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Barbara Radziwiłł and *Princess Tarakanova* at the 1867 *Exposition Universelle*

Meanings Lost and Found in Cross-National Perceptions

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Abstract

At the 1867 *Exposition Universelle* in Paris, a competition for public sympathy unfolded within the Russian section between two paintings – Józef Simmler's *The Death of Barbara Radziwiłł* and Konstantin Flavitsky's *Princess Tarakanova*. Flavitsky worked in Saint Petersburg, while Simmler was based in Warsaw, in the so-called Kingdom of Poland (commonly known as Congress Poland), then part of the Russian Empire. This paper examines how their depictions of beautiful, dying women reflected the collective memory and political concerns of the Polish and Russian nations. Additionally, by drawing on archival documents, it investigates the selection and censorship of paintings for the Russian section of the *Exposition Universelle*. It also analyzes French critics' responses to *Barbara Radziwiłł* and *Princess Tarakanova*. In doing so, the paper traces how the reception of these works evolved across various national contexts.

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Introduction

[1] The 1867 *Exposition Universelle* in Paris was the first international exhibition to include a large and notable display of contemporary art from the Russian Empire. Some observers pointed out that it was then that Russian art finally became truly known in Europe. Nevertheless, especially in comparison to the leading French school, the Russian one attracted only limited attention from international audiences. However, two paintings stood out and were very well received by critics and the broader public: Konstantin Flavitsky's *Princess Tarakanova* (1864) and Józef Simmler's *The Death of Barbara Radziwiłł* (1860).

[2] Flavitsky (1830–1866) was born in Moscow, studied and worked in Saint Petersburg, and spent several years in Italy. Simmler (1823–1868), a Polish artist, trained in Dresden, Munich, and Paris, and mostly lived in Warsaw.[1] From the late 18th century, after the three partitions (in 1772, 1793, and 1795) of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth by the Russian Empire, the Kingdom of Prussia, and the Habsburg monarchy, Poland ceased to exist as a sovereign state for over a century. In 1807, as a result of the treaty of Tilsit, Napoleon Bonaparte, in whose army many Poles fought, established the Duchy of Warsaw, a de facto French client state. In 1815, after Napoleon's defeat, the Congress of Vienna redivided Poland, and a large part of its territory, centered around Warsaw, came under the control of the Russian Empire as the Kingdom of Poland (also known as Congress Poland). In 1831, following the failure of the November Uprising against Russian rule, the Kingdom of Poland lost almost all its autonomous privileges, but continued to maintain a greater degree of cultural distinctiveness from the imperial center than other western provinces of the Russian Empire. Simmler, like Flavitsky, had Russian citizenship and exhibited his work in the Russian section of the *Exposition Universelle*.

[3] In the Kingdom of Poland, Simmler was one of the most esteemed and popular artists of his generation. He began as a portraitist, but from the late 1850s onwards, he also created history paintings, inspired by innovative French examples and dedicated to the Polish past.[2] Flavitsky initially emerged as a rather conservative painter, focusing on biblical and ancient Roman

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[1] Flavitsky's ancestors were from Kharkov and its surrounding areas in Sloboda Ukraine (Slobozhanshchyna or Slobozhanshchina), which was once largely populated by settlers from the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth who moved to Russia; see Игорь Масленков [Igor Maslenkov], "Слобожанские корни К. Д. Флавицкого" [Slobozhansky roots of K. D. Flavitsky], in: *Генеалогический вестник* [Genealogical Herald] 62 (2020), 132-136. Today, the Kharkov region is part of Ukraine. One can talk of Flavitsky's Ukrainian and Polish roots, as well as of Simmler's German origin, since he was born into a family of Germans who had moved to Warsaw.

[2] For more on Józef Simmler and the French influence in his art, see Barbara Ciciora, "La Question du 'genre historique' dans la peinture d'histoire polonaise entre 1830 et 1860", in: Stephen Bann et al., eds., *L'Invention du passé. Histoires de coeur et d'épée en Europe, 1802–1850*, vol. 2, Paris 2014, 229-237: 231-232, 237; Stéphane Paccoud, "The 'Historical Genre' as an International Style: The Influence of Paul Delaroche on Józef Simmler and Polish History Painters", in: Wojciech Bałus and Rafał Ochęduszko, eds., *European History Painting of the 19th Century: Mutual Connections, Common Themes, Differences*, Cracow 2010, 155-175; Maria Poprzęcka, "Józef Simmler – un académique romantique", in: *Bulletin du Musée National de Varsovie* 21, no. 4 (1980), 99-115; Tadeusz S. Jaroszewski and Elżbieta Charazińska, *Józef Simmler: Katalog wystawy monograficznej*, exh. cat., Warsaw 1979.

subjects. However, shortly before his premature death from consumption, he completed *Princess Tarakanova*, a work that had no precedent either in his own practice or in Russian art.[3] Like Simmler's *Barbara Radziwiłł*, it belonged to the new type of history painting (*genre historique*) that was invented and developed in France during the first half of the 19th century.[4] Flavitsky owed his fame in Russia solely to *Princess Tarakanova*. Although Simmler's reputation was not so closely tied to a single work, *Barbara Radziwiłł* was widely regarded in Poland as his most significant painting and as an emblem of the modern Polish national art school.

[4] Throughout the 19th century, many Polish painters studied or were at least enrolled at the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts in Saint Petersburg and took part in exhibitions in Petersburg and Moscow.[5] Simmler, though, was not involved in the artistic life of these central imperial cities and apparently remained unknown there until 1867. Similarly, it is unlikely that the public in Poland was familiar with Flavitsky's art before the *Exposition Universelle*.

[5] In this essay, I trace how the reception of *Barbara Radziwiłł* and *Princess Tarakanova* evolved across different national contexts. I begin by discussing their meanings and significance within Russian and Polish cultures, respectively. Drawing on archival documents, I then examine the selection and censorship of paintings curated by the Academy of Arts in Saint Petersburg for the Russian section of the 1867 *Exposition Universelle* in Paris. Finally, I consider French critics' responses to the paintings of Flavitsky and Simmler. In doing so, I address the following questions: What were the political implications of these depictions of pretty, dying women? Why was *Barbara Radziwiłł* immediately approved by the Academy Council, while *Princess Tarakanova* was initially rejected? And why did Russian officials' eventual decision to display the latter in Paris turn out to be a success of Russian cultural diplomacy?

Simmler's *Barbara Radziwiłł* and Flavitsky's *Princess Tarakanova*

[6] Barbara Radziwiłł (1523–1551) was born into an influential and wealthy family of Lithuanian nobility. As a young widow, she fell in love with Sigismund II Augustus. Technically, Sigismund became King of Poland in 1530, having been crowned *vivente rege* (while his father was still alive),

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[3] For more on Konstantin Flavitsky and his *Princess Tarakanova*, see Мария Чернышева [Maria Chernysheva], *Феминизация истории в культуре XIX века: Русское искусство и польский вектор* [The feminization of history in 19th-century culture: Russian art and the Polish vector], Moscow 2024, 203-212, 217-219; Светлана Усачева [Svetlana Usacheva], *Константин Флавицкий. "Княжна Тараканова"* [Konstantin Flavitsky. *Princess Tarakanova*], Moscow 2024; Maria Chukcheeva, "Hidden Histories and Historical 'Truth': Konstantin Flavitsky's *Princess Tarakanova* of 1864 and How Art Helped Change the Understanding of Russian History", in: *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 22, no. 1 (Spring 2023), DOI: https://doi.org/10.29411/ncaw.2023.22.1.2 (accessed April 5, 2025); Татьяна Горина [Tat'jana Gorina], *Константин Дмитриевич Флавицкий. 1830–1866* [Konstantin Dmitrievich Flavitsky. 1830–1866], Moscow 1955.

[4] For more information and further discussion of the new type of history painting (*genre historique*) in European art, see Bann (2014). For more on the *genre historique* in Russian art, see Maria Chernysheva, "Paul Delaroche: The Reception of his Work in Russia", in: Вестник Санкт-Петербургского университета. Искусствоведение [Bulletin of Saint Petersburg University. Art History], no. 3 (2019), 577-589.

[5] Чернышева (2024), 120, 124-125, 126-127, 129-138, 145-146, 162.

and they nominally co-reigned until 1548. After the premature death of his first wife, Elizabeth of Austria, in 1545, Sigismund II secretly married Barbara in 1547 and soon demanded that she be recognized as queen. This provoked resistance from his mother, Bona Sforza, and the Polish magnates, who did not want the Radziwiłł family to gain more power. However, Sigismund stubbornly pursued Barbara's coronation, even risking armed conflict and his throne. In 1550, Barbara was finally proclaimed Queen of Poland, but she fell ill and died within a few months, allegedly poisoned.[6] The romance between Barbara Radziwiłł and Sigismund II Augustus has gone down in history as one of the most vivid love stories of the Early Modern period.

[7] The figure of Barbara became especially appealing to Polish writers in the early 19th century, during the decades following the fall of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. It was a period marked first by a crisis of collective identity caused by the late 18th-century partitions of Poland, and then by frustrated hopes for national revival – stimulated by Napoleon's campaigns (against Poland's enemies) and the Franco-Polish alliance – which together increased Poles' self-reflection and interest in their national past. In a brief span of time, several literary works devoted to Barbara appeared, among which the tragedy *Barbara Radziwiłł* by Aloysius Feliński (1771–1820) achieved the greatest success.[7] It was staged in Warsaw in 1817.

[8] Feliński's drama closely intertwines love and patriotic themes. Poland-Lithuania is depicted at the height of its political and cultural flourishing, and Polish King and Grand Duke of Lithuania Sigismund II Augustus is portrayed as one of the most powerful rulers in Europe. Sigismund personifies the greatness of Poland, while Barbara embodies its sacrifice. In the finale of the tragedy, the beautiful, beloved, and fatally poisoned queen becomes a metaphor for Feliński's contemporary Poland, destroyed as a state by the partitions. The drama ends with an expressive exchange of lines between Barbara and Sigismund Augustus, reminding us that this is a tragedy about both love and Poland:

> Barbara:
> *You must live!… Save the fading tribe of Poland's fathers;*
> *From misfortune… from downfall… protect this land!…*
>
> Augustus:
> *Ah, she is dying! I must live – and live without Barbara!*
> *O Poland, what a heavy sacrifice you demand!*[8]

[6] According to other versions, she died of a venereal disease or, more likely, cancer.

[7] During the same period, the first romantic-patriotic plays about Wanda, another very popular heroine of Polish history, were written in Poland. For the representation of the Wanda legend in 19th-century Polish art, see later in this essay. For further discussion of the importance of female characters and the intricate intertwining between erotics and politics in the genre of patriotic drama, primarily in Polish plays dedicated to Wanda, see Halina Filipowicz, *Taking Liberties: Gender, Transgressive Patriotism, and Polish Drama, 1786–1989*, Athens 2014, 143-165.

[8] Alojzy Feliński, *Barbara Radziwiłłówna: tragedya w 5 aktach*, Cracow 1820, 88. Unless otherwise indicated, translations are mine.

In 1821, the Russian government suspended the production of Feliński's drama,[9] fearing it might serve as a manifestation of the national dream of Poland's prosperity and splendor.

[9] In 1820, three years after the premiere of Feliński's *Barbara Radziwiłł*, Sophie de Choiseul-Gouffier née Zofia Tyzenhauz (1790–1878), wrote in French a novel of the same name. She referred to Feliński as "one of our best poets" and expressed hope that her own work would also resonate "in the hearts of the Poles, who are proud of the ancient virtues of their compatriots – loyalty, courage, and honor."[10] Like Feliński's drama, Choiseul-Gouffier's novel features Barbara, who, dying, addresses Sigismund with concern for the Polish nation: "I am dying, dying, poisoned... But do not think of blaming the Poles for this black crime; they are not capable of such a thing [...]. I know whose hand struck the blow[11] […]."[12]

[10] In the first half of the 19th century, the literary representations of Barbara Radziwiłł were not limited to Feliński's drama and Choiseul-Gouffier's novel, and a body of historical evidence about Barbara was published by the historian Michał Baliński (1794–1864).[13] During the second half of the century, Polish artists – following writers, poets and historians – created numerous works depicting the famous love story of Barbara and Sigismund. Józef Simmler's *The Death of Barbara Radziwiłł* (Fig. 1) emerged as one of the earliest such images and remained the most popular among them.[14] Commissioned by the collector Leopold Burczak-Abramowicz (1819–1884), it greatly delighted audiences at exhibitions held by Zachęta (the Society for the Encouragement of Fine Arts) in Warsaw and by the Society of Lovers of Fine Arts in Cracow during 1861–1862.[15] A public fundraising campaign was organized to purchase the painting from Burczak-Abramowicz and donate it to Zachęta, thereby making it public property.

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[9] By that time, it had already been published. Soon, it was translated into French: Alojzy Félinsky, "Barbara Radziwill", in: *Chefs-d'oeuvre du théâtre polonais. Félinsky, Wenzyk, Niemcovitz, Oginsky, Mowinsky, Kochanowsky*, Paris 1823, 33-126.

[10] Sophie de Choiseul-Gouffier, *Barbe Radziwil: roman historique orné de deux portraits*, 2 vols., Paris 1820, vol. 1, 1, vol. 2, 164.

[11] This is an allusion to the Italian Bona Sforza, the mother of Sigismund II Augustus, on whose orders Barbara was allegedly poisoned.

[12] Choiseul-Gouffier (1820), vol. 2, 150.

[13] Michał Baliński, *Pamiętniki o królowej Barbarze, żonie Zygmunta Augusta*, 2 vols., Warsaw 1837–1840.

[14] For additional information on Simmler's *Barbara Radziwiłł* and other images of Barbara in 19th-century Polish culture, see Jakub Zarzycki, "Wizualne (i nie tylko) konsekwencje pewnej łzy: O 'Śmierci Barbary Radziwiłłówny' Józefa Simmlera słów kilka", in: *Quart* 41, no. 3 (2016), 54-73, DOI: https://doi.org/10.11588/quart.2016.3.

[15] For selected reviews by Polish critics about Simmler's painting, see Maria Poprzęcka, *Czas wyobrażony: o sposobach opowiadania w polskim malarstwie XIX wieku. Rozprawy Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego*, Warsaw 1986, 76-79.

1 Józef Simmler, *The Death of Barbara Radziwiłł*, 1860, oil on canvas, 2.05 × 2.34 m. National Museum, Warsaw (photo: MNW website)

[11] Simmler showed the final moment of the story that Feliński had transformed into a symbolic memorial to Poland. More importantly, in the very structure of Simmler's *Barbara Radziwiłł*, private and romantic intonations are intertwined with a laconic and almost solemn significance befitting a national memorial. His painting effectively contributed to the memory of both the great royal love and the once-powerful, now-ruined Poland. Combined with its high artistic merit, this gave the work its iconic status in Polish national painting.

[12] So-called Princess Tarakanova (1745/1753–1775) was an impostor to the Russian throne. She did not speak Russian, had little knowledge of Russia, but posed as the daughter of Empress Elizabeth Petrovna and, therefore, was a rival and enemy of the reigning Empress Catherine II. A well-educated and very seductive adventuress, Tarakanova had wealthy and influential patrons in various countries, including Poland. By order of Catherine II, Count Alexei Orlov (1737–1808) courted Tarakanova and lured her onto a Russian ship in Livorno, in 1775, where she was arrested. Taken to Saint Petersburg, she was imprisoned in the Peter and Paul Fortress. For almost a century, the Tarakanova case was kept secret by the Russian authorities, despite the circulation of rumors. In the early years of Alexander II's relatively liberal reign, in the late 1850s, the first documents about and studies of the story were released.[16] Although those in the know were aware that Tarakanova had died in prison of tuberculosis in 1775, Konstantin Flavitsky painted the legendary version, in which she drowned in her cell during the devastating flood of 1777 in Petersburg.

[16] Михаил Лонгинов [Mihail Longinov], "Княжна Тараканова. Эпизод из анекдотической хроники XVIII в." [Princess Tarakanova. An episode from anecdotal chronicles of the 18th century], in: *Русский вестник: Журнал литературный и политический* [The Russian Herald. A Literary and Political Journal] 24, no. 2 (1859), 716-736; "Несколько данных для истории принцессы Таракановой" [Some facts about the history of Princess Tarakanova], in: *Русская беседа* [Russian Conversation] 18, no. 6 (1859), 59-76.

2 Konstantin Flavitsky, *Princess Tarakanova*, 1864, oil on canvas, 2.45 × 1.87 m. State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow (photo: Wikimedia Commons)

[13] Flavitsky's *Princess Tarakanova* (Fig. 2) was a novelty in Russia in the 1860s: the sole figure in this large historical composition is a woman who is not from the pantheon of Russian queens and princesses. Furthermore, she is a criminal, guilty of imposture. Until then, only positively regarded major figures from Russian history were honored with large-scale visual commemoration. Flavitsky portrays Tarakanova as neither influential nor insidious and dangerous. She is pretty, fragile and helpless, and evokes sympathy. The artist neither justifies nor condemns her. He persuades viewers that any individual is worthy of attention and empathy, even if they are not particularly remarkable and far from perfect.[17]

[14] In Russian historical visual culture, Flavitsky's *Princess Tarakanova* marked the first clear and expressive statement on an important and complicated theme. It can be described as a tragic conflict between obviously unequal forces: a powerful state, mobilizing large resources, and a vulnerable individual. Tarakanova was not a prominent figure, an ideological or spiritual leader, or a fighter, but, probably, just a fraudster in search of a better life. The conflict led to an assertion of state power against something that was, in the end, rather trivial – not a serious threat or a significant adversary. Tarakanova was arrested thanks to Orlov's betrayal at the behest of the Russian authorities. Her punishment was severe, even if her death was not intended. Dealing with Tarakanova proved easy, but the damage done to the historical reputation of the authorities was significant. They turned an adventurer into a victim, drawing public attention and sympathy to her. She became the heroine of melodramatic narratives in art and literature, where she was

[17] On the close relationship between the development of a culture of empathy (including the imaginative empathy fostered by literature and art) and the invention of human rights, see Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History*, New York 2007.

favourably compared with Catherine II in terms of her youth and beauty. Thus, the Tarakanova case was not an absolute victory for the authorities. The questionable triumph of power over a weak and seemingly defeated individual is, of course, a liberal theme. And it was Flavitsky, a man of liberal views,[18] who introduced it to Russian historical iconography.[19]

[15] Flavitsky's *Princess Tarakanova* was the first truly popular painting based on a subject from Russian history. Exhibited in 1864 at the Imperial Academy of Arts in Saint Petersburg and in 1865 at the Society of Art Amateurs in Moscow, it was well received by a wide audience in Russia.[20] In 1867, soon after the *Exposition Universelle* in Paris, Pavel Tretyakov, the founder of the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, purchased the picture, making it the first history painting in his collection. Since Tretyakov's mission was to promote Russian art for the general public, this acquisition further underscored the public success and cultural significance of Flavitsky's work. It seemed to confirm that *Princess Tarakanova* had indeed succeeded in bringing Russian history closer to ordinary people.

The Censorship of Paintings for the Russian Section at the 1867 *Exposition Universelle*

[16] At the end of 1866, the paintings submitted to the Russian department of the 1867 *Exposition Universelle* were reviewed by the Council of the Imperial Academy of Arts. Among the rejected paintings, a significant portion were by Polish artists.[21] It should be noted that this occurred shortly after the Polish uprising for national independence, the January Uprising (1863–1864), which triggered the rise of Polonophobia in both Russian official circles and broader society. However, Simmler's *Barbara Radziwiłł* was accepted immediately.[22] Flavitsky's *Princess*

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[18] In 1862, while returning from Italy, he wrote to his brother: "I regret all the more that I must return and see Russia in this grotesque mode, where everyone is threatened by the excessive zeal of the police, which seizes both the just and the guilty merely on a suspicion." Quoted in Chukcheeva (2023).

[19] Чернышева (2024), 207-209.

[20] For more on its reception in Russia, see Chukcheeva (2023); Владимир Стасов [Vladimir Stasov], "Двадцать пять лет русского искусства" [Twenty-five years of Russian art] and "Тормозы нового русского искусства" [The brakes on new Russian art], in: Владимир Стасов, *Собрание сочинений* [Collected works], vol. 1, part 1, Saint Petersburg 1894, 493-698: 568-569; 697-836: 744-745; Владимир Стасов [Vladimir Stasov], "Exhibition at the Academy of Arts (1867)", in: Стасов (1894), vol. 1, part 2, 207-224: 221. For possibly the earliest (and very favorable) mention of Simmler's *Barbara Radziwiłł* in Russian criticism, see Стасов (1894), vol. 1, part 2, 219-220. In particular, Vladimir Stasov, Russia's leading art critic in the second half of the 19th century, writes here: "Mr. Simmler's painting is one of the rare creations of art […] No true connoisseur would hesitate to acknowledge it as a first-rate work […] Overall, it has something in common with the finest works of Delaroche: the same calmness and beauty, the same absence of exaggeration and melodramatic effect, the same intelligence in every detail, the same profound grasp of a historical period, and the same psychological truth."

[21] РГИА [Российский государственный исторический архив / Russian State Historical Archives]. Ф. 789. Оп. 5. 1865 г. Д. 53. Л. 152, 153, 187.

[22] РГИА. Ф. 789. Оп. 5. 1865 г. Д. 53. Л. 152. Before the *Exposition Universelle*, Simmler was hastily awarded the title of Honorary Free Member of the Imperial Academy of Arts, an institution to which he had previously had no connection (РГИА. Ф. 789. Оп. 6. 1867 г. Д. 220. Л. 2).

Tarakanova was not so fortunate: the Academy Council initially refused it, but in the end, it was included in the Russian section of the *Exposition Universelle*. Emperor Alexander II personally set the condition for the work's display in Paris: the French catalogue was to indicate that "the plot of this painting is taken from a novel that has no historical truth".[23]

[17] As mentioned, Flavitsky depicted the legendary death of Tarakanova without adhering to historical facts. Nevertheless, Tarakanova did indeed die in prison under terrible circumstances – not during a flood, but of consumption. Flavitsky's painting faithfully conveyed the essence of the tragedy, though not its historical details. The emperor and Russian officials seemed less concerned about the lack of historical accuracy than about the portrayal of a horrific Russian prison, where a pretty woman – who did not look like a criminal – was shown dying. Such a scene could have cast Russian authority in an unfavorable light. This was particularly sensitive for several additional reasons. First, Flavitsky intended the setting to be the Alekseevsky Ravelin in the Peter and Paul Fortress, which continued to serve as a prison for political detainees throughout the 19th century, up until the 1880s. Second, Russian troops had recently brutally suppressed the January Uprising in the Kingdom of Poland, and not only the participants but also many suspected of aiding or sympathizing with them – including women – were subjected to repression. Third, Tarakanova's place of birth and nationality remain uncertain. Both in her time and in the 1860s, one of the various suggestions was that she might have been of Polish origin. In any case, Tarakanova proclaimed herself a princess soon after the First Partition (1772) of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth by Russia, Prussia, and Austria. She maintained close ties with, and received support from, members of the Polish nobility who were aggrieved by the loss of their country's sovereignty. The Polish dimension of Tarakanova's story gained renewed political relevance in the years following the January Uprising.

[18] Interestingly, Flavitsky depicted Tarakanova's dress in white and red – the colors traditionally associated with Poland, and widely recognized as the Polish national colors in the 19th century, especially since the November Uprising (1830–1831).[24] At the very least, this choice indicates that Flavitsky intended to portray Tarakanova as Polish. More importantly, the symbolic combination of white and red further politicized his painting. Could it have been a mere coincidence that the artist conceived it either on the eve of, or during, the January Uprising for independence? If the tragic events in Poland influenced the creation of *Princess Tarakanova*, in what way and with what result? Could the sympathy for the unfortunate "princess" in this painting have masked a deeper sympathy for a freedom-loving, tortured, and tormented Poland? This question is difficult to

[23] РГИА. Ф. 789. Оп. 5. 1865 г. Д. 53. Л. 179, 181. The tsar's order was not carried out exactly; in the French catalogue, the adjective "legendary" was simply added to the title of the painting: *The Legendary Death of Princess Tarakanova* (*Catalogue général: Exposition universelle de 1867 à Paris. Première partie (groupes I à V) contenant les oeuvres d'art*, Paris [s. d.], 176). The first Russian novels about the "Princess" Tarakanova appeared only later. The tsar probably had in mind literature published in France and Germany in the first half of the 19th century, such as: *Anna Petrowna, fille d'Elisabeth, Impératrice de Russie, histoire véritable*, Paris 1813; Wilhelmine Lorenz, *Elisabeth Tarakanow oder die Kaisertochter: ein historischer Roman aus der neueren Zeit*, Altenburg 1835; Luise Mühlbach, *Die Tochter einer Kaiserin*, Berlin 1848.

[24] I am grateful to Magdalena Łanuszka for drawing my attention to the symbolic meaning of Tarakanova's white and red dress.

answer with certainty. But it is worth noting that Flavitsky may have had contact with Alexander Herzen (1812–1870),[25] a prominent opponent of Russian autocracy who lived in exile and openly supported the Polish January Uprising.

[19] Thus, Alexander II and his officials had every reason to worry that *Princess Tarakanova* might have stimulated anti-Russian sentiments in Paris. France had always demonstrated solidarity with the Poles in their struggle against Russian domination. Beginning with the November Uprising of 1830, Paris became the main center of Polish emigration from the Russian Empire. After the January Uprising of 1863, Paris saw a new wave of Polish émigrés.[26] So why did the Russian authorities still decide to send Flavitsky's *Princess Tarakanova* to the Paris *Exposition Universelle*?

[20] In my opinion, the main (if not the only) reason was the work's high artistic quality and its alignment with the major current trends in French and pan-European art. In Russia, it was one of the first and finest examples of the new type of history painting that emerged in France and became extremely popular throughout 19th-century Europe. For the same reason, I believe the Academy Council favored Simmler's *Barbara Radziwiłł*. Like *Princess Tarakanova*, it was primarily inspired by the paintings of Paul Delaroche (1797–1856),[27] a leading figure in the new *genre historique*. But in contrast to Flavitsky's picture, Simmler's was considered by Russian officials to be neutral and appropriate in both its subject matter and meaning. Apparently, they did not notice any political subtext in *Barbara Radziwill*, viewing it merely as a depiction of a moving love story from the distant past. However, as shown above, Simmler's work carried political connotations by invoking the memory of Poland's past greatness and enduring tragedy, suggesting a metaphorical comparison between the dying Polish queen Barbara and Poland itself – beautiful, beloved, and destroyed by the partitions.

[21] Similarly, when, several years later, Simmler's *Barbara Radziwiłł* impressed the Russian artist Grigory Sedov (1836–1884), he hardly realized its semantic complexity; it served mainly as a visual and sentimental source for his painting *Ivan the Terrible Admiring Vasilisa Melentieva* (Fig. 3) exhibited at the Academy of Arts in Saint Petersburg in 1876. There are clear thematic and compositional parallels between the two pictures. Both engage with the national histories of the 16th century – the reign of Sigismund II Augustus in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and that of Ivan IV in Russia. As is well known, the kings were contemporaries, and Ivan even proposed (unsuccessfully) to Sigismund's sister, Catherine Jagiellon. Like Simmler, Sedov treats a love theme borrowed from literature. He draws on the historical drama *Vasilisa Melentieva* by Alexander Ostrovsky and Stepan Gedeonov, which was published and staged in Moscow and

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[25] Алла Верещагина [Alla Vereshhagina], *Историческая картина в русском искусстве: шестидесятые годы XIX в*. [History painting in Russian art: the 1860s], Moscow 1990, 115-116, 222.

[26] One of them, Anton Berezowski, attempted to assassinate Alexander II during the tsar's visit to Paris in 1867 for the *Exposition Universelle*.

[27] For further discussion of Paul Delaroche's art, see Stephen Bann, *Paul Delaroche: History Painted*, London 1997; Patricia Smyth, *Paul Delaroche: Painting and Popular Spectacle*, Liverpool 2022. Delaroche's *The Christian Martyr* (1850s; versions of the painting are now in the Louvre and the Saint Petersburg Hermitage), which portrays a young woman's death by drowning, may have been particularly inspiring for Flavitsky's *Princess Tarakanova*. I thank the anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

Petersburg in 1868. The dramatic moment and compositional scheme chosen by Sedov are very close to those in Simmler's work. Vasilisa, the tsar's unofficial consort, lies on the bed while he sits beside her, gazing at her with adoration. Although she is merely sleeping, the reader of the drama is aware that, according to the plot, she will whisper the name of her former lover Andrey in a few minutes; Ivan will overhear it, and both Vasilisa and Andrey will be immediately condemned to a brutal death by the cruel tsar. Thus, in the depicted scene, she is on the brink of death – echoing Simmler's Barbara.

3 Grigory Sedov, *Ivan the Terrible Admiring Vasilisa Melentieva*, 1875, oil on canvas, 1.37 × 1.72 m. State Russian Museum, Saint Petersburg (photo: Wikimedia Commons)

[22] Although several of the Polish paintings disapproved by the Academy Council were still lifes and genre scenes with no connection to political or national ideas, it is clear that, among historical paintings, those glorifying the courage and military heroism of the Polish people were rejected as a priority.[28] Besides Józef Simmler's *The Death of Barbara Radziwiłł*, the following Polish history paintings were accepted: his *Queen Jadwiga's Oath* (Fig. 4), Aleksander Lesser's *Wanda's Death*

[28] The group consisted of *Young Bolesław Goes to War against the Moravians* and *Count Skarbek Habdank, Sent by the City of Głogów, Before Emperor Henry V in 1109*, both by Aleksander Lesser, *The Flight of Kara Mustafa Pasha in the Battle of Vienna in 1683* by January Suchodolski, and *The Battle of Varna, Lost by King Władysław in 1444* by Feliks Sypniewski. See РГИА. Ф. 789. Оп. 5. 1865 г. Д. 53. Л. 152, 153. The titles are given here in translation from this archival document in Russian. Although it is not certain, it is most likely that the two works by Lesser depicting events from the turn of the 11th and 12th centuries (one dedicated to the youth of Duke Bolesław the Wrymouth and the other to Count Skarbek Habdank and the legend of the origin of his coat of arms) are those reproduced here: https://cyfrowe.mnw.art.pl/pl/zbiory/447333 (accessed September 10, 2025) and here: https://inmuseums.pl/all-objects/ZQL8blTqUba8MBXhI0Q2_john-of-mount-wawel-in-message-to-emperor-henry-v-besieging-glogow-in-1109-beginning-of-skarbeks-nick-name-historical-scene (accessed September 10, 2025). As for the works by Suchodolski and Sypniewski, it is difficult to associate them with any paintings held in collections today.

(Fig. 5),[29] and Wojciech Gerson's *The Lamentable Apostolate / The Germanic Apostolate Among the Pomeranian Slavs* (1866, oil on canvas, 2.9 × 4.6 m, National Museum in Cracow).[30] Thus, three of these four works focused on female figures from medieval and Early Modern Poland: Queen Barbara dying in front of her loving husband; Queen Jadwiga swearing her innocence to defend herself from accusations of adultery; and Queen Wanda, who drowned herself to escape marrying a German prince, Poland's enemy.

4 Józef Simmler, *Queen Jadwiga's Oath*, 1867, oil on canvas, 2.89 × 2.14 m. National Museum, Warsaw (photo: MNW website)

[29] Simmler's *Queen Jadwiga* was the most expensive painting acquired from the Russian section of the 1867 *Exposition Universelle*, selling for 15,000 francs. The second-most expensive was Lesser's *Wanda*, which was purchased for 10,000 francs (ОРГТГ [Отдел рукописей Государственной Третьяковской галереи / Department of Manuscripts of the State Tretyakov Gallery]. Ф. 79. Ед. хр. 149, 164). After returning from the *Exposition*, Flavitsky's *Princess Tarakanova* was bought by Pavel Tretyakov for 4,300 silver rubles, which amounted to slightly more than 14,000 francs and, probably not by chance, was very close to the cost of Simmler's *Jadwiga*.

[30] *Указатель русскаго отдела Парижской всемирной выставки 1867 г*. [Index to the Russian section of the Paris *Exposition Universelle* of 1867], Saint Petersburg 1867, 9, 11, 13. The reproduction of Gerson's *The Lamentable Apostolate* is available at https://zbiory.mnk.pl/pl/wyniki-wyszukiwania/katalog/280941 (accessed September 10, 2025).

5 A 19th-century lithograph of Aleksander Lesser's *Wanda's Death* (original after 1862, oil on canvas, 1.64 × 2.12 m, in the collection of the National Museum in Warsaw) by Władysław Walkiewicz, published by Maksymilian Fajans, issued as the annual gift for the members of the Society for the Encouragement of Fine Arts in the Kingdom of Poland for the Year 1869, print: 52 × 55,6 cm, sheet: 63 × 89,5 cm. National Museum in Warsaw, inv. no. Gr.Pol.21156 MNW (photo: MNW website)

Among these paintings, Lesser's *Wanda* had the most pronounced political message, directly derived from the plot. In 19th-century Polish culture, the myth of Wanda, the daughter and heir of King Krakus, the legendary founder of Krakow, became immensely popular, transforming her into a symbol of Polish patriotism, independence, national resistance, and sacrifice.[31] But for the Academy Council, it surely mattered that, according to legend, Wanda refused a German prince – not a Russian one – to preserve her own and her subjects' Polishness. At first glance, Simmler's *Jadwiga* was not so politicized, addressing the transnational and timeless ideal of a true queen's moral purity. However, her oath was provoked by an intrigue rooted in a similar confrontation – between the Poles and the Habsburgs, representing Austria or, more broadly, the German peoples.[32] A supporter of the Habsburgs, Gniewosz of Dalewice, attempted to destroy the marriage of Jadwiga (1373–1399) and Jagiełło, the Grand Duke of Lithuania, whose mother was the Russian princess Uliana of Tver. To achieve this, Gniewosz spread rumors that the queen had engaged in an affair with William Habsburg, Duke of Austria. Simmler's *Barbara Radziwiłł* presented the most complex and nuanced case, less overtly patriotic than *Wanda*, yet more tragically resonant with the current political and national agenda than *Jadwiga*. As noted, it looks like for the Academy experts, the portrayal of tender and moving femininity overshadowed – or perhaps even concealed – the expression of Polish national consciousness in the painting.

[31] For a discussion of various interpretations of the myth of Wanda in 19th-century Polish literature, see Filipowicz (2014), 143-165.

[32] Like Wanda and Barbara, Jadwiga became the heroine of many literary and visual works in 19th-century Poland. For more information on this, see Magdalena Łanuszka, *Królowa Jadwiga w kulturze polskiej na przestrzeni wieków*, https://historiaposzukaj.pl/sciezki_historii,14,sciezka_jadwiga.html?b=nasi_autorzy%2C344%2Cautor_magdalena_lanuszka.html (accessed May 22, 2025).

[23] It is not surprising that Wojciech Gerson's (1831–1901) *The Lamentable Apostolate* was included in the Russian section at the 1867 *Exposition Universelle*. This large canvas showed how the Germanic warriors ruthlessly conquered the Western Slavs under the pretext of their Christianization in the 10th century. Gerson's composition implied a parallel between the Germanic tribes and the Germans, who, in the late 18th century, deprived the Poles of statehood through the partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Although the Germans acted alongside the Austrians and Russians, Gerson's *The Lamentable Apostolate* tended to place primary responsibility for Poland's national tragedy on the Germans.[33] As also seen in the example of Lesser's *Wanda*, the demonstration of Polish opposition to the Germans was quite appropriate – if not desirable – for the Russian officials. Altogether, nineteen history paintings were exhibited in the Russian section at the *Exposition Universelle* in Paris: besides the four Polish history paintings, there were fifteen paintings depicting the Russian past, eight of which glorified Russian military victories.[34]

French Critics on Simmler's and Flavitsky's Paintings at the *Exposition Universelle*

[24] As I noted at the beginning of the essay, at the 1867 *Exposition Universelle* in Paris, Simmler's *Barbara Radziwiłł* and Flavitsky's *Princess Tarakanova* were regarded by critics and the public as the finest paintings in the Russian section. Below are some quotes from French reviews of the exhibition.

Charles Clément stated:

> *The organizers of the Russian section [...] showed tact and made a reasonable, well-justified selection […]. The exhibited works inspire respect for the country. But at first glance, it is evident that Russian art does not yet exist independently […]. In the Russian hall, one finds followers of Delaroche, Calame, Knaus [...]. Russian artists [...] paint in the French or German manner, almost without an accent […]. Still, I would highlight a couple of worthy paintings in the historical genre […]. Mr. Simmler's "The Death of Barbara Radziwiłł" […] is good and certainly deserves attention […] though it is entirely French […]. In this thematic category, the late Flavitsky's "The Legendary Death of Princess Tarakanova" is the best work, [...] attracting the largest number of viewers […]. A vivid and exciting image is created on the horrifying subject. Flavitsky's painting is remarkable both in concept and execution, truly excellent*.[35]

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[33] Unlike Simmler, Gerson built an official artistic career in Russia, maintaining close relations with the Imperial Academy of Arts, participating in exhibitions in Saint Petersburg and Moscow, and receiving various titles and awards. In Warsaw, he established himself as a successful mediator between the local cultural community and the Russian authorities, earning the trust of both sides. One of the most intriguing and obscure moments of his career was that he "received a dark bronze medal in commemoration of the suppression of the Polish rebellion of 1863–1864" (РГИА. Ф. 789. Оп. 8. 1873 г. Д. 109. Л. 36).

[34] For more on Russian history paintings at the 1867 *Exposition Universelle*, see Чернышева (2024), 198-202.

Hippolyte Gautier wrote:

> *Does Russian art exist? The exhibition makes us doubt it […]. Nothing bears the mark of originality […]. These paintings are banal and too European. However, some of them are quite interesting: "The Legendary Death of Princess Tarakanova" [...]. Here, the plot alone is enough to arouse emotions. The artist, the late Konstantin Flavitsky, does his best to make his painting as moving as possible [...]. [Also notable is] "The Death of Barbara Radziwiłł" by Simmler […].*[36]

Hippolyte Durant shared his impressions:

> *I do not know if all the artists listed in the catalogue in the Russian section are actually from Russia, but I can say for sure that many of them are similar to French, Italian, or German masters […]. Among the history paintings, the most notable are […] "The Death of Barbara Radziwiłł" by Mr. Simmler and, particularly, "The Death of Princess Tarakanova" by the late Konstantin Flavitsky; the latter […] has a striking effect.*[37]

Théophile Thoré's opinion was that, in the Russian section,

> *[T]he most remarkable painting is "The Legendary Death of Princess Tarakanova" by Konstantin Flavitsky […]. His talent combines the poetry of Ary Scheffer with the free execution of Gallait. Mr. Józef Simmler seems to be influenced by the same masters, and to some extent by Delaroche. There is nothing Russian in the paintings of Flavitsky and Simmler.*[38]

A little later, Pierre Larousse mentioned that *Princess Tarakanova* was "especially noted" in Paris.[39] Flavitsky's work even prompted the French artist Élise Moisson-Desroches to create a composition on the same subject – *Princess Farrakanoff Drowned in Her Prison during the Neva Flood of 1777* – which was displayed at the Paris Salon the following year, in 1868.[40]

[25] At the 1867 *Exposition Universelle*, the French audience's reaction differed from the official one reflected in the awards – something that often happened in the French art world, where public opinion primarily shaped artistic reputations. The 1867 *Exposition* did not bring official success to painters from the Russian Empire: the only, and rather modest, third-class medal was awarded to Alexander von Kotzebue for his canvases *The Battle of Poltava* (1862, oil on canvas, 3.9 × 5.7 m. State Hermitage, Saint Petersburg) and *The Russians Crossing the Devil's Bridge*

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[35] Charles Clément, "Exposition universelle. Beaux-arts", in: *Journal des débats politiques et littéraire*s (28 August 1867), 1-2: 1.

[36] Hippolyte Gautier, *Les curiosités de l'Exposition universelle de 1867*, Paris 1867, 149.

[37] Hippolyte Durant, "Exposition universelle de 1867. Études et souvenirs. Beaux-arts. Peinture", in: *Recueil des publications de la Société Impériale Havraise d'Études Diverses de la 34me année 1867 et séance publique du 2 août 1868*, Le Havre 1868, 71-97: 86.

[38] Théophile Thoré, "Exposition universelle de 1867", in: *Salons de W. Bürger. 1861 à 1868*, 2 vols., Paris 1870, vol. 1, 335-454: 436.

[39] Pierre Larousse, *Grand dictionnaire universel du XIXe siècle*, vol. 13, Paris 1875, 1544.

[40] Chukcheeva (2023).

(1857, oil on canvas, 3.33 × 2.79 m. State Hermitage, Saint Petersburg), both of which commemorated Russian victories in 18th-century wars and were owned by Alexander II. It looks as if the Award Committee diplomatically sought to please the tsar personally and to acknowledge the Russian Empire's prestige as a powerful state. However, the favorite of both critics and the public was Flavitsky's *Princess Tarakanova*, slightly ahead of Simmler's *Barbara Radziwiłł*.

[26] French critics quite justifiably observed that the works of Flavitsky and Simmler were inspired by European, particularly French, art. This common judgment was ambivalent: on the one hand, it suggested that these paintings lacked national specificity; on the other hand, it implied that, being well-designed, well-executed, and relevant to contemporary artistic trends, they were a valuable part of the pan-European mainstream. In this regard, *Barbara Radziwiłł* and *Princess Tarakanova* contributed to the favorable image of the Russian Empire as a country perfectly integrated into the cross-national cultural community of Europe. The Russian authorities were wrong to fear that *Princess Tarakanova* would have negatively affected this image, as French critics remained rather indifferent to – if they were even aware of – the underlying meaning and political undertones of Flavitsky's and Simmler's compositions. The decision to send *Princess Tarakanova* to Paris proved all the more prudent, as without its inclusion in the exhibition, the public would most likely have favored *Barbara Radziwiłł*, leading to a triumph of Polish art – an outcome undesirable for the Russian imperial government.

[27] The works of Konstantin Flavitsky and Józef Simmler became notable examples of 19th-century European art. Both offered more than mere depictions of charming, doomed women meeting death and evoking empathy. They conveyed the collective memory and political concerns of the Polish and Russian nations, while also being deeply aligned with a major innovative and progressive process in 19th-century pan-European culture – namely, the demythologization and humanization of history, making it more accessible to a wide audience and ordinary people.

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About the Author

Maria Chernysheva primarily explores 19th-century visual culture, with a particular focus on national and pan-European dimensions of historical imagination in the arts and their connections to historical studies, historical fiction, and collections of historical artifacts. Her research also addresses the "feminization of history" in 19th-century culture, visual projects of Russian Orientalism in relation to Russian colonialism in Central Asia, and the concept of mimesis in European artistic theory. After many years of teaching in the Department of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Saint Petersburg State University, she is now a Berlin-based independent scholar and a participant in Smolny Beyond Borders, a liberal arts initiative.

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