earlier perceptions of folk songs regarding robbers on the river, see Reeder, *Down Along the Mother Volga*.
44. Vasily Rozanov, *Ruskii Nil* (M:V. Volgin, *Ataman Kuz'ma Roshchin* (Moscow, 1901), 3, as cited in Jeffrey Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read: Literacy and Popular Literature, 1861–1917* (1985; repr., Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2003), 242. Brooks’s work shows how Russia’s growing national identity and pride in the nineteenth century were invested, in large part, to Russian ideals of their landscape.
45. Ivan Bunin, “The Riverside Tavern” in *The Gentleman From San Francisco and Other Stories* (1916; repr., New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 216.