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Ivan the Terrible: Centralization in Sixteenth Century Muscovy

By

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Senior Seminar
(HST 499W)

June 6, 2008

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The Oprichniki, Ivan IV's loyal death squads of the Oprichnina, rode black horses while dressed in black garb. To symbolize their cause, an insignia displaying a dog's head and broom were worn. The dog's head was a representation of sniffing out traitors. In turn, the broom represented how the Oprichniki were dedicated to eliminating, or sweeping them away. These symbols represented the struggle for centralization in Ivan the Terrible's sixteenth century Muscovy. During his time as Tsar, Ivan introduced reforms and imposed harsh judgments upon those he viewed as traitors. In 1565, key events in Ivan's life, religion and the desire to build a stronger state would motivate him to aggressively push for centralization and introduce his Oprichnina which would last until 1572.

Before Ivan's time Kievan Rus, a medieval state that predated Muscovy and the Russian Empire, was made up of multiple city-states governed by various princes. Under this system, Kiev was the most dominant and influential city-state. However, the Mongol invasion virtually eliminated Kiev's position as the center of power. While Kiev continued its downward trend, Moscow emerged as the dominant city-state due to, in part, its geographical location. The princes from each city-state then became subservient to the Grand Prince of Moscow as power shifted from Kiev to Moscow. It is during this time that Kievan Rus became known as Muscovy. Ivan grew up surrounded by princes and aristocratic advisors known as boyars who had lost power during the transition from Kievan Rus to Muscovy. Some scholars attribute Ivan's intense paranoia to the boyar/princely classes which had dominated much of his early childhood. When Ivan came of age to rule Muscovy at age fifteen he demonstrated his readiness by executing select members of the elites who had tormented him throughout childhood.

On January 3, 1564 Ivan abdicated from his position as Tsar of Muscovy in a clever attempt to centralize power. After his abdication, Ivan sent two letters of explanation: one to the boyars, clerics and princely classes and the other to be read aloud to the Muscovite citizens. In the former, he accused the elite classes of treasonous acts against the state. His other letter stated that his abdication was not due to his displeasure towards the common people but rather the result of corruption within the elite classes. The letters amassed public support against traitors within the elite class and forced the boyars and those alike to beg Ivan to return. Upon hearing this Ivan accepted but not without conditions. One such condition was the ability to govern any way he saw fit, which was later used within the Oprichnina. After such conditions were agreed upon Ivan returned and divided the land into two sections – the Oprichnina and Zemschina.

From 1565-1572, the Oprichnina was a land within Muscovy of Ivan's choosing where he alone held sole power. The Zemschina was the remaining portion of Muscovy that was governed by the state administration. Even though the state administration governed the Zemschina, they had no real power. All military, financial and international decisions ran through Ivan. The state administration's only purpose was to help run the Zemschina so Ivan didn't have to. Ivan did, however, enlist the help of loyal death squads known as Oprichniki. The Oprichniki were described by Heinrich Von Staden – a foreigner who served as an Oprichniki – as extremely loyal and hand-picked by Ivan himself. They were responsible for policing the Oprichnina and assassinating individuals thought to be traitors. Furthermore, Ivan confiscated land belonging to traitors and incorporated it into the Oprichnina. The ability to annex any portion of the Zemschina and redistribute its wealth gave Ivan an extremely useful tool in limiting the nobility's

power. However, Ivan's efforts to find traitors would eventually have unintended consequences. Imposters would pose as Oprichniki and rob or even kill the Muscovite peasantry. Additionally, the Oprichniki themselves would eventually commit these same crimes. Ivan realized the Oprichniki were abusing their authority and assassinated the Oprichniki leadership.

The motives and function of Ivan's Oprichnina vary from scholar to scholar. Some scholars argue that Ivan was pathological and disillusioned by the power he possessed. In contrast, others argue that the Oprichnina was Ivan's effort to centralize his power while limiting that of the boyar and princely classes. Furthermore, it has been argued that Ivan believed he was justified in his actions through his divine authority. By examining the historiography's periodization, changes in scholar's arguments and interpretations can be seen. For instance, the introduction of new sources such as administrative documents in recent historiography has developed a new interpretation of Ivan as a Tsar who valued a certain level of discretion in his local government. The majority of historians, however, have relied upon traditional sources such as letters and foreign accounts. Since the majority of historians have focused their examination on similar sources, various interpretations have emerged. Some historians emphasize key events in Ivan's life as motivation for centralization while others advocate for state building or religion. By organizing the historiography by date, such differences can be seen.

In 1961 Jules Koslow argued in his book *Ivan the Terrible* that Ivan used the boyars and their treason as justification for his actions while his true motive was personal

ambition for unlimited power.¹ By implementing the Oprichnina, he was breaking the boyar's power by separating them from their land. Ivan felt justified in doing so because he felt it was strengthening the state. Koslow further argues that it was not Ivan's intention to destroy the boyar class but rather to use the Oprichnina as a balance to keep them in check.² Ivan recognized that without the boyar class there was nobody to administer Muscovy and therefore their purpose in society was useful if managed correctly. Koslow identifies Ivan as tormented from what he had to endure throughout his life. Koslow attributes the death of Ivan's first wife, Anastasia, as a major contributing factor that led to his paranoid behavior. Koslow states that "it was not that the Czar's character changed after Anastasia's death; rather, it was that he returned to the original complex and violent nature that Anastasia had kept in check for thirteen years."³ Additionally, he credits the betrayal of Andrey Kurbsky and the death of both his brother and son as more reasons for his distraught personality which would eventually cause him to see potential enemies everywhere and act irrationally. Kurbsky was a close friend and military advisor of Ivan's who defected to Poland in 1564. In a letter written to Ivan, Kurbsky would cite multiple grievances with the manner in which Ivan governed Muscovy as reasoning for his defection.

Ian Grey's *Ivan the Terrible* – published in 1964 – also examines how Ivan's childhood experiences contributed to his distrust/hatred of the boyar/princely classes. He argues that, "This hostility (to the Boyars) was the bitter fruit of the terror in childhood

¹ Jules Koslow, *Ivan the Terrible*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1961), 108.

² Koslow, 115.

³ Koslow, 89.

and then of what he had felt to be his betrayal by those whom he had trusted implicitly.”⁴ In this quote, Grey is referring to Ivan illness of 1553 and the betrayal of Kurbsky. During his illness it was speculated that he might die. In his will, he appointed his son as the next sovereign heir to the throne. Ivan asked the select crowd of boyars he trusted to swear allegiance to his son. Instead of agreeing, arguments erupted among the boyars and princes over who would rule if Ivan died. Grey argues that the refusals to swear allegiance to his son were not based on their fears of chaos but rather were rooted in the struggle for power.⁵ Taking into account that the boyars took advantage of Ivan when he was too young to rule, it is clear that they were a class of opportunists and were willing to seize power if it was available.

Grey’s other argument for Ivan’s mistrust of boyars and princes stems from the betrayal of Kurbsky. He makes the argument that the letters written by Kurbsky after he fled to Lithuania, along with the actual betrayal, is what ultimately made Ivan untrusting of the boyar and princely class:

It was, however, the intensity of Kurbsky’s hatred that most disturbed Ivan. This was because he saw in Kurbsky not an individual who had fled from just punishment but the representative of the whole boyar-princely class, voicing their implacable malevolence towards him. His suspicions intensified, Ivan readily believed that the boyars and princes hated him and his dynasty. All were meditating treason against him. All were waiting to follow in the steps of Kurbsky, who in the security of the enemy camp expressed the vitriolic thoughts which they were thinking.⁶

Not mentioned in this excerpt is the friendship that once existed between Ivan and Kurbsky. Before his betrayal, Kurbsky had been a trusted friend to Ivan. Their previous friendship made Kurbsky’s letters even more painful for Ivan to read. Stating that “Ivan’s

⁴ Ian Grey, *Ivan the Terrible* (Great Britain: Hodder and Stoughton, 1964), 114.

⁵ Grey, 110.

⁶ Grey, 161.

reputation remained blackened by his calumnies”⁷ Grey argues that Kurbsky’s betrayal acted as proof of Ivan’s suspicions regarding the boyar-princely classes.⁸ Following this incident Ivan was extremely paranoid. This experience, alongside a lifelong struggle with boyars and princes supports Grey’s argument that this ultimately made Ivan bitter towards the two classes. Grey goes on to mention that this led to the creation of the Oprichnina. He makes another interesting argument that Ivan created the Oprichnina so that he could feel secure, not to destroy the boyar-princely aristocracy.⁹ A prominent weakness arises from this argument in that his source of information is not present. Grey only tells the reader, “But more recent researches into the circumstances of the setting up of the Oprichnina and the acquisition of lands for its personnel disprove this thesis.”¹⁰ Without further elaboration into the “recent researches” it is impossible to see the evidence for the argument he is making. It would be logical to assume that the creation of the Oprichnina was a reaction to a lifelong problem. By creating the Oprichnina, he was giving himself the means to centralize power in Muscovy.

As Michael Cherniavsky states in his 1968 article “Ivan the Terrible as Renaissance Prince,” “It would be foolish to argue that the personality of Ivan is irrelevant for an understanding of his reign.”¹¹ In his article, Cherniavsky argues that Ivan ruled through terror deliberately.¹² Cherniavsky’s argument is based on the assumption that ruling subjects with a sense of awe created fear and thus led to respect among

⁷ Grey, 154.

⁸ Grey, 156.

⁹ Grey, 167.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Michael Cherniavsky, “Ivan the Terrible as Renaissance Prince,” *Slavic Review* 27(1968), 195.

¹² Cherniavsky, 200.

society. Cherniavsky focuses on the mental framework of Ivan in the sense of him being aware that his actions were viewed as terrible or awful. Cherniavsky examines the time period of Ivan IV's rule compared to that of tyrants elsewhere in Europe such as Richard III, Henry VIII and Louis XI.¹³ He makes a valid argument that rulers among Ivan IV's time period were almost all "terrible." The author argues that Ivan was associated with other rulers which were terrible. Ivan's sense of "terrible" was derived, in part, from the framework of other powerful aristocracies.

In 1974 Sergei Platonov expanded Cherniavsky's notion of an "all terrible" ruler in *Ivan the Terrible*. Platonov argues that Ivan was a man tormented with a sense of duality to his personality.¹⁴ He states that while Ivan was growing up he looked up to the Metropolitan Macarius and acquired a sense of what was right and wrong. To support his argument, Platonov uses excerpts from contemporaries of Macarius' school to describe Ivan's good side. One of the excerpts reads, "His contemporaries described him as, 'a man of wonderful reason and very loquacious, who was content with knowledge gained from lessons of the book.'¹⁵ He goes on to say that "the Shuisky and Glinsky [two powerful noble families] families had sufficiently ensured that Ivan would become acquainted with the negative aspects of life at that time. By committing acts of pillage and violence in his sight, they seduced him into caprice and savagery."¹⁶ Platonov's argument attempts to classify Ivan's personality as black and white (good and bad) with no shades of grey. As Tsar of Muscovy, Ivan was the figurehead of society with the

¹³ Cherniavsky, 196.

¹⁴ Sergei Platonov, *Ivan the Terrible* (Gulf Breeze, FL: Academic International Press, 1974), 34.

¹⁵ Platonov, 35.

¹⁶ Ibid.

divine right to rule. In reality, Ivan was a normal human being born into a world with the power to do, for the most part, whatever he wished. The expectation that Ivan be either all good or all terrible is unrealistic of any human being. While his outbursts were at times inhumane, he demonstrated skill in deciding what was beneficial and what was detrimental to Muscovy.

In the late 1970s, historiography concerning Ivan's centralization would shift from examining his personality traits to emphasizing his political tactics and state-building techniques. Previously examined scholars place greater emphasis on the personality of Ivan in sacrifice of examining his methods for centralization as a means to better the state. Not all historians after the late 1970s would agree that Ivan was a political tactician. However, there is a noticeable break from the traditional approach among some historians. This break signifies a new approach in the interpretation of Ivan's goals and motives for centralization.

Four years after Platonov's book Maureen Perrie wrote "The Popular Image of Ivan the Terrible" and made the argument that the popular image of a "just tsar" was not formed on a passive interpretation but instead created by Ivan to gather support to centralize power.¹⁷ She uses his letters of abdication as evidence for her argument by examining how Ivan first accused the elite of treason then identified with the populace as being betrayed.¹⁸ She argues that Ivan knew he would need the support of the Muscovite peasantry to centralize power and therefore he looked for ways in which to identify with

¹⁷ Maureen Perrie, "The Popular Image of Ivan the Terrible," *Slavonic & East European Review* 56 (1978): 286.

¹⁸ Perrie, 280.

them. Ivan portrayed himself as an ally of the people and gathered popular support through having the common people's interests at heart.¹⁹

Priscilla Hunt's 1993 article "Ivan IV's Personal Mythology of Kingship," argues that Ivan developed a personal mythology of kingship which allowed him to interpret his actions as divine, therefore creating justification for his actions which were a response to extreme anxiety caused by the betrayal of his people.²⁰ Ivan viewed his actions in the Oprichnina as necessary because "the breakdown of his relationship with his people tarnished his kingdom's likeness to Christ."²¹ Additionally, the purging of factional groups through the Oprichnina was what cleansed both himself and his subjects. She uses the correspondence between Kurbsky and Ivan as a source for examining Ivan's sense of betrayal and abandonment by those who had acted against him.²² By incorporating the correspondence she is giving context to her argument that Ivan's extreme anxiety was caused by betrayal.

To compliment her work in "Ivan IV's Personal Mythology of Kingship," Perrie teamed up with Andrei Pavlov in 2003 to create *Ivan the Terrible: Profiles in Power*. Pavlov and Perrie argue that Ivan was reacting in a calculated manner to improve the state. He saw the boyar class as detrimental to the welfare of Muscovy and therefore created the Oprichnina in a deliberate manner. Pavlov and Perrie argue that as a reaction to previous triggers such as the betrayal of Kurbsky, Ivan abdicated from his position as

¹⁹ Perrie, 281.

²⁰ Priscilla Hunt, "Ivan IV's Personal Mythology of Kingship," *Slavic Review* 52 (1993): 775.

²¹ Hunt, 792.

²² Hunt, 793.

Tsar of Muscovy on January 3, 1564 in a clever attempt to centralize power.²³ It is Pavlov and Perrie's argument that Ivan's goal in implementing the Oprichnina was to create unquestioned subordination of all his subjects.²⁴ The boyar/princely class posed a threat to the consolidation of power and thus Ivan used the Oprichniki to terrorize them. Pavlov and Perrie use the correspondence between Ivan and Kurbsky as supporting evidence to their claim.²⁵ Kurbsky believed in the use of advice from officials while making important decisions but Ivan did not share the same ideology. Ivan was confident in his ability to make important decisions regarding the state while still appreciating the state administration's value. Without the state administration, Ivan would have been overwhelmed by the demands of running Muscovy. Ivan wanted the important decisions to be made by him while the lesser, more tedious tasks were delegated among the state administration.

Isabel de Madariaga's 2005 book entitled *Ivan the Terrible* argues that Ivan implemented the Oprichnina as a means for Muscovite society to recognize him as the supreme ruler and central figure.²⁶ Ivan understood that sixteenth century Muscovy lacked a literate subculture and therefore the elimination of the boyar class would mean the elimination of those capable of government administration. Furthermore, she states that it was Ivan's goal to limit the power of the elite by confiscation of their lands and holdings.²⁷ By doing so, he was limiting their influence within Muscovy while extending

²³ Andrei Pavlov and Maureen Perrie, *Ivan the Terrible: Profiles in Power* (London: Pearson/Longman, 2003), 108.

²⁴ Pavlov, Perrie, 123.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Isabel de Madariaga, *Ivan the Terrible: First Tsar of Russia*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 369.

²⁷ Ibid.

his. To justify himself in the Oprichnina, Madariaga states that “it was this self-identification of Ivan with the idea of sacred violence which opened the way for the Tsar’s belief in the purificatory value of his cruelty, and enabled him to accept as divine in origin the sadism which made life a hell for his subjects.”²⁸ Yet again the correspondence between Kurbsky and Ivan is used as supporting evidence for an argument. Madariaga uses Ivan’s reference to the judgment of God in reference to Kurbsky’s betrayal as supporting evidence for her argument, which portrays Ivan’s personal justification in his actions within the Oprichnina.²⁹

Charles Halperin’s article entitled “Administrative Discretion in Ivan IV’s Muscovy,” published a year after Madariaga’s in 2006, reexamines the administrative system and preconceived notions about Ivan’s rule. Historians have attributed Ivan as a tyrant who controlled every detail of his government. Halperin argues that because a certain level of discretion was evident under Ivan’s rule, a different evaluation of the Muscovite bureaucracy is needed. He uses Muscovite administrative documents as sources for his article by searching for key words that, in Russian, equate to the use of discretion. He argues that Ivan was a ruler who realized his kingdom was far too large to have complete control over every detail.³⁰ With this understanding, Ivan allowed for certain discretion to be used by the local administration. Ivan was not totally suspicious of the administration, Halperin suggests, because he granted them some freedom in decision making. Indeed, Halperin states that “the last Muscovite ruler one would suspect of granting anyone, including or especially his own officials, any discretion in anything

²⁸ Madariaga, 381.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Charles J. Halperin, “Administrative Discretion in Ivan IV’s Muscovy,” *Russian History* 33 (2006): 435.

would be Ivan the Terrible.”³¹ Halperin argues that in order to grant such discretion the central government (Ivan) had to admit that it was neither omniscient nor omnipotent.³²

Time has played a significant factor in the interpretation of Ivan’s reign. Having written her article in 1978, Perrie had time to further develop her argument that Ivan was a political strategist by the time she started work on *Ivan the Terrible: Profiles in Power* with Pavlov in 2003. Her article examines the popular image that Ivan created for himself to centralize power. She focuses on his letters written to the Muscovite peasantry and nobility after his abdication in 1564. Through doing so she argues that Ivan was creating a popular image of himself among the peasantry to obtain a support base to use against the nobility. When Perrie and Pavlov wrote their book, they used the correspondence between Kurbsky and Ivan to a greater degree than what Perrie did in her article. The book examines in detail how Ivan centralized power and his motives such as building a stronger state. Not having a preexisting article from Pavlov, it is difficult to examine how his arguments may have changed through time with the possible inclusion of previously unknown sources. However, the inclusion of Perrie’s preexisting article is excellent for examining the development of her arguments of Ivan as a political strategist and state-builder.

In comparison to Pavlov and Perrie, Hunt argues that Ivan’s abdication was a path to the divine and self-humiliation. Sixteenth century Muscovy was Orthodox Christian and religion was a prominent power within the state. She attributes the divine nature of kingship as central to Ivan’s ideology. She uses Ivan and Kurbsky’s correspondence to

³¹ Ibid.

³² Halperin, 436.

illustrate how Ivan exhibited attributes of a dual nature as Christ did.³³ Christ exhibited a dual nature, both human and divine. Hunt continues that on a symbolic level, Ivan abdicated his leadership in a gesture of voluntary self-humiliation as Christ did in becoming human. The abdication of his power was a path to the divine which would lead to the Oprichnina.³⁴ Hunt argues that Ivan's centralization was an attempt to "redeem the kingdom and keep intact the 'Chosen People's' covenant with God."³⁵ God had appointed him as Tsar and the factional powers within Muscovy were not acceptable. Ivan needed to centralize power to recreate his kingdom's likeness to God. If he did not push for centralization, he would have been going against God's will. Ivan's abdication in 1564 was what gathered public support for his implementation of the Oprichnina, thus it was his path to the divine. The Oprichnina was what Ivan believed would centralize power and recreate his kingdom's likeness to Christ.

Hunt places far greater weight upon Ivan's religious goals and motivations in the Oprichnina than Pavlov and Perrie do. However, Madariaga incorporates Hunt's argument into her book as part of her argument. She cites Hunt's argument as support for her own by reiterating Ivan's belief that God sanctified his position as Tsar. Indeed she goes on to state that the Oprichnina cannot be explained as required by "objective political or social causes" because Ivan viewed himself not only as Tsar but a representation of God himself.³⁶ She reiterates her argument in relation to Hunt's in the following excerpt:

³³ Hunt, 797.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Hunt, 800.

³⁶ Madariaga, 380.

It was also the quality of Ivan's firm conviction in his God-given duty of rewarding and punishing his people that induced in them the acceptance of the duty of obedience to the divinely powerful Tsar, to whose judgment they submitted as though it were the Last Judgment.³⁷

Halperin's article challenges the traditional views of Ivan's kingship as extremely centralized and provides readers a reason to question arguments regarding Ivan's implementation of the Oprichnina. Indeed, sources pertaining to Ivan and the Oprichnina are limited in number which leads to multiple interpretations. By providing context to arguments of other authors, Halperin creates an unbiased approach to viewing the Oprichnina. Approaches such as Halperin's facilitate new ideas in examining the subject. He is one of few historians to provide a unique evaluation of Muscovite bureaucracy. Halperin uses administrative documents for primary sources which are different than the traditional use of first-hand accounts and the epistles between Kurbsky and Ivan. He examines them for words which translate into "discretion" to support how Ivan valued the state administration's role in Muscovy. As the most modern secondary source examined, this is further indication that historians are breaking away from traditional approaches. Historians are seeking new sources for examination which allow for diversity among literature. Historians focused on Ivan's personality to interpret his centralization through the 1970s. Arriving in the 21st century, historians have uncovered new sources which allow for new approaches.

Ivan's implementation of the Oprichnina is important as it is his biggest push for centralization. However, without a wide range of sources to study, it is open to a variety of interpretations. Due to the lack of primary sources, historians have examined one another's work in detail. Differences within each approach are emphasized as a result of

³⁷ Madariaga, 381.

the continual use of common primary sources such as first-hand accounts and the epistles between Kurbsky and Ivan. Indeed, it's evident with Madariaga's integration of Hunt's argument that historians have also built off of one another in interpreting Ivan's centralization. Pavlov and Perrie's book also contains multiple monographs that they have examined. The work done by historians regarding Ivan requires the use of previous historians simply due to the lack of primary sources available for study.

Platonov describes Ivan IV's childhood as both an educational experience under the leadership of Metropolitan Macarius and that of trauma inflicted by the boyar class. These insights assist historians in attempting to analyze Ivan's character as the Tsar of Muscovy. Platonov argues that Ivan was an individual with a sense of duality to his personality. While this may be true to some extent, it can be argued that his character was that of any other human being. Because of this, he was not immune to fits of rage and misjudgment. However, he was the Tsar of Muscovy and thus his every move commanded the attention of those around him. Anything he did was bound to have an impact on his reputation.

In consideration of Ivan's personality, Grey supports Platonov's idea that childhood experiences affected Ivan's character. Grey emphasizes events in Ivan's adult life that may have changed his personality (or disposition) towards the boyar-princely class. While Grey and Platonov share the same view regarding Ivan and his influential childhood, Grey focuses more on events that happened throughout Ivan's adult life. The squabbling between boyars when he was ill and Kurbsky's betrayal are evidence that Grey uses to show Ivan's contempt of the boyar/princely classes. Examining the broad

scope of Ivan's life and events within it give Grey's arguments more credibility than Platonov's argument.

Grey's views regarding the Oprichnina are interesting because he believes it was not Ivan's intention to destroy the boyar-princely class. Grey argues that it was Ivan's intention to simply create an area where he could feel safe. Regardless, Ivan effectively used the Oprichnina to eliminate those he thought opposed him. Indeed, it is evident that Ivan is a man reacting to situations. His creation of the Oprichnina was a reaction to his lifelong problem with the boyar/princely classes.

Cherniavsky's article is quite thought provoking. He states that it is possible Ivan was aware of his viciousness. He also states that the personality of Ivan is crucial to understanding his reign. Cherniavsky argues that Ivan understood Muscovy needed a strong central leader and he was ruling as such for the good of his people. If Cherniavsky's argument is correct, then Platonov's argument analyzing Ivan's childhood as the reason he was "terrible" is flawed. Cherniavsky argues that it was a conscious decision by Ivan and gives no inclination that his personality was a result of childhood experiences. In comparing Cherniavsky's argument to Grey's argument there are more similarities. The trials of Ivan's adult life taught him valuable lessons. Though his experiences as an adult he realized that to be "terrible" meant to be a formidable ruler.

Interestingly enough, "terrible" is only one translation of Ivan's original Russian nickname of "Grozny." Ivan Grozny has only been translated into Ivan the Terrible because Western scholars have depicted him as such. Russian words do not always translate directly into English and "Grozny" is no exception. Among the many translations are "dread," "fearsome," "menacing," "formidable" and "terrible." An

examination into Ivan's reign as has shown that "terrible" is too narrow of a word to describe the multifaceted Tsar.

Supporting the argument that "Grozny" is too narrow of a translation is the Correspondence between Andrey Kurbsky and Ivan. Kurbsky was Ivan's close friend and military commander/advisor. From Kurbsky's defection to Poland on 1564 to 1579, a series of letters were exchanged between with Ivan addressing grievances. *The Correspondence between Prince A.M. Kurbsky and Tsar Ivan IV of Russia 1564-1579*, edited and translated by J.L.I. Fennell, contains seven epistles which vary in length. The longest, written by Ivan in response to Kurbsky's first epistle, is 84 pages and contains the most material concerning Ivan's views on centralization. Kurbsky and Ivan's correspondence details the relationship between the aristocracy and the princely/boyar classes. In a series of epistles to Kurbsky, Ivan defends himself and his policies. In turn, Kurbsky defends himself and provides a good example of the public sentiment held by the elite. Ivan describes himself as being surrounded by traitors and the correspondence between Ivan and Kurbsky illustrates his paranoid disposition. Such a document allows for the sentiment of both authors to be examined in detail. Each author addresses disputes raised by the other, which gives historians a broad basis, in conjunction with other primary sources, for understanding Ivan and his relationship to the elites. It should also be noted that the authenticity of this document has been called into question by Edward Keenan, a prominent Russian historian.³⁸ However, similarities between the Correspondence and Kurbsky's history of Ivan show it to be authentic. Both Kurbsky's

³⁸ For more details see: Edward Keenan, *The Kurbskii-Groznyi Apocrypha: The Seventeenth-Century Genesis of the "Correspondence" Attributed to Prince A. M. Kurbskii and Tsar Ivan IV*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971).

epistles to Ivan and Kurbsky's history of Ivan contain the same style of writing and hold congruent accusations against the Tsar. To disregard the authenticity of one document would require questioning the other. Kurbsky's history of Ivan is an undisputed primary source which, combined with a comparison of both texts, testifies to the authenticity of the Correspondence.

In J.L.I. Fennell's translation, Kurbsky's first epistle, written in 1564, states that he was never properly credited for accomplishments he made in the Tsar's name. Instead, Kurbsky states that the Tsar showed only hatred towards those whom he benefited from. Furthermore, Kurbsky states that he was never able to see his homeland or family due to his service to the Tsar.³⁹ He argues that the Tsar's advisors, particularly one by the name of Fedor Alekseevich Basmanov, were responsible for corrupting the Tsar into his evil ways. Kurbsky's letter depicts Ivan as a tyrant manipulated by corrupt advisors seeking control of Muscovy. He describes Ivan as a "beastful" man who massacred the people of Muscovy.

Kurbsky, priest Sylvester and Aleksey Adashev were all once trusted advisors of Ivan. Little information has been recovered as to the origins of Sylvester. Of importance is his influence over Ivan in his youth as spiritual guidance and mentor. Adashev was a man of humble origins who rose swiftly in rank to serve the Tsar. Eventually, he would form a friendship with Sylvester. Together, they counseled the Tsar in various matters of importance. In 1553 the Tsar came down with a life threatening illness. During that time, Ivan composed a last will and testament which left the Tsarship to his eldest son. Sylvester and Adashev, in addition to various other princes and boyars, refused to

³⁹ *The Correspondence Between Prince A.M. Kurbsky and Tsar Ivan IV of Russia 1564-1579*, trans. and ed. J.L.I. Fennell (London: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 5.

acknowledge the Tsar's infant son. Instead, they chose to recognize Prince Vladimir Andreevich as Muscovy's successor to the throne in the case of Ivan's death. This event is of utmost importance in examining Ivan and his policies. Ivan's references this event in his response to Kurbsky's first epistle and it is clear that it holds weight in his suspicion and hatred of the boyar/princely classes:

Yet they desired to raise to the throne Prince Vladimir, who is far removed from us in the line of succession; while our infant, given to us by God, did they, like Herod, desire to destroy (and how could they fail to destroy him!), having raised Prince Vladimir to the throne.⁴⁰

Needless to say, once Ivan recovered, the boyars and princes that he trusted were then seen with a suspicious eye. In the Ivan's response to Kurbsky's first epistle, he details his feelings regarding the situation in addition to other grievances. He states that Kurbsky had forsaken his spiritual health for his body. Ivan asks Kurbsky, "Why did you betray your soul for the sake of your body, if you feared death according to the lying word of your devilish friends and spies?"⁴¹ Ivan's argument comes from his belief that it was his divine right to rule over his subjects. Since God entrusted Ivan with the right to do so, Kurbsky's defection to Poland was a defiance of God. Additionally, Ivan states that by defecting to Poland, Kurbsky took up arms against his homeland and his religion. In his text, he states, "having raged against man, you have risen against God."⁴² Kurbsky's defection had a lasting impression on Ivan. The defection took place after Ivan's illness of 1553 and at the time when he was experiencing intense paranoia. Its influence on Ivan is undeniable. Shortly after Kurbsky's defection Ivan would abdicate

⁴⁰ The Correspondence, 95.

⁴¹ The Correspondence, 15.

⁴² The Correspondence, 19.

from his position as Tsar. After being begged to return Ivan created the Oprichnina in an effort to centralize power.

Kurbsky's betrayal heightened preexisting notions of traitorous behavior existing within the nation. Ivan accused the boyar and princely classes as wanting control over the state through him. His writing attests to this through his response to Kurbsky's first epistle that it would be foolish for him to have allowed it to happen:

And therefore, in view of you having in devilish manner shattered piety since the days of my youth, and in view of your having seized and appropriated the power handed down to me by God from our forefathers – is this then the sign of a “leprous conscience” to hold my kingdom in my hand and not let my servants rule? And is it contrary to reason not to wish to be possessed and ruled by my own servants? And is this “illustrious Orthodoxy” – to be ruled over and ordered about by my own servants?⁴³

Ivan's concern about people within his kingdom desiring power predated his letter to Kurbsky. Ivan thought about the problem that existed between the aristocracy and elites and then came to the conclusion that centralization was the best option for him and for his country. The Tsar's response to Kurbsky's first epistle in 1564 defended his policies against attacks which were meant to portray Ivan as a madman who ruled through ruthlessness as an only option:

Yet how could you fail to understand this too – namely that it is unbecoming for rulers either to rage like wild beasts or in silence to abase themselves? In the words of the apostle: ‘and of some have compassion, making a difference: and others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire.’ See you then how the apostle bids ‘save with fear’? Thus will you find even in the days of the pious tsars much still fiercer torment. How then, according to your mad reasoning, can a man be tsar in one manner only, and not in accordance with the demands of the present day?⁴⁴

⁴³ The Correspondence, 25.

⁴⁴ The Correspondence, 39.

Ivan's ideology stemmed from his notion of a strong, centralized Tsar as beneficial to the state. A Tsar had to be just and fair but when confronted with opposition extreme ferocity was the best approach. Ivan could not allow a division of power between the aristocracy and nobility. Consider Kurbsky's accusation against Ivan regarding unsound counsel from Basmanov and others:

With the Approbation of your flatterers and comrades of the table, your quarrelsome boyars, the destroyers of your soul and body, who urge you on to aphrodisiacal deeds and, together with their children, act more viciously than the priests of Cronus.⁴⁵

Kurbsky attacked Ivan for taking bad counsel and yet did not approve of Ivan's push for centralization. It is curious to consider why Kurbsky was simultaneously opposed to centralization and those counseling Ivan. In theory, if Kurbsky truly believed Ivan's counsel to be the root of Ivan's evil tendencies, then he should be in support of Ivan's centralization. Through centralization, Ivan believed that he was helping his country. In a question directed towards Kurbsky, Ivan asks "Is this not what you call piety, not to organize one's kingdom to hold in check evil-doing men and to abandon the kingdom to destruction by foreign races?"⁴⁶ Such a statement indicates that Ivan's interest was the preservation of Muscovy through centralization.

For Ivan, centralization during his time was crucial because he saw that factional powers within the state were a primary cause for failure. With a focus on Kievan Rus, history had taught him that factions within the nobility cause the state to become weak. He illustrated his thoughts when discussing the Kievan Rus system of hierarchy among princes. Princes would quarrel among themselves for dominance and invaders were

⁴⁵ The Correspondence, 9

⁴⁶ The Correspondence, 57.

confronted with limited opposition. In theory, if one city-state was attacked then the other city-states would come to its aid. When the Mongols invaded, they were met with little opposition and experienced easy victories. Ivan understood that the sharing of power between the princes divided the resources and power of Kievan Rus. His text that reads “And with your lawless eyes you yourself have seen what happened as a result of this desire in Russia, when each city you were governors and viceroys, and what destruction was wrought as a result of this”⁴⁷ illustrates his commitment to centralization as a means to strengthen the state.

Of additional importance to Ivan’s disposition towards the boyar/princely classes was the death of his first wife, Anastasia. In Fennell’s notes, he states that Ivan told the Lithuanian ambassador in 1572 that he attributed the death of his first wife to the boyars. In Ivan’s first letter to Kurbsky, he accused the boyars of not providing medical supplies to his sick wife.⁴⁸ When discussing his wife, his writing indicates that he cared a great deal for her. The accusation that the boyars did not properly care for her more than likely stems from the 1553 incident which sparked Ivan’s distrust of the nobility. In the case of his wife’s illness, there was nothing the nobility could do to escape blame. Ivan’s experiences with them in the past instilled a paranoia that extended to all aspects of his life including the death of his first wife. Anastasia’s death led Ivan to push for centralization with increasing vigilance. Ivan’s writing in his response to Kurbsky’s second epistle proclaims that the likes of Sylvester, Kurbsky and Adashev wanted to control him through manipulation. He states, “so you have desired with priest Sylvester and with Aleksey Adashev and all your families to see all the Russian land under your

⁴⁷ The Correspondence, 59.

⁴⁸ The Correspondence, 192.

feet; but God grants power to whom he will.”⁴⁹ Kurbsky claims in one of his letters that Ivan persecuted him without mercy and that all he ever did was offer sound advice. Ivan responded:

And because we did not wish to remain in childhood and under your will, you call this persecution! Yet you always wished to be rulers and teachers, as it were to a child. But we trust in the mercy of God, for we have reached the grade of the age of Christ’s fulfillment, and apart from the mercy of God and of the most pure Mother of God and of all the saints, we ask for no teaching from men, for it is not befitting, when ruling a multitude of people, to ask for instruction from others.⁵⁰

The rhetoric between Ivan and Kurbsky further illustrates Ivan’s contempt for those who oppose his efforts to centralize power within Muscovy. Clearly, the events within Ivan’s life led him to believe the only way to strengthen the state was to centralize power.

Ivan’s efforts to centralize power in Muscovy culminated in the creation of the Oprichnina in 1565. Heinrich von Staden, a former Oprichniki, provides a first-hand account of sixteenth century Muscovy in his writing to the Holy Roman Emperor. Staden was a foreigner from Germany who had served under Ivan as a member of the Oprichniki from 1569 – 1572 and acquired knowledge of Muscovy’s society through direct experience. Following his three years of service as an Oprichniki, Staden described his account of Muscovy in a letter meant to persuade the Holy Roman Emperor to invade.

Very few foreigners were accepted into the Oprichniki as they were the most trusted of individuals under Ivan’s control. Each one was handpicked by Ivan and foreigners didn’t obtain this level of trust easily. As is apparent, Ivan was wrong to trust Staden as he would eventually attempt to persuade the Emperor to invade Muscovy. Staden claimed his motives were not driven by desire for riches; however his writing

⁴⁹ The Correspondence, 189.

⁵⁰ The Correspondence, 154-155.

implies that he would have liked to be rewarded for producing a first-hand account of Muscovy in the event of an invasion. It is therefore with skepticism that scholars must approach Staden's work as his motives may have led him to exaggerate certain details such as his level of importance as an Oprichniki. Nonetheless, his account provides a detailed description of the Oprichnina which is accurate enough for a critical scholarly analysis. The exaggerations are limited to his worth and importance and do not impact the benefits of such an account's worth.

Staden's book contains a section which describes Ivan's Oprichnina as limiting the influence of the boyar and princely classes while expanding his. He states that Ivan accomplished this through land acquisition.⁵¹ The Oprichnina wasn't composed of fixed boundaries and this allowed Ivan to incorporate any particular region of land. The property residing on acquired land was then redistributed in accordance with Ivan's wishes. Such political maneuvering indeed supports Ivan's rhetoric with Kurbsky. He saw the nobility as a threat to the state and himself so he took measures to deal with it.

Ivan's Oprichnina created unintended problems within Muscovy. With a certain amount of discretion, the Oprichniki were allowed almost complete freedom in their activities. Because of their distinct wardrobe, imposters emerged to exploit the peasantry. One such case is described by Staden in which individuals dressed as Oprichniki collected money from citizens. Ivan heard of this and had offenders beheaded as punishment.⁵²

⁵¹ Heinrich Von Staden, *The Land and Government of Muscovy*, trans. and ed. Thomas Esper (California: Stanford University Press, 1967), 30.

⁵² Staden, 32.

Imposters were not the only problem within the Oprichnina. Staden describes how the Oprichniki themselves eventually ran rampant:

The Oprichniki ransacked the entire countryside and all the cities and villages of the Zemschina, although the Grand Prince [Ivan] had not given them permission to do that. They drew up permission themselves, as though the Grand Prince had ordered them to kill this or that merchant or noble – if he was thought to have money – along with his wife and children, and to take his money and property to the Grand Prince’s Treasury.⁵³

Staden goes on to describe how the Tsar eventually saw that the Oprichniki were oppressing the Muscovite people and thus “ordered the Oprichniki to pay because of their unjust receipts.”⁵⁴ Documentation was kept in Moscow to keep track of the reparations but when Moscow burned down all of it was lost to ash. Those who suffered most were the Muscovite peasantry. Ivan eventually saw that the Oprichniki were too far beyond his control. Therefore, following the burning of Moscow Ivan began systematically executing key figures within the Oprichniki.⁵⁵

Important to note within Staden’s account is Ivan’s command of the situation. He implemented the Oprichnina to limit the influence of the nobility and succeeded in doing so. However, unintended consequences did arise through his methods. The Oprichniki became drunk with their power and began to run rampant, terrorizing the peasantry of Muscovy. This did not help Ivan’s goals of centralization within Muscovy and thus he did not support their methods. Within the Correspondence, Ivan attributes his style of rule as ruthlessly cutting down those who oppose his goals while being fair to those who do not. His sentiment is reflected in the manner in which he handled the Oprichniki. Ivan assassinated the Oprichniki leaders whom he felt were the instigators of chaos within

⁵³ Staden, 33-34.

⁵⁴ Staden, 35.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

Muscovy. The Oprichnina was Ivan's effort to centralize power within Muscovy but had the unintended consequence of harboring corruption and mayhem. The ideology explained within the Correspondence is seen in Staden's first-hand account of the Oprichnina.

In 1573, Kurbsky wrote a history of Ivan entitled *Prince A.M. Kurbsky's History of Ivan IV*. In contrast to Staden, Kurbsky's motives for writing a History of Ivan IV may be more obscure and should be approached with a degree of caution. The text was written following his defection to Poland and thus the writing illustrates his contempt for the Tsar. One must question Kurbsky's motives for writing such a book as the only logical benefits are to justify his defection and slander Ivan's name. However, it is insightful for scholars to take into account those closest to the Tsar and therefore Kurbsky's account is still important as it provides context to Ivan. Kurbsky had been one of Ivan's most trusted advisors and friends throughout much of their careers and Kurbsky's account cannot be totally dismissed on the basis of his dislike for the Tsar. Instead, a careful examination of the primary source with consideration of its context allows Kurbsky's text to become a valuable asset in examining the Tsar, his policies, and the reactions of those around him.

Kurbsky attributes Ivan's paranoid personality to the evilness that was released when the priest Sylvester was dismissed. His writing boasts of Ivan's great accomplishments in the period of his life when he consulted with the nobility. Kurbsky then goes on to say that Ivan eventually surrounded himself with evil counsel, "...and he gathered together and collected around him an exceedingly strong and great satanic

host.”⁵⁶ By insinuating such ideas, Kurbsky is portraying Ivan to be easily influenced by those around him. This is not the case, as is evident through his writing in the Correspondence and his actions with the Oprichnina. It is safe to say that Kurbsky’s accusation of Ivan’s influential nature is unfounded.

Conclusion

Ivan IV was a Tsar that valued a strong, centralized government. His motivation for centralization was a result of key events in his life, religion and the desire to build a stronger state. An examination of the Correspondence details these three points. Additionally, the first-hand account of an Oprichniki and Kurbsky’s history of Ivan help give context to Ivan’s centralization. Ivan’s implementation of the Oprichnina in 1565 was the culmination of his aggressive push for centralization.

Ivan was not easily influenced by those who he saw to be opposed to his goals of a centralized Muscovy. The events within his life had taught him to be extremely cautious of those around him. His illness in 1553 when the boyar/princely classes would not swear allegiance to his son spawned intense paranoia which would then transfer over into his view of how his first wife Anastasia died. The paranoia and anxiety which was the result of his illness in 1553 caused Ivan to see his beloved wife’s death in 1560 as the result of negligence or even murder through poisoning on behalf of the princely/boyar classes. Finally the betrayal of Kurbsky in 1564 would be the precursor to Ivan’s abdication in 1565. These events within Ivan’s life are the most important and influential

⁵⁶ Andrey Kurbsky, *Prince A.M. Kurbsky’s History of Ivan IV*, trans. and ed. J.L.I. Fennell (London: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 157.

in Ivan's life as shown in the examination of the Correspondence. They are the driving force behind Ivan's aggressive push for centralization.

In addition to the key events in Ivan's life, religion was another motivation for centralization. Ivan viewed his position as Tsar to be appointed by God. Therefore, in the Correspondence he constantly references how Kurbsky went against God's intentions. The rhetoric between both Ivan and Kurbsky emphasizes how important religion was in Muscovy. Ivan's goal of a centralized Muscovy was, in part, due to his religious beliefs. He believed that the factional groups within the state were against God's will. His push for centralization was an effort to reclaim his position as appointed by God.

Centralization was also a means to build Muscovy into a stronger state. This is evident through Ivan's references to the Kievan Rus system in his correspondence with Kurbsky. Ivan saw that the factional groups within Muscovy were a representation of the quarreling princes within the preexisting system. The Kievan Rus system weakened the state to the point that their defenses were not effectively mobilized against the Mongols. As Tsar, Ivan took it upon himself to centralize power under one ruler to make the state more efficient and powerful. Without factional powers in the government, Ivan would be able to govern more efficiently and increase the state's power and influence.

Each historiographic approach can be seen behind Ivan's three motivations for centralization. Historians such as Koslow and Grey have argued that Ivan was primarily influenced by key events in his life that led him to push for centralized power. Hunt and Madariaga have been advocates for religion as a central role behind centralization. Finally, historians such as Pavlov and Perrie have argued that Ivan pursued centralization through political maneuvering to strengthen the state. The evidence supporting each

historian's argument is evident in primary sources. No one approach is comprehensive enough to fully explain why Ivan was so determined to centralize power within Muscovy. Ivan's goal to attain sole power was based on not one, but all three reasons. Key events in his life, religion and strengthening the state were why Ivan pushed for centralized power in Muscovy.

Of the three primary sources examined, the Correspondence proved to be the most beneficial to examining Ivan's centralization. In it, specific arguments are addressed which are critical to a well-formulated and informative argument. Staden's account and Kurbsky's history have proven to be of supporting material for reference while discussing points within the Correspondence. Staden's unbiased detail of the Oprichnina and Kurbsky's personal history of Ivan are both remarkable sources and their information supports each argument that has been formed. Depending on the specific subject, historians might find another source to be of more value than the Correspondence. However, for an examination into centralization there is no known suitable substitute.

An analysis of the Correspondence, Kurbsky's history and Staden's first-hand account has shown Ivan as an independent Tsar who was influenced by events in his life. Ivan and Kurbsky's Correspondence is extremely important to study Ivan's centralization in sixteenth century Muscovy. Furthermore, the presence of religion in the rhetoric is substantial. Throughout each epistle Kurbsky and Ivan constantly reference how God would judge their actions. Many of their arguments are based solely on the Bible and extensive quotations are frequently used. Ivan felt justified in his divine right to rule and as such, Kurbsky was wrong to defect to Poland. Centralization in Muscovy was a necessary component in building a stronger Muscovite state. If history was any indicator

as to the future, Ivan knew what needed to be done by the mistakes of Muscovy's past.
His efforts to centralize power within Muscovy led him to create his ill-fated Oprichnina.

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