

Biographical Paper
Ivan Turgenev, *A Lear of the Steppes*
Jonathan Freilich
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Varvara Lutovinova fled her tyrannical stepfather for the home of her uncle, the owner of a large estate which Ivan the Terrible had granted the family in the 16th century. When her uncle died, she inherited the estate, along with its 5,000 serfs. She was 26 years old. At 29, she was married to a former cavalry officer, dashing and six years her junior, from an aristocratic, but far less wealthy, family, Sergey Turgenev. In 1818, the second of their three children, all boys, was born. Like his brothers, Ivan Turgenev, the eventual author of *A Lear of the Steppes*, grew up on the estate, located in the Russian steppes.

Varvara, an educated woman, was likely an inspiration for strong female characters in Turgenev's works. She was also described as "dominating" and "authoritarian," not least for her creation of a private

police force on her estate, and her use of family separation to punish serfs.

Turgenev's father, often away from the family, wrote him affectionate letters, some encouraging him in his studies of Russian, an unusual preoccupation. Families such as theirs spoke French among themselves, and Russian to serfs. Indeed, it was the estate's majordomo, a serf, who introduced Turgenev to the work of the 18th century poet, Mikhail Kheraskov. (This may give a misleading impression of serfs' literacy. Turgenev disapproved of his mother's later treatment of the majordomo and, when older, stymied his mother's attempt to sell a girl away from her family.)

Turgenev and his brothers were educated mostly on the estate, usually by visiting tutors, though Turgenev's older brother apparently taught him to read English. Turgenev spoke French, English and German, and had read the English Romantic poets, as well as Dickens and Bulwer-Lytton, before his admission to the University of Moscow at the age of 15 – young, even in that era. When Turgenev was 16, his father died prematurely.

After a year at the University of Moscow, Turgenev studied at the Universities of St. Petersburg and Berlin, returning from Berlin to St. Petersburg, strongly influenced by Western ideas, an orientation which much

grieved many of his compatriots, including Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy.

Turgenev's 1852 short story collection, *A Sportsman's Sketches*, includes "Hamlet of the Shchigrovsky District." The novel, *Fathers and Sons*, published in 1862, is often regarded as Turgenev's most lasting work. But its political content inspired such criticism that Turgenev began a self-imposed exile. *Smoke*, his first novel written in Baden-Baden, was published in 1867, and could not have been intended to mollify detractors. It has a love story frame, but much of this short work consists of harsh criticism of reactionary influences in Russia, and contempt and derision for radical reform movements. *Smoke* offended each of its targets, provoking an argument with Dostoyevsky during the latter's visit to Baden-Baden. Tolstoy's challenging Turgenev to a duel – a challenge Tolstoy later withdrew – is too involved a story to explore here.

Turgenev had far less contentious relationships with non-Russian authors, and corresponded with several, including George Sand and Flaubert. Both Joseph Conrad and Henry James considered Turgenev's works far superior to those of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky. James described Turgenev as, "the most touching of writers, the most lovable of men." With such a contrast, it's unsurprising Turgenev made infrequent trips to Russia,

spending most of the remainder of his life in Baden-Baden and Paris. But, after Turgenev died at his house near Paris in 1883, his body was returned to St. Petersburg for burial.

Main sources for this paper were:

Turgenev, His Life and Times by Leonard Schapiro

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ivan-Sergeyevich-Turgenev>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ivan_Turgenev

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