

Screenplay for the film "1913 — Ilya Repin. Historical Chronicles with Nikolai Svanidze"
written by Marina Zhukova, translated by AI, and preceded by a summary also written by AI

Screenplay Summary:

The text uses the year 1913 as a symbolic hinge of late imperial Russia: it is the Romanov tercentenary, the year of the “triumph of Russian justice” with the acquittal of Mendel Beilis, and at the same time the last peaceful year before war and revolution.

It begins with the attack on Ilya Repin’s famous painting Ivan the Terrible and His Son Ivan at the Tretyakov Gallery, when Abram Balashov slashes the faces of the tsar and tsarevich on the canvas. Repin restores the painting himself but ruins it with a new lilac-tinted head for Ivan; the new director, Igor Grabar, wipes this off with kerosene and repaints the damaged sections. This episode is interpreted as a symbolic assassination attempt on the “first Romanov,” since Ivan’s mother Anastasia was an ancestor of the dynasty.

In parallel, the text paints a broad portrait of the Romanov court during the tercentenary celebrations: an overgrown, greedy, internally divided clan. Nicholas II appears as a weak figure, dependent on domineering uncles and cousins, influenced by Grand Duke Nicholas Nikolaevich, the ultra-right Black Hundreds, the empress and Rasputin. Money scandals, unequal marriages punished by exile, and mystical fads all show a decaying elite cut off from the country.

Anti-Jewish policy is embodied by Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovich, linked to the Kishinev pogrom and the Khodynka tragedy. As a counterpoint, the text recounts in detail the Beilis trial in Kiev: a fabricated charge of ritual murder, heavy pressure from nationalist politicians, and yet a final acquittal by a jury of peasants and petty clerks, whose names are listed one by one as a tribute to ordinary Russians who preserved the honour of justice.

Repin himself appears as a “man of the sixties” – a child of the liberal reforms of Alexander II – politically ambivalent but artistically radical. His conflict with the powerful conservative Pobedonostsev over Ivan the Terrible shows how dangerous it was to depict a tsar as a mere criminal and to strip the monarchy of its sacred aura. Later, in old age, Repin lives in Finland, courted by the Soviet authorities and writing to Voroshilov for financial help while his daughter in Soviet Russia is harassed, stripped of her belongings and threatened with deportation. Stalin orders that Repin be supported, but the painter never returns.

The narrative also dwells on Repin’s contradictory personality: self-critical, sometimes brutal towards his own work, notorious for love affairs with models and patronesses, surrounded by strong, eccentric women and haunted by a legend that his portraits bring death to their sitters.

All of this is set against an impressive economic backdrop: by 1913 Russia is an industrial power with high growth, rising wages, cheap food and expanding public education. Foreign experts predict that if peace and Stolypin’s reforms continued, Russia could dominate Europe by mid-century. Instead, war is approaching, Russia’s military lag behind Germany is fatal, and the Romanov tercentenary celebrations feel hollow and forced. The text ends by recalling the lavish “historical ball” at the Winter Palace in 1903 – a dazzling masquerade in 17th-century costume which, in retrospect, looks like the “Last Tavern at the City Gates” before the fall of the old regime.

Screenplay:

1913 – Ilya Repin

1913 was the year of the celebration of the 300th anniversary of the House of Romanov.

1913 was the year of the triumph of Russian justice. Twelve Orthodox jurors delivered a verdict of acquittal for the Jew Menachem Mendel Beilis.

1913 was the last peaceful year.

For the great Russian painter Ilya Yefimovich Repin, 1913 unexpectedly brought the chance to repaint his most famous picture.

On 16 January 1913, right in the midst of the celebrations of the Romanov tercentenary, a young man, an icon painter from among the Old Believers, Abram Balashov, struck three knife blows into the faces of the tsar and the tsarevich. One blow hit the face of the tsar – from the middle of the temple, cutting across the ear, down to the shoulder; the second blow went across the tsarevich's nose; the third sliced his cheek, the knife slipped and injured the fingers of his right hand.

This savage attack took place in Moscow, in the Tretyakov Gallery. The victims of the attack were Ivan the Terrible and his son Ivan. More precisely, the painting of the great Russian artist Ilya Yefimovich Repin.

Ilya Semyonovich Ostroukhov, who was then head of the Tretyakov Gallery, immediately resigned. In fact, it is quite possible to see a political subtext in this resignation.

The point is that the episode of 16 January 1913 was a symbolic, yet successful, attempt on the very first Romanov. Ivan, killed by his father, Ivan Vasilievich the Terrible, was the son of the tsar's first and beloved wife, Anastasia Romanovna Zakharina-Yurieva. And Tsarina Anastasia happened to be the first cousin once removed of the first tsar of the Romanov dynasty, Michael.

Only the festivities marking 300 years of Romanov rule kept the deeply mystical Nicholas II from directing the highest attention to what had happened in the Tretyakov.

Repin went to the Tretyakov, carried out the restoration himself, and left.

It should be said that Ilya Yefimovich had a particular passion for repainting his old works, and he always repainted them for the worse. As a result of this "author's restoration", Ivan the Terrible received an entirely new head, in a hideous lilac color scheme.

This sight was discovered by the artist, restorer and new Tretyakov director Igor Grabar. He grabbed some cotton wool, soaked it in kerosene and wiped away all the fresh paint. Then, over the course of a week, he carried out a second restoration in watercolors. It ended with a banquet at the restaurant "Prague."

All the regulars were there, headed by Shalyapin and Bunin. The owner, Tararykin, had once won the restaurant building in a billiard game. After the Revolution the restaurant was taken from him and turned into a public canteen of Mosselprom, and in the 1930s it became a special canteen where Stalin's bodyguards liked to have lunch. At that time the Arbat was the main government route along which Stalin travelled from the Kremlin to his so-called "near dacha" in Kuntsevo.

And while in Moscow, at the restaurant "Prague," they were celebrating the healing of Ivan the Terrible and his son Ivan, in St Petersburg the Romanovs, on the occasion of their 300th

anniversary, were receiving congratulations from various deputations. This took place in the hall next to the Malachite Drawing Room.

The whole enormous Romanov family stood behind the emperor and the empress. Unlike his father, Emperor Alexander III, Nicholas was not and could not be the patriarch of this clan. His sister Olga said that “the countless uncles and cousins had slipped the leash”, that Nicholas was unable to make decisions without looking back at them.

The family was huge. Prime Minister Witte said: “We’ve bred a whole herd of all kinds of grand dukes.” They got married. Their wives demanded money. Some grand dukes, once married, continued to live with their mistresses abroad. In such cases the wives demanded even more money. The budget of the Ministry of the Imperial Court was increased for that. Yet even that was not enough.

So it was, for instance, with the wife of the third son of the Grand Duchess Maria Nikolaevna, Yuri of Leuchtenberg. His wife, the daughter of Prince Nicholas of Montenegro, wished that the yearly indemnity which Turkey paid to Russia, in the amount of three million roubles, should not go to the Russian state budget but straight into her hands, for her native Montenegro – an ally of Russia. The Ministry of Finance refused, but the tsar said: “What can we do, I have already promised.” Incidentally, it was this lady and her sister who brought Rasputin to court.

Besides money there were other paths of influence. Grand Duke Nicholas Nikolaevich, Nicholas’s uncle, had been infected with mysticism even before the empress reintroduced this virus into the family. It was this Grand Duke Nicholas Nikolaevich who was the tsar’s partner in table-turning séances. And the trouble was not only the table-turning. Nicholas Nikolaevich was in the closest contact with the ultra-right “Union of the Russian People.” From there came the tsar’s attraction to this pogrom-prone nationalist organization.

In October 1905, horrified by the revolution, Grand Duke Nicholas Nikolaevich shouted: “Sign the constitution!” Later, his Black Hundred friends at a rally in the St Petersburg Manege were already yelling: “Down with the constitution!”, planning a street march under this slogan, and he, Grand Duke Nicholas Nikolaevich, decided to become honorary chairman of the Union of the Black Hundreds. But then this was judged not entirely safe.

The only thing, perhaps, that the tsar managed successfully in matters of family was exiling from the homeland those grand dukes who contracted unequal marriages. Nicholas punished a mésalliance strictly, by banning them from entering Russia. There is no doubt that after 1917 these exiles remembered their relative with a grateful word.

The only thing that united the Romanovs was their common dislike of the empress.

On 24 February 1913, everyone who came with congratulations first approached Empress Alexandra Feodorovna, bowed, kissed her hand, and bowed again. Only then did they go to the dowager empress Maria Feodorovna and then to the tsar. The young empress sat, but Maria Feodorovna remained standing the whole time.

By today’s restaurant standards, the menu of the ceremonial dinner at the Winter Palace on 24 February 1913 looks modest:

Turtle soup and game soup.

Assorted pirozhki.

Sterlet from the Dvina in champagne.

Moscow-style veal fillet.
Cold duck.
Orange sauce.
“Victoria” punch.
Roast: French poulards and pheasants.
Dessert: peaches à l’impériale.

The musical programme that evening included, among other things, the duet of Masha and Dubrovsky.

Speaking of Pushkin. Although the grand duke Mikhail Mikhailovich, grandson of Nicholas I, was forbidden to enter Russia because he had married Pushkin’s granddaughter, the Romanovs undoubtedly loved Pushkin. There is a photograph showing the then heir to the throne, Nicholas, in the role of Eugene Onegin. In the role of Tatiana – Grand Duchess Elizabeth Feodorovna.

There is also a photograph in which Elizabeth Feodorovna’s husband, Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovich, is dressed as Tsarevich Fyodor in “Tsar Boris,” based on the drama by Alexei Konstantinovich Tolstoy. In Repin’s painting “The Session of the State Council,” however, he wears a very different costume. The painting was displayed in the Mariinsky Palace, where the State Council met in 1903.

In 1903, in Kishinev, one of the most terrible pogroms in Russian Jewish history was orchestrated. The chief ideologue of this shameful line of Russian domestic policy was precisely Sergei Alexandrovich. His influence on Nicholas in this respect was enormous and undeniable. Besides that, full responsibility for the bloodshed on Khodynka Field on the day of Nicholas’s coronation lay with Sergei Alexandrovich. In a certain sense Sergei Alexandrovich was a great “internationalist” – because for him human life, whatever the nationality, had no value at all. The grand duke was killed by the terrorist Kalyaev in February 1905. The Romanov descendants in their memoirs usually pass his figure over in silence. Here is a rare recollection in which he appears: Nicholas II’s cousin Dmitry was born on Sergei Alexandrovich’s estate, Ilyinskoye, near Moscow. It was this Dmitry who would take part in the murder of Rasputin in 1916, together with Felix Yusupov, Sergei Alexandrovich’s neighbour by estate. Dmitry’s mother died in childbirth. The child was frail and weak. No one thought he would survive. On doctors’ advice, Sergei Alexandrovich personally bathed the baby in warm broth.

30 October 1913 turned out to be the day of posthumous defeat for the antisemitic grand duke. On that day, at a trial in Kiev, Menachem Mendel Beilis was acquitted by a jury.

In October 1913, a sensational trial ended, which entered Russian history as “the Beilis case.” The investigation had lasted two years. The only suspect was Menachem Mendel Beilis, of the Jewish faith, father of five children. He was accused of the ritual murder of a boy, the Orthodox Christian Andrei Yushchinsky, in order to obtain Christian blood for baking matzah for the Jewish Passover. This version was treated by the official investigation as the only one. The faction of extreme nationalist Black Hundreds in the Duma, led by Purishkevich, took up this matter. Members of the youth Black Hundred organisation “The Double-Headed Eagle” carried out their own investigation.

On the last day of the trial, while the hearing was going on in the Kiev District Court, a memorial service for the slain Andrei Yushchinsky was held in St Sophia Cathedral. The square was filled with pogrom-minded crowds in a state of extreme tension, ready for anything.

The last to speak in court was Beilis's lawyer, Vladimir Maklakov. His own brother, Interior Minister Nikolai Maklakov, stood on the other side of the barricades in this case.

The lawyer addressed the jurors: "We all must beg you for one thing: take care not to condemn an innocent man. That would be a sin on your conscience; it would be a disgrace for Russian justice. And this disgrace will never be forgotten."

Now to the jurors who were to decide Beilis's fate in the Kiev District Court. When the writer Vladimir Korolenko, who did not doubt for a moment that the charges were fabricated, saw the jurors, he was seized with despair. They were seven peasants and five petty townsmen and minor officials who could hardly make sense of the conflicting psychiatric reports and complex theological expert opinions. Yet it was precisely these jurors who found Beilis not guilty.

I want to name these Russian jurors who acquitted Menachem Mendel Beilis:

Mitrofan Kutovoy – peasant,

Savva Mostitsky – cabman of Kiev,

Georgy Ogloblin – official,

Konstantin Sinkovsky – postal employee,

Porfiry Klimenko – worker at the Demidov wine warehouse,

Mitrofan Tertychny – peasant,

Pyotr Kalitenko – employee of the Kiev railway station,

Faust Savenko – peasant,

Arkhip Oleinik – peasant,

Iosaf Sokolovsky – peasant,

Ivan Perepelitsa – house-owner on Voznesensky descent,

Makary Melnikov – provincial secretary.

Let us return to Ilya Yefimovich Repin's painting "The Session of the State Council."

In the left part of the painting – incidentally painted by Repin's pupil Kustodiev – we see the ober-procurator of the Holy Synod, the unforgettable, because extremely reactionary, political long-liver Konstantin Petrovich Pobedonostsev. He was the servant of three masters, three Romanovs – Alexander II, Alexander III and Nicholas II. And what a servant! Thanks to him, the first Russian Constitution was scuttled on the eve of the assassination of Alexander II; he prevented its adoption in the first days of Alexander III's reign. He was an admirer of police methods because otherwise reforms would be needed. Witte writes of this:

"This is his great sin, Pobedonostsev's; otherwise the history of Russia would have taken another course and we would not be living through this shameful, vile anarchist revolution."

Pobedonostsev had special relations both with Repin and with Ivan the Terrible.

In February 1885, the painting popularly known as "Ivan the Terrible Killing His Son" appeared at the Peredvizhniki (Wanderers) travelling exhibition in St Petersburg. Alexander III visited the exhibition, and he liked Repin's work. Pobedonostsev also went to the exhibition, became suspicious, and that same day, 15 February 1885, wrote to the emperor:

"At the travelling exhibition a painting has been hung which offends the governmental feeling of many: it is difficult to understand what idea the artist has in mind in presenting with such realism precisely such moments. And why Ivan the Terrible here? One can find no motive other than a tendency of a certain kind."

The all-hearing ear of Pobedonostsev clearly picked up what the visitors to the exhibition were saying – or rather, thinking – as they stood before Repin’s canvas. And what they thought was: “But this is regicide.” That is, by painting a tsar who kills his son, Repin stripped him of any aura of sacredness, holiness, inviolability. He made him simply a human being who had broken the moral law. In other words, the tsar was nothing more than a criminal, a murderer.

The vigilant Pobedonostsev hit the mark. Because Leo Tolstoy, after visiting the exhibition, wrote to Repin about Ivan the Terrible: “He is the vilest and most pitiful of murderers. Good, very good.”

Rumours began to spread that the painting would be banned. And indeed, when the exhibition opened in Moscow, Tretyakov received a notice from the Moscow chief of police:

“My dear Pavel Mikhailovich, His Majesty the Emperor has most graciously ordered that Repin’s painting is not to be admitted to exhibitions and not to be permitted to be shown to the public.”

Tretyakov, who had bought the painting, was then required to sign an undertaking to carry out this imperial order.

For three months the painting was kept in a separate room. And only the intercession before the emperor of influential people of a different stamp from Pobedonostsev lifted the ban.

One has the feeling that Repin himself never fully decided what had moved him to paint the picture “The Parricide” – its original title.

Sometimes Repin said that everyone had been shaken by the murder of Alexander II in March 1881, that the whole year had passed under a bloody sign, and that was when he remembered the story of Ivan the Terrible.

At other times, Repin told a very different story: he had gone to Spain, watched the spectators at bullfights, and realised how much the spectacle of killing and blood attracted the crowd. He returned home, painted a bloody scene, “Ivan the Terrible and His Son”, and once again became convinced that a picture full of blood enjoyed great success.

Repin’s remark about the crowd and blood deserves attention. It may sound cynical, provocative, with a whiff of 21st-century mass culture – but that is only at first glance.

Ilya Yefimovich Repin was a “man of the sixties.” That is what he called himself. The term appeared in the 19th century, although we are accustomed to it in the 20th. In the 20th century, “the people of the sixties” were those who emerged in culture and politics after the 20th Party Congress, on the crest of Khrushchev’s post-Stalin thaw. The “men of the sixties” of the 19th century were the children of the era of Alexander II, who abolished serfdom. But the word “sixties people” really came into everyday use during the harsh years of Alexander III. Repin, as a man of the sixties, did not remember the reformer Alexander II with kind words; he spoke instead about democratic ideals in general, and often recalled Gogol. In this he was undoubtedly right, because what Russia sorely lacked in the “stable” era of Alexander III was Gogol.

After 1917, Pobedonostsev’s letter to Alexander III about “Ivan the Terrible” was published. Here is Repin’s reaction after reading it: “Pobedonostsev is a nonentity, a policeman. And Alexander III is an ass, through and through. The Russian catastrophe he prepared becomes clearer and clearer. Compared to him, the illiterate muzhik Rasputin was a genius; he provided a fitting finale for them all – it all ended, despite how many had warned them.”

To continue the theme, here is a fragment from Repin’s memoirs: “Once, the painter Galkin and I were invited to the palace to paint the tsarina, Alexandra Feodorovna. And out comes to us this

German woman. Her expression is snakelike. She sits there, biting her thin, haughty lips. That is how I painted her: evil and pregnant. The Minister of the Court comes up to me and says: 'What are you doing? Look here,' and shows me Galkin's portrait.

Galkin has painted a blue-eyed fairy.

'Forgive me, I don't know how to do that,' I said meekly, and asked with many bows to be allowed to go home."

As for another of his subjects, the "Barge Haulers", Repin was just as frank: "I must honestly confess that the everyday life and pay of the barge haulers did not interest me in the least. Not in the least, no."

God knows how many years after painting "Barge Haulers on the Volga" – to be precise, 53 years later – Ilya Yefimovich Repin wrote a letter to Voroshilov. This happened in September 1926, after a group of Soviet artists, on instructions from the GPU, came to Repin to persuade him to return to his homeland. It should be noted that Repin had never truly left his homeland: long before the Revolution he had settled at a dacha in Finland, then part of the Russian Empire. There he remained after the homeland, in the guise of the Bolsheviks, had left Finland in peace for a time – until 1940. The GPU promised Repin a full pension if he came to the USSR. It also advised him to turn to Voroshilov for additional help.

And so Repin writes:

"Highly placed comrade Kliment Efremovich!

For a long time I did not dare write to you, but necessity forced me. The matter is serious.

In my life I have been fortunate, and I have never asked for anything. My work provided for me, and I already had an estate, my own apartment in Piter (Petersburg), and, despite my growing family, I had about 200,000 roubles in gold in the State Bank and the Moscow Merchant Bank.

After 81 years of life – no estate, no money. But I still had friends. They began inviting me to Piter, even came to see me, saying:

'Make an effort, they will give you back your estate, your money, and your apartment in Piter.'

Forgive me.

The elderly painter Ilya Repin, author of the 'Barge Haulers' and the 'Zaporozhian Cossacks'."

It must be said that the imaginary painting "Repin Writes a Letter to Voroshilov" would be in no way inferior to "The Zaporozhians Writing a Letter to the Turkish Sultan." It is a pity Repin never painted such a self-portrait. He was in his eighty-second year, and the situation was very difficult. That situation appears in a GPU memo in the Repin file. It concerns the fate of Repin's daughter, Tatyana Ilyinichna, who lived in the former Repin estate near Vitebsk. For nine years a school had been housed free of charge in Repin's house. Repin's daughter worked there as a teacher until she gave it up because she lost her hearing.

Here is the GPU memo:

"On 5 February of this year, all of Repina's property was inventoried (including the underwear on her body, baby's diapers, etc.), with the warning that it would be confiscated. T. I. Repina was ordered to transport timber herself from the Nikolaev state farm. When she appeared at the village soviet to announce that she could not perform the required work but offering the use of her horse, she was searched and held under arrest until evening. At the same time a search was carried out in the house (as in all houses subject to the individual tax). On 31 March, T. I. Repina was summoned to the village soviet to fill in a questionnaire for possible deportation to Siberia."

It was against this background that Repin wrote to Voroshilov. Voroshilov asked Stalin for advice:
“Dear Koba!

I am sending you Repin’s letter for your information. I ask you very much, if it is not too troublesome, to jot down a couple of words on this matter. I shake your hand.
Voroshilov.”

On the letter is Stalin’s resolution:

“Klim! I think that Soviet power must support Repin by all possible means.
Greetings. I. Stalin.”

Voroshilov wrote to Repin:

“...I hope that the Workers’ and Peasants’ Government will do everything necessary to satisfy your requests.”

Later, Voroshilov wrote again to Repin:

“Your personal life and that of your relatives will be fully provided for by the state.”

And he also wrote to the painter Brodsky, Repin’s favourite pupil:

“What worries me most is Repin’s White Guard entourage. Act as you think best, but in such a way that I. E. is transferred back to his homeland.”

Repin in turn wrote to Brodsky that he was proud of his correspondence with Voroshilov, and that he bequeathed his letters to a museum. Later, his old acquaintance Kornei Ivanovich Chukovsky was dispatched to Repin in Kuokkala. On returning to Moscow, Chukovsky said that Repin would not come to the USSR. During the Winter War, when the Red Army passed through Kuokkala, Repin’s diaries fell into the hands of the NKVD. In them was the note: “Chukovsky came and tried to persuade me to return to Russia. He strongly advised me not to.”

In fact, Voroshilov and Stalin had no reason to be upset that Repin did not come to them and never thought of painting their portraits. Sometimes Repin’s portraits turned out rather ill-omened: often they carried a sinister force. Whoever he painted would promptly die. He painted Mussorgsky – Mussorgsky died at once. He painted Pirogov – Pirogov died. He wanted to paint Tyutchev – Tyutchev immediately fell ill and died. He painted Garshin – Garshin threw himself down a stairwell. Finally, Repin received a commission for a portrait of Stolypin. Hardly had Repin finished the portrait when Stolypin went to Kiev, where he was shot almost at once.

In general, Ilya Yefimovich Repin was a highly contradictory person. Here is one of his recollections:

“Once a buyer came to me. I talked him out of it: ‘It’s a rotten picture, not worth buying.’ And he left.”

“My God, what filth!” he wrote of one of his works.

Or: “Once I went into a shop, and they said to me: ‘Would you care for a Repin canvas?’

And I said: ‘To hell with it.’”

He was harsh with women as well. He admitted that long attachments bored him: a year was enough, two years – far too much.

He considered himself free in relation to his wife, but went on being jealous of her. Especially of the son of the famous painter Perov, author of “The Troika” and “The Last Tavern at the City Gates.” At the same time he was ashamed of the disapproval of Kramskoi and especially of Tretyakov.

Repin's attachments were extremely varied. Most often they were society ladies whom he painted. Sometimes he suffered terribly, as when he fell in love with his pupil Zvantseva, who made him forget at once the baroness Varvara Ivanovna Ixkull.

Relatives of the baroness Ixkull on her husband's side are depicted by Repin in "The Session of the State Council." As for Varvara Ivanovna herself, after Repin left her she became a writer and publisher, with Tolstoy's personal blessing. An admirer of Gorky, she had him released from arrest. During the First World War, when she was already over sixty, she organised military hospitals, fed the poor, and served as a nurse right at the front. She was awarded the Cross of St George.

So, after the baroness came Zvantseva. Repin left her for Princess Maria Klavdievna Tennisheva, who was Diaghilev's patron. And Maria Klavdievna in turn yielded her place to Natalia Borisovna Nordman-Severova, who had her dacha at Kuokkala.

Chukovsky, who often stayed at "Penaty" (Repin's house), wrote in his diary:

"I was passing by Repin's house and heard someone shouting at the top of their lungs: 'You wretch, get out!' It was Repin's wife shouting at Madame Nordman. When she saw me, she was embarrassed.

A fool and full of notions – some kind of Manilov in a skirt. On a mirror that had broken, she made Repin paint canaries to cover the crack. Repin and canaries! That's the perfect symbol of her influence over him. And you should see their toilets! Even the dogs' kennels, Repin painted them."

At first, Ilya Yefimovich and Natalia Borisovna were keen on vegetarianism, and then they took up dancing in earnest.

Tolstoy's sister, Maria Nikolaevna, long remembered how the Repin couple would dance to the gramophone at night at Yasnaya Polyana, just above Leo Nikolaevich's room.

The painter Igor Grabar, in his 1937 book on Repin, speaks with indecent harshness about Natalia Borisovna Nordman: "Repin began to tire of her guardianship and was not overly grieved when she left for Italy, where she died."

One might ask: who is Repin, after all? Just a great Russian painter. But the story around him actually tells us quite a bit about the ruling family. In his letter to Emperor Alexander III about the painting "Ivan the Terrible...", Konstantin Petrovich Pobedonostsev slightly falsified matters when he wrote that Repin's earlier works "were marked by the same vicious tendency and were repulsive." He wrote that so that the tsar would ban the painting. And he got what he wanted: the tsar banned it.

In reality, Pobedonostsev shamelessly intruded into the complicated family relations within the House of Romanov. Let us once again look at Repin's "State Council." On the painting, on Nicholas's right hand sits his uncle, Grand Duke Vladimir Alexandrovich. And it was none other than he, Pobedonostsev's pupil, who commissioned Ilya Yefimovich to paint "Barge Haulers on the Volga."

When he was still not president of the Academy of Arts, but only vice-president, Vladimir Alexandrovich invited Repin to show him his sketches. Repin had just returned from the Volga. At the appointed hour the sketches were laid out on the floor of the Academy's conference hall.

Vladimir Alexandrovich immediately pointed at the "Barge Haulers" sketch and said: "Start working up this one for me right away."

In 1917, between the February and October revolutions, on linoleum, Ilya Yefimovich Repin painted what we would now call a remake of his “Barge Haulers on the Volga,” and titled it “The Cattle of Imperialism.” This painting is practically unknown and hangs on straps in the storage vaults of a museum in Tbilisi. Here is Repin’s own explanation of its meaning: “‘Bydlo’ is a Polish word. It means a brutish slave. ‘Bydlo’ is a deeply debased creature. Usually it fawns on its masters. But it quickly turns to violence against these masters when they grow weak.”

The first version of “Barge Haulers on the Volga,” painted to a commission from one of the Romanovs, was exhibited at the Academy in 1873. The grand duke perfectly explained the character of Repin’s figures; he knew them all by name. The painting hung for a long time in his billiard room, and he complained to Repin that the wall was always empty because everyone kept asking to borrow the “Barge Haulers” for various European exhibitions.

Against that background, the opinion of the then Minister of Transport seems amusing. He confided to Repin: “Tell me, for heaven’s sake, what on earth possessed you to paint such a ridiculous picture? Why, I’ve already brought this prehistoric mode of transport almost down to zero. It would be more patriotic not to show these tattered rags to Europe at the world’s fairs.”

We do not know the opinion of another Minister of Transport – later Minister of Finance and then Prime Minister – Sergei Yulyevich Witte, about Repin’s “Barge Haulers on the Volga.” Witte also appears in “The Session of the State Council.” Kornei Ivanovich Chukovsky recalls Repin’s words about Witte: “He’s a genius.”

To a large extent, thanks to the efforts of this statesman, Russian 1913 became what it was. It is precisely the year 1913 – more exactly, Russia’s economic condition in 1913 – that haunted Soviet historical and economic science like a persistent ghost for many Soviet years. All the years of the luxuriant flowering of Soviet power, we kept comparing our economic indicators to those of 1913; despite the passage of time, the year 1913 pursued us obsessively, until its mere mention became almost seditious.

In 1913, Russia had become an industrial power and firmly occupied fourth place in the world. The growth rate of production was 19 percent per year.

The population growth in 1913 was 16 percent – the highest in Europe. Russia covered 56 percent of its domestic needs for machinery and equipment from its own resources.

The chemical industry and energy sector were developing at an accelerated pace. Expenditures of the Ministry of Public Education from 1900 to 1913 increased fivefold and, in 1913, accounted for 14.6 percent of budget spending.

If we recalculate the prices and wages of 1913 in terms of the prices and wages of 1985, we get:

A skilled worker earned about 2,000 roubles a month.

An unskilled labourer – 600–700 roubles.

A specialist engineer – 20,000 roubles.

Now let us recall our wages in 1985. The ultimate dream of a top-flight certified specialist with a degree was 280–320 roubles. The average wage was 100 roubles. And even then, there were no goods in the shops; everything was bought from under the counter, with a markup.

In 1913, domestic Russian investment successfully competed with foreign investment. Foreigners strove to obtain Russian citizenship.

Academician Stanislav Gustavovich Strumilin – an academician since 1931, laureate of the Lenin and State prizes – testified that earnings of workers in large industry ranked second only to those in the United States.

Here are his calculations:

The average annual wage in American manufacturing in 1913 was 573 dollars a year, or 1.84 dollars a day.

Converted into Russian currency, the daily wage was 3 roubles 61 kopecks. In Russia, according to 1913 data, the average annual wage of workers was 300 roubles, or 1 rouble 16 kopecks a day.

From this it was usually concluded that the living standard of Russian workers lagged sharply behind. And so it would be, if one did not compare food prices in the US and in Russia. But the trouble is that in the US in 1913 food cost three times more than in Russia. It turns out then that the wage of a Russian worker in 1913 was only about 15 percent lower than that of his American counterpart.

Here are some food prices in St Petersburg in 1913. Note that prices are given per pud, that is, 16 kilograms of each product:

Meat (first quality) – 9 roubles 38 kopecks per pud.

Pork (first quality) – 8 roubles 22 kopecks per pud.

Frozen crucian carp – 8 roubles 48 kopecks per pud.

Chickens (first quality) – 1 rouble 93 kopecks per pair.

Rye bread – 3 kopecks per funt (a Russian unit of weight equal to 409.5 g).

Eggs – 30 kopecks per dozen.

And now the wages in St Petersburg in the same year, per day:

Navvy – 1 rouble 50 kopecks.

Blacksmith – 2 roubles 26 kopecks.

Metalworker – 2 roubles 63 kopecks.

Unskilled labourer – 1 rouble 24 kopecks.

I repeat, wages are given per day, food prices per pud. Taking into account that neither the unskilled labourer nor the metalworker ate a pud of carp a day, the picture is fairly clear. To be fair, we should add that the spread of prices and wages across Russia, as now, was considerable.

Now, as for Russia's prospects, according to foreign experts.

If things in Russia went on as they had between 1900 and 1912, then by the middle of the 20th century Russia would dominate Europe politically, economically and financially.

There was a separate forecast for agriculture:

Another 25 years of peace and 25 years of land reform in the liberal direction launched under Stolypin, and Russia would have become a different country.

There were no 25 years of peace. One more year of peace remained. Even less.

The economic upsurge of the country made it possible to devote huge sums to the army and navy. In 1913, Russian and French generals were already deep in discussion of a highly exciting topic: General Joffre declared that France, on the 10th day of mobilisation after a declaration of war, would have 1.5 million men concentrated at the front. In response, General Zhilinsky promised that, in 1914, Russia, on the 13th day of mobilisation, would throw 800,000 men against Germany.

After defeat in the Russo-Japanese war, Russia had overcome its loser's complex and was once again becoming a major naval power. However, its lag in the military sphere behind Germany was fatal.

A strange thing. In spite of the excellent background of economic rise, in spite of the waning of the terrorist wave – the last surge of which had been the assassination of Premier Stolypin – in spite of a situation which, let us say, was not bad and rare for Russia, the celebration of the dynasty's 300th anniversary left the Romanovs with a joyless impression.

Nicholas's sister Olga said: "Everything was forced."

Indeed, the empress became so exhausted by the stream of ceremonies that she almost fainted at the ball in the St Petersburg Nobles' Assembly.

On the Volga, the tsar travelled without her. Everything seemed correct. Crowds of peasants came out to have a look at the tsar; some out of curiosity even stepped into the water and stood almost waist-deep.

Some unstable souls fell to their knees to kiss the emperor's shadow as he walked by. But Grand Duke Gavriil Konstantinovich, who watched it all, wrote: "Yes, the invited crowd in the streets and in the theatre shouted 'hurrah', but there was no feeling. Everything was staged."

In Kostroma, the imperial family lived on two steamers. In the mornings they drank coffee in the dining room. Grand Duke Sergei Mikhailovich was constantly in a bad mood and sat gloomily at the table in his old aide-de-camp's cap. He always dressed badly. Sergei Mikhailovich, son of Nicholas's cousin Grand Duke Mikhail Nikolaevich, is also shown in Repin's "State Council."

In the 1960s, his great-grandson, Prince David Chavchavadze, a captain in the US Army working for the CIA, found himself, after yet another divorce, with a bride being sought for him – a lady who had recently left the Soviet Union. The thrice-divorced prince refused to meet her. The lady they wanted to introduce him to was Svetlana Stalin.

In 1913, the tsar arrived in Moscow by train at the Aleksandrovsky (now Belorussky) station. From there he rode on horseback through the city. In front of him rode a squadron of his own personal convoy. Troops lined the streets as a guard of honour. The empress, travelling with the heir, was nervous; her face was blotched red. Grand Duchess Elizabeth Feodorovna rode with the grand duchesses.

Tverskaya Street, along which the procession passed, had been strewn with yellow sand, and the lampposts decorated with flowers and flags. The Moscow nobility gave a ball at the Noble Assembly. A special lift was installed for the empress, because her weak heart made it hard for her to climb the stairs.

Grand Duke Gavriil Konstantinovich sums up in his memoirs: "You did not feel that Russia was celebrating the jubilee of its dynasty. I had the impression that the Romanovs' jubilee passed without any real lift of spirit, and I explain this by the fact that revolution was already in the air."

In reality, the last carefree Romanov celebration was the so-called historical ball in January 1903 at the Winter Palace. Everything after that came "after the ball." The war with Japan began, then revolution, terror, then another war and the end. So the ball of 1903 may indeed be considered the last, and for that reason historical. Although its name came from another source. The point is that the 416 invited guests were required to appear at the Winter Palace in 17th-century court costumes. And they did so. The idea of a costume ball came to the empress on 29 December 1902 at breakfast

with the son of the poet Zhukovsky, Pavel Vasilievich, and the Minister of the Court, Baron Frederiks.

Frederiks himself would appear dressed as Bohdan Khmelnytsky. A dispute arose among them as to the desirability of Peter the Great's reforms of the Russian costume. Zhukovsky maintained that the old Russian dress was aesthetically superior to court uniforms. It was then decided to turn one of the balls into a historical one. The whole of high society rushed to the art galleries of St Petersburg and Moscow, peered at family portraits, leafed through historical works. The museums recorded record attendance in those days.

A hundred people immediately refused to take part in the ball. The cost of the costumes was too high. By decision of the Minister of the Court, some of the costumes were sewn in the workshops of the Imperial Theatres. In addition, for Guards officers especially hard-pressed for money, the administration of the Imperial Theatres promised to buy back the costumes after the ball. Since various historical balls were not uncommon in Russia, the guests rummaged in their trunks and borrowed from each other. Thus Baron Theophil Yegorovich Meyendorff put together his costume of a voivode from Prince Pozharsky's army from borrowed pieces: yellow boots and a helmet from the Sheremetevs, a shining mail shirt and gorget from the Bobrinskys, a curled wig from a certain Olga, and the sword was his own.

Count Sheremetev's costume weighed two puds. He noted this in his diary, together with curses.

Grand Duchess Xenia Alexandrovna wept: "All morning I've been fastening diamonds to my kokoshnik. I haven't any strength left. I'm like an over-driven horse."

After the ball, at the empress's request, all the participants were photographed.

It may seem crude, but in historical retrospect this mad and beautiful ball at the Winter Palace is nothing other than the "Last Tavern at the City Gates." And there is nothing crude about that: this very phrase had already been introduced into Russian cultural usage by the Peredvizhnik painter Perov – the same Perov whose son Repin so jealously suspected with regard to his wife.