

Making Sense of Autocracy

The Example of Ivan the Terrible

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Ivan IV (1530-1584, reg. 1533-1584) is one of the most prominent rulers in Russian History and the first to be crowned as Tsar (1547). Historic sources, professional historiography and popular traditions present disparate accounts of Ivan's complex personality: he was and still is described as intelligent and devout, yet given to rages and prone to episodic outbreaks of mental illness. On one such outburst, the Tsar beat and unpremeditatedly killed his groomed and chosen heir, Ivan Ivanovich. This left the Tsardom to be passed to Ivan's young-er son, the weak and intellectually disabled Feodor I, and led to the famous times of troubles, perhaps the biggest crisis of autocracy up to its end at the beginning of the 20th century.¹

Ivan's legacy is complex: he was, at least in the beginning of his reign, an able diplomat, a patron of arts and trade, founder of Russia's first Print Yard. Like his grandfather Ivan III (reg. 1462-1505),² he was considered a reformer in the interest of a centralized state. But he is also remembered for his paranoiac suspiciousness and cruel persecution not only of the high nobility and but also of other subjects, such as those from the hierarchy of the church. Therefore memories on Ivan IV differ through times and contexts and were used for various purposes. Ivan stands for the long lasting discussion on the periodization of Russian History – his reign represents a transformation period from the Middle Ages into an Early Modern Period.³

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- 1 Overviews of his life and reign: KÄMPFER, 1995; PAVLOV/PERRIE, 2003; MADARIAGA, 2005; SKRYNNIKOV, 2006; FLORJA, 2009.
 - 2 A still topic account of his reign in a western language is FENNELL, 1961; with an emphasis on the concept of his rule: ZIMIN, 1982, p. 55-75.
 - 3 CHERNIAVSKI, 1968; MARTIN, 1995, p. 327-371.

The example of Tsar Ivan is therefore worth considering when the ‘making of sense’ as an analytical category is being discussed in a connection between cultural political history and on a biographical approach:

1. Ivan as an individual and ruler in his “Lebenswelt”⁴ tried to give meaning and sense to his actions and his life as a whole.

2. As a ruler, he perceived all his actions as part of being Tsar and the concept of autocracy which he and his advisors developed in the mid-16th century. Ivan reflected intensively on his practices and crucial points of his life, to put in modern terms, on his biography *in toto*. He did so in his correspondences with other monarchs such as the Polish king Stefan Bathory or the English Queen Elisabeth.⁵ He discussed essentials of faith and belief in public disputations, as with the Jesuit Antonio Possevino or the Bohemian Brother Jan Rokyta. Ivan was the first and the last Tsar who did so up to the Peter the Great at the beginning of the 18th century.⁶

3. Ivan and his advisors used various and interrelated media to communicate their sense of rule embodied in the chosen practices. They initiated chronicle writing. The first prominent example is the “Stepennaja kniga”, the “book of steps”, which made Ivan the telos of the Rurikid-dynasty, founded not by the Viking Rurik, but by a legendary brother of the Roman Emperor Augustus, called Prus. The main “steps”, i.e. rulers up to the rule of Ivan were Vladimir the Saint, who is said to have baptized the Rus’ in 988, Alexander Nevsky who fought successfully against the Latins – the Swedes and the Livonian branch of the Teutonic knights in 1240 and 1242 – and Ivan III as the Unifier of the Russian lands and ender of the so-called Tatar yoke.⁷ The second prominent example is the Book of tsars, “Carstvennaja kniga”, to which I shall return later. Ivan also used icon-painting and the newly imported technique of printing to spread his sense of rule and self-representation as a ruler.

4. Thus, Ivan communicated with his subjects and – this was new for Muscovy – with Monarchs and representatives, with powerful and economic elites all over Europe. All communication partners and addressed audiences reacted in specific ways: the peasants and urban dwellers within the Tsarist realm cre-

4 VIERHAUS, 1995.

5 LUBIMENKO, 1914.

6 There is a long lasting controversy on the question whether the correspondence between the Tsar and his former trustee prince Andrei Kursbky is original. Whether true or not, there can be no doubt, that Ivan was much more learned than his predecessors.

7 HUNT, 1993; HECKER, 2003 and, recently the monumental work of USAČEV, 2009.

ated popular folk songs, tales and myths which differed by regions and which contributed to an image of an autocrat of great persistence.⁸ European men of war, envoys and merchants produced accounts and handbooks for travelling Muscovy or, especially a mass of leaflets during the Livonian War (1558-1582), giving a vivid and deliberately crucial picture of Ivan as a person and a ruler. Ivan became well-known as Grozny i.e. the Terrible among his contemporaries.

On the basis of these brief considerations I shall discuss three fields of self-shaping and sense making of Ivan to conclude with the legacy of the Tsar in what we call “Geschichtspolitik”, that is the construction and use of history by the state.

The First Example: The Coronation of an Autocrat

Since 1533, at the age of the three, Ivan was Grand duke of Muscovy, a state which took shape in the second half of the saeculum before. This Ivan, under the influence of the strong Metropolit Makarij, was crowned with Monomakh’s Cap at the Cathedral of the Dormition at age 16 on 16th January 1547.⁹ He was the first person to be crowned as “Tsar of All the Russias”, hence, claiming the ancestry of Kievan Rus. Prior to that, rulers of Muscovy were crowned as Grand Princes, although Ivan III the Great, his grandfather, styled himself “tsar” in his correspondence. This was the denomination for the Tatar khans as well as for the Byzantine Emperors. Therefore, the long lasting discussion about the roots of Russian autocracy seems to be somewhat artificial.¹⁰ Both types of rule relied on the total subordination of the subjects, but were both in part suitable to function as a model for the Muscovite-like autocracy. Here, Ivan IV undertook a new step.

By being crowned Tsar and implementing the new proceedings, Ivan was sending a message to the world and to Russia: he was now the one and only supreme ruler of the country, and his will was not to be questioned. The new title not only secured the throne, but also granted Ivan a new dimension of power, one intimately tied to religion. He was now a “divine” leader appointed to enact God’s will; “church texts described Old Testament kings as ‘Tsars’ and Christ as the Heavenly Tsar.” The newly appointed title was then passed on from gen-

8 PERRIE, 1987.

9 In Detail on the circumstances and the ceremony: NITSCHKE, 1972, p. 259-268; see also MILLER, 1967.

10 Comprehensive interpretation by: KLUG, 1998.

eration to generation, “succeeding Muscovite rulers [...] benefited from the divine nature of the power of the Russian monarch [...] crystallized during Ivan’s reign,” to quote the Russian Historian Sergei Bogatyrev.¹¹ This self-perception of his rule and divine leadership caused Ivan conscious to discuss his faith and his opinion of rule with Habsburg envoys such as the aforementioned Antonio Possevino.¹²

As for the title and the concept, one can state that the ceremony, as were others, was a mixture of byzantine and tatar elements with features of the coronation ceremonies at the court of the Habsburg Emperor. He was the one whom Ivan considered to be the main political rival, whereas the kings of Poland or the Khan of the Crimea were perceived as dangerous but not of equal rank.¹³ These eclectic mixture of elements in the coronation were not combined by chance, but, as already Peter Nitsche found out without using the wording of cultural history,¹⁴ created a unique form of symbolic representation to be followed by the Tsars up to Peter the Great.

The Second Example: Making Sense through Reform and Expansion

The early part of Ivan’s reign was one of peaceful reforms and modernization.¹⁵ Ivan revised the law code (*sudebnik*), created a standing army with firearms (the so called *streltsy*), established the (*Zemsky*) Sobor or assembly of the land, a public, consensus-building assembly, the council of selected nobles (known as the Chosen Council), and confirmed the position of the Church with the Council of the Hundred Chapters, which unified the rituals and ecclesiastical regulations of the entire country. He introduced local self-government to rural regions, mainly in the northeast of Russia, populated by the state peasantry.¹⁶

On Ivan’s order in 1553, the Moscow Print Yard was established and the first printing press was introduced to Russia. The 1550s and 1560s saw the printing of several religious books in Russian. The new technology provoked discontent

11 BOGATYREV, 2006, p. 263.

12 NITSCHÉ, 1991.

13 This rivalry can also be seen in the adoption of the double headed eagle: ALEF, 1966.

14 NITSCHÉ, 1972, p. 268.

15 For this period still useful: ZIMIN, 1960.

16 BOGATYREV, 2006, p. 253-255; MARTIN, 1995, p. 340-347.

with traditional scribes, which led to the Print Yard being burned in an arson attack and the first Russian “Gutenbergs”, the printers Ivan Fedorov and Pyotr Mstislavets being forced to flee from Moscow to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Nevertheless, the printing of books resumed from 1568 onwards. In a European comparison, Muscovy introduced Book-printing under the guidance of Tsar and church late and restricted, yet earlier than Norway, to name just one example.¹⁷ Other events of this period include the introduction of the first laws restricting the mobility of the peasants, which would eventually lead to serfdom, persisting up to the middle of the 19th century.

The early one and a half decade of his rule was also a successful period in terms of expansion. While Ivan IV was a minor, armies of the Kazan Khanate, the Islamic Tatar-statehood from the Middle Volga, repeatedly raided the northeast of Russia. In the summer of 1552 Ivan IV led a strong Russian army towards Kazan. The last siege of the Tatar capital commenced in August. Kazan finally fell in October, its fortifications were razed, and much of the population massacred. About 60,000-100,000 Russian prisoners and slaves were released. The Tsar celebrated his victory over Kazan by building several churches with oriental features, the most famous of which is the Saint Basil’s Cathedral on Red Square in Moscow.¹⁸

The hagiographic chronicle on the “History of Kazan”, describing the conquest as a successful conquest of the autocrat Ivan as the leader of Christianity, became one of the canonic texts, in which the grandeur of the Russian Empire and of its Tsars was founded: A holy crusade, exercised by the first Russian Tsar, to protect Christianity.¹⁹

In fact, the fall of Kazan had as its primary effect in the outright annexation of the Middle Volga. The Bashkirs accepted Ivan IV’s authority two years later. In 1556 Ivan annexed the Astrakhan Khanate and destroyed the largest slave market on the river Volga. These conquests complicated the migration of the nomadic hordes from Asia to Europe through Volga. As a result of the Kazan campaigns, Muscovy was transformed into the multinational and multi-faith state of Russia, the road to Siberia was open, and its conquest started in the last years of Ivan’s reign. Thus, Ivan brought three more Tsardoms under his crown.

The 1560s brought hardships to Russia that led to the dramatic change of Ivan’s policies. Russia was devastated by a combination of drought and famine, Polish-Lithuanian raids, Tatar invasions and the sea trading blockade carried

17 BACHTIAROV, 1890, p. 73-81.

18 PELENSKI, 1974.

19 KÄMPFER, 1969; KUSBER, 2010, p. 208-210.

out by the Swedes, Poles and the Hanseatic League.²⁰ His first wife, Anastasia Romanovna, died in 1560, and her death was suspected to be caused by poisoning. This personal tragedy deeply hurt Ivan and is thought to have affected his personality, if not his mental health.²¹

The Third Example: Making Sense through Terror with the Oprichnina

On December 3, 1564, Ivan IV departed Moscow for the some twenty kilometers distant Aleksandrova Sloboda, a very famous scene in the film of Sergey Eisenstein about the Tsar from the 1940s. From there Ivan sent two letters in which he announced his abdication because of the alleged embezzlement and treason of the aristocracy and clergy. The boyar court was unable to rule in the absence of Ivan and feared the wrath of the Muscovite citizenry. An envoy departed for Aleksandrovskaya Sloboda to beg Ivan to return to the throne. Ivan IV agreed to return on the condition of being granted absolute power.²² He demanded that he should be able to execute and confiscate the estates of traitors without interference from the boyar council or church. Upon this, Ivan decreed the creation of the Oprichnina, a word that was used for a territory of a widow (of a ruler).

The Oprichnina consisted of a separate territory within the borders of Russia, mostly in the territory of the former Novgorod Republic in the north. Ivan held exclusive power over the Oprichnina territory. The Boyar Council ruled the Zemshchina ("land"), the second division of the state. Ivan also recruited a personal guard known as the Oprichniki. The Oprichniki enjoyed social and economic privileges under the Oprichnina. They owed their allegiance and status to Ivan, not to heredity or local bonds. They had special black forms, similar to those of monks. Their horses were decorated with dog heads.²³ One may say he formed an order, in which he acted within a community.

The first wave of persecutions targeted primarily the princely clans of Russia, notably the influential families of Suzdal'. Ivan executed, exiled, or forcibly tonsured prominent members of the boyar clans on questionable accusations of conspiracy. Among those executed were the Metropolitan Philip and prominent

20 On this in detail: KHOROSHEVICH, 2003.

21 MARTIN, 1995, p. 334, 348; MADARIAGA, 2005, p. 131f.

22 PAVLOV/PERRIE, 2003, p. 112f.

23 See the descriptions in: EPSTEIN, 1964.

warlords. In 1566 Ivan extended the Oprichnina to eight central districts. Of the 12,000 nobles there, 570 became Oprichniki, the rest were expelled.²⁴

Under the new political system, the Oprichniki were given large estates, but unlike the previous landlords, could not be held accountable for their actions. These men took virtually all the peasants possessed, forcing them to pay in one year as much as they used to pay in ten. This degree of oppression resulted in increasing cases of peasants fleeing, which in turn led to a drop in the overall production. The price of grain increased by a factor of ten. Conditions worsened due to the 1570 epidemics of plague that killed 10,000 people in Novgorod. The plague killed 600-1000 in Moscow daily.

During the grim conditions of epidemics, famine and the ongoing Livonian war, a war which lasted for 24 years and ended unsuccessfully for Russia with economic decay, Ivan grew suspicious that noblemen of the wealthy city of Novgorod were planning to defect, placing the city itself into the control of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. In 1570 Ivan ordered the Oprichniki to raid the city. The Oprichniki burned and pillaged Novgorod and the surrounding villages, and the city was never to regain its former prominence.²⁵

Casualty figures vary greatly in different sources. The First Pskov Chronicle estimates the number of victims at 60,000. Yet the official death toll named 1,500 of Novgorod's nobility and mentioned only about the same number of lesser people. Many modern researchers estimate the number of victims to range from 2000-3000 (after the famine and epidemics of 1560s the population of Novgorod most likely did not exceed 10,000-20,000). Many survivors were deported elsewhere.

The Oprichnina did not live long after the sack of Novgorod. During the 1571-1572 Russo-Crimean war, Oprichniki failed to prove themselves worthy against a regular army. In 1572, Ivan abolished the Oprichnina and disbanded his Oprichniki.²⁶ However, the terror did not stop. In the last decade of his reign, he continued to persecute, as he perceived it, traitors and enemies among the clergy, urban dwellers and others. On the other hand he begged for forgiveness for his deeds, bestowed the church with large donations for his savior – this especially when he murdered his son in furor after a quarrel in 1582.²⁷ In a way here was the edge of his concept as autocratic ruler. Some weeks before his death he became a monk, following Russian and other European examples.

24 MARTIN, 1995, p. 340-347.

25 IBID., p. 369.

26 MADARIAGA, 2005, p. 368-370.

27 STEINDORFF, 2003; BOGATYREV, 2009.

The Legacy: Making Sense of Ivan's Rule

In the centuries following Ivan's death, historians developed different theories to better understand his reign; but regardless of the perspective through which one chooses to approach this issue, it cannot be denied that Ivan the Terrible changed Russian history and continues to live on in popular imagination. His political legacy completely altered the Russian governmental structure; his economic policies ultimately contributed to the end of the Rurik Dynasty.

Arguably, Ivan's most important legacy can be found in the political changes he enacted in Russia. Alexander Yanov was of the opinion, that Ivan the Terrible and the origins of the modern Russian political structure were indissolubly connected.²⁸ Of course, this was a conclusion he made while the USSR still existed.

The title of a Tsar alone may hold symbolic power, but Ivan's political impact went further, in the process significantly altering Russia's political structure. The creation of the Oprichnina marked something completely new, a break from the past that served to diminish the power of the boyars and create a more centralized government. "[...] [T]he revolution of Tsar Ivan was an attempt to transform an absolutist political structure into despotism [...] the oprichnina proved to be not only the starting point, but also the nucleus of autocracy which determined [...] the entire subsequent historical process in Russia."²⁹ Yanov tried to put it in the terms which were used in the Enlightenment in the 18th century and in political theory hence. He concluded that "Czar Ivan's monstrous invention [i.e. the terror through the oprichnina] has thus dominated the entire course of Russian history."³⁰ One may doubt those long lines of essentialism strongly. But recourses on Ivan can be found in various contexts. Kevin Platt recently stated that not only Stalin was fascinated by the combination of terror and greatness, as one may see in Eisenstein's masterpiece *Ivan the Terrible*.³¹ The autocrats of the 19th century as well as the elites within the Russian Empire were fascinated by this special mixture as the essence, the sense of autocracy.

The Russian contemporaries, as we can see from the sources, did not at all perceive Ivan as the terrible. The English word terrible is usually used to translate the Russian word *grozny* in Ivan's nickname, but the modern English usage of terrible, with a pejorative connotation of bad or evil, does not precisely represent the intended meaning. The meaning of *grozny* is closer to the original

28 YANOV, 1982, p. 31.

29 IBID., p. 68.

30 IBID., p. 70.

31 PLATT, 2011; PLATT/BRANDENBERGER, 1999.

usage of terrible – inspiring fear or terror, dangerous, formidable or threatening. In this context one may compare Ivan IV to many other rulers of early modern Europe, as for example Henry VIII., who fought fiercely for the subordination of the church under his rule.³²

By expanding into Poland (although a failed campaign), the Caspian and Siberia, Ivan established a sphere of influence that lasts until today. Ivan's conquests also ignited a conflict with the Ottoman Empire which would lead to successive wars.³³ The acquisition of new territory brought about another of Ivan's lasting legacies: a relationship with (Western) Europe. Although the contact between Russia and Europe remained limited at this time, it would later grow, facilitating the permeation of European ideals across the border. Peter the Great would later push Russia to become a European power, and Catherine II would make Russia the leader within the region.³⁴

Contrary to his political legacy, Ivan IV's economic legacy was disastrous and became one of the factors that led to the decline of the Rurik Dynasty and the Time of Troubles. Ivan inherited a government in debt, and in an effort to raise more revenue instituted a series of taxes. The endless military campaigns were responsible for the increasing government expenses. To make matters worse, successive wars drained the country both of men and resources. Muscovy from its core – where its centralized political structures depended upon a dying dynasty, as Ivan hit his heir to death, to its frontiers, where its villages stood depopulated and its fields lay fallow – was on the brink of ruin.

This ruin stood in contrast to his lasting reforms. Ivan's political revolution not only consolidated the position of Tsar, but also created a centralized government structure with ramifications extending into local government. "The assumption and active propaganda of the title of Tsar, transgressions and sudden changes in policy during the Oprichnina contributed to the image of the Muscovite prince as a ruler accountable only to God."³⁵ Subsequent Russian rulers inherited a system put in place by Ivan. In the 19th century some representatives of the famous debate between westernizers and slavophiles on the path of Russia's history and future saw in Ivan the antitype to the west-orientated Peter the Great.³⁶ Therefore, scenes of the life of Ivan were very often chosen for historical paintings, not only by the famous Ilya Repin, but also in popular prints.

32 For an early comparative approach of analysis: STÖKL, 1953.

33 KHOROSHEVICH, 2003.

34 On this: KUSBER, 2005.

35 BOGATYREV, 2006, p. 263.

36 PLATT, 2011, p. 164f.



Tsar Ivan opens the first “zemskii sobor”, Klavdii Lebedev, 1894, National Library St. Petersburg.

Another interesting and unexpected aspect of Ivan’s legacy emerged within Stalinist Russia.³⁷ In an effort to revive Russia’s nationalist pride, Ivan the Terrible’s image became closely associated with Joseph Stalin. Historians faced great difficulties when trying to gather information about Ivan IV in his early years because early Soviet historiography, especially during the 1920s, paid little attention to Ivan IV as a statesman. This, however, was not surprising because Marxist intellectual tradition attached greater significance to socio-economic forces than to political history and the role of individuals. By the second half of the 1930s, the method used by Soviet historians changed. They placed a greater emphasis on the individual. The way was clear for an emphasis on “great men”, such as Ivan the Terrible and Peter the Great, who made a major contribution to the strengthening and expansion of the Russian state.

From this time on, the Soviet Union’s focus on great leaders would be greatly exaggerated, causing historians to gather more and more information on the great Ivan the Terrible. In the chronicles and other Russian sources they only found and find hints for an alternative narrative about his rule as an autocrat.

His contemporary advisors cleaned most of the sources perfectly. The western sources give a different bleak picture of the “rude and barbarous kingdom” and its Tsar, as the English merchant Jerome Horsey put it.³⁸ Some stereotypes,

37 For an excellent overview see PERRIE, 2001; also PLATT, 2011.

38 BERRY/CRUMMEY 2012.

as Andreas Kappeler observed some forty years ago,³⁹ were stereotypes borrowed from anti-ottoman propaganda, which put Muscovy into an Asian, even non-Christian context. Other traits were borrowed from own observation and were written with the objection to hide their diplomatic or economic defeat Ivan brought to his counterparts. Antonio Possevino, the Oprichnik Heinrich von Staden and others contributed to this picture.

It would perhaps have pleased Ivan that he caused a lasting impact on the memory and “Geschichtspolitik” through the times. The illustrations in this essay are a part of the attempts to make sense of the autocrat Ivan. Today, there exists a controversial movement in Russia campaigning in favor of granting sainthood to Ivan IV. The Russian Orthodox Church has stated its opposition to the idea,⁴⁰ but recently even President Vladimir Putin remarked that this may be a justification before history. The legacy of Ivan’s autocracy is not a phenomenon without relevance for today’s Russia, it still “makes sense” by the actors to use it as a historical argument.

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39 KAPPELER, 1972.

40 GLASSER, 2003, <http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1P2-317469.html>, 14.12.12.

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