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Truly Terrible

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Ivan the Terrible: Free to Reward and Free to Punish

by Charles J. Halperin

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Tretyakov Gallery

Ilya Repin: Ivan the Terrible and His Son Ivan, 1885

Writing to his cousin Olga Freidenberg in 1941, Boris Pasternak remarked on Stalin's unexpected glorification of Tsar Ivan IV, known as Ivan the Terrible:

To our benefactor it seems that up until now we have been too sentimental.... The new enthusiasm, openly professed, is for the Terrible Tsar, the *oprichnina* [reign of terror], and cruelty. New operas, plays, and film scripts are being written on this topic. No joke.

It might have seemed a joke because Ivan's name had long been synonymous with sadism and pointless destruction. As Charles J. Halperin remarks in his new book, *Ivan the Terrible: Free to Reward and Free to Punish*, Ivan is "a card-carrying member of the Historical Hall of Shame—a dubious pantheon of mostly rulers...that includes Nero, Caligula, Attila the Hun, Chinggis (Genghis) Khan, Vlad the Impaler (Dracula), Cesare Borgia, and the Marquis de Sade."

Was Ivan an appropriate object of Stalin's enthusiasm? Was he really so terrible? Russian nationalists, who routinely accuse Western historians of "Russophobia," claim Ivan has been slandered, and Halperin, for different reasons, agrees that "Ivan's evil reputation...prejudices scholarship, and distorts history." All those descriptions of "the putative homicidal maniac" in literature, film, and historical scholarship simply "enshrine the myth." In Halperin's view, Ivan was bad, but no worse than other rulers of his time.

Who was Ivan? To begin with, he was one of the century's best-read Russians and a prolific author. Students of early Russian literature know his fascinating correspondence with Prince Andrey Kurbsky, who defected to Poland-Lithuania in 1564. When Kurbsky wrote a letter denouncing Ivan's brutalities, Ivan responded at length in his distinctive style: filled with digressions, pious quotations, displays of temper, and rapid alternations between mockery and fake humility. The correspondence, which continued until 1579, exhibits Ivan's wrath and Kurbsky's gradual acquisition of Western ideas. Kurbsky claims that people should value most highly "pure conscience...put into every man by God," whereas Ivan insists that God demands humans be absolutely obedient to existing authority, however it is exercised. "Think on this and reflect," writes Ivan, "that he who resists power, resists God," even if the power is illegitimate—and all the more so if the power is legitimate, like Ivan's. Ivan reasons that Kurbsky, regardless of whether he has sinned, should "accept suffering from me...and [so] to inherit the crown of [eternal] life." Kurbsky, with his appeals to natural law, human freedom, and the rights of conscience, now appears as Russia's first dissident, émigré author, and Westernizer. In his repeated descriptions of Ivan's Russia as laughably ignorant in the eyes of Westerners, Kurbsky can also be seen as looking forward to Russia's ever-present inferiority complex with regard to the rest of Europe.*

Ivan began his reign as Grand Prince of Moscow in 1533 at age three, when his father, Vasily III, died. The Russia (or Muscovy) into which Ivan was born was the product of a long history of gradual consolidation by Muscovite rulers. After the Mongol conquest in the mid-thirteenth century, Russia was fragmented into many small principalities. The Muscovite princes gradually expanded their power, not because of military prowess—that didn't matter when the Mongols were overwhelmingly strong—but because of their political skills in dealing with the Mongols and other Russian rulers. Known as "the gatherer of the Russian lands," Ivan the Terrible's grandfather, Ivan the Great, tripled the size of Muscovite domains and defeated a Mongol (or Tatar) army in 1480, the date usually given for the end of "the Tatar yoke." Notably, Ivan the Great conquered the independent city-state of Novgorod, a powerful commercial republic, replacing its elites with Muscovites.

The resulting state was a hodgepodge of traditions and practices, which were slowly being harmonized and centralized. Power was fragmented: the boyars (upper noblemen, often holding political office) overlapped with the princes, rulers of principalities who were, like Ivan, descendants of the dynasty's founder, the semi-legendary Rurik. Though princes could no longer conduct foreign policy or issue their own coinage, they still enjoyed considerable authority within their own domains.

Five years after Ivan's father died, his mother, Elena, the regent, followed her husband to the grave, and Ivan was left in the care of court boyars. For Ivan, this was the decisive period of his life. Dostoevsky famously argued that the abused and humiliated, should they ever attain power, make the cruelest tyrants, both because they feel entitled to revenge and because, having suffered extreme pain, they know just what hurts. Ivan's self-descriptions sometimes read as if Dostoevsky had composed them to illustrate his theory. In his letters to Kurbsky, he explicitly justifies his cruelty as an appropriate response to his treatment in childhood and early manhood. When Kurbsky accuses him of persecuting the innocent, Ivan replies that no one came to his aid

when he was the innocent victim, and that boyars still try to persecute him. It is clear why so many historians and writers have diagnosed him as paranoid.

The actual abuse Ivan writes about does not resemble the heartrending cases Dostoevsky described. Rather, Ivan complains that as a boy he was treated as a sovereign only on ceremonial occasions, but that otherwise there was no “element of servility to be found” in those looking after him. “How can I enumerate such countless sore sufferings as I put up with in my youth?” he asks Kurbsky. “Many a time did I eat late, not in accordance with my will.” Even when he was old enough to understand, others presumed to instruct him. “And so neither in external [state] affairs, nor in internal [personal] affairs, nor in the smallest and pettiest things (and [I refer to such things as] footwear and sleeping)—was anything according to my will...while we remained, as it were, a child.” Ivan also complains that Kurbsky once hurt his feelings by giving presents to a nobleman’s daughters while forgetting to give any to Ivan’s. The childhood hurt, and the child’s whining response, can still be heard in the thirty-four-year-old ruler.

In 1547, when he was sixteen, Ivan had an archbishop crown him tsar, making him the first to assume that title. Domestically, the term *tsar*, which translated the Byzantine emperor’s title of *basileus*, reflected Ivan’s absolute authority over the Orthodox Church as well as over the aristocracy. His will was now superior to that of any clergyman or boyar, however high-ranking. *Tsar* was also used as a translation of the Mongol title *khan*, suggesting Ivan’s aspiration to dominate the three remaining Tatar khanates of Kazan, Astrakhan, and the Turkish-backed Crimea. Though the khans no longer ruled Russia, they raided it, causing vast destruction and taking large numbers of slaves. Conquering the Mongols would not only reverse the historical tide that had begun with their westward expansion but also allow Russians to take slaves rather than provide them, all while conducting what could be represented as a crusade against the infidel.

Ivan did not even recognize non-Orthodox Westerners as truly Christian. When Ivan tells Kurbsky that by allying himself with Poland-Lithuania and leading armies against Muscovy, he will incur the guilt of killing Christians, Ivan anticipates the reply that Russia’s enemies are also Christians. Ivan is sure that Catholics and Protestants are not: “Should you accuse us of warring against Christians—namely Germans and Lithuanians—then your accusations are groundless.... In those lands there are no Christians except a very few ministers of the Church and secret servants of the Lord.”

In 1553 Ivan fell ill and did not expect to recover. He asked his servitors to swear allegiance to his son Dmitri, and although everyone eventually did, many at first balked at the prospect of another infant ruler. They preferred Ivan’s first cousin, Vladimir of Staritsa, who impressed no one as particularly intelligent or politically astute, but was at least an adult. Ivan never forgot this hesitation to abide by his will or his cousin’s potential challenge. Accusing Vladimir of conspiring with his cook to poison him, Ivan eventually forced Vladimir, his wife, and his youngest child to take poison themselves.

Following Kurbsky’s *History of Ivan IV*, historians have usually divided Ivan’s reign into two periods. The first one ends in 1560, when Ivan’s beloved wife Anastasia died, leaving him grief-stricken and without her moderating influence. During the first part of his reign, Ivan instituted a number of domestic reforms that historians praise—most notably, a new law code, a new system

for tax collection, and allowing for local elections of police and judges—but Ivan later rejected them as the work of his advisers Aleksey Adashev and the priest Sylvester. He always took credit for the conquest of the Tatar Khanate of Kazan in 1552, an achievement that marks the moment when, as historian Robert Crummey observes, Russia first became an empire governing peoples from very different cultures. In 1558 Ivan launched a twenty-five-year war to conquer Livonia on the Baltic Coast, a disastrous attempt that provoked opposition by several other powers and eventually led to a costly defeat. The war also left Moscow unprotected against attack by the Khanate of Crimea, which in 1571 pillaged and burned down Moscow.

After the death of Anastasia, Ivan dismissed Adashev and Sylvester. Nobles now felt his wrath. Around 1560 he began seizing property and ordering executions. Kurbsky prudently defected in April 1564. Nothing prepared Muscovites for what followed. On December 3, 1564, Ivan left Moscow with his treasury, his family, and a large retinue for an undisclosed destination. They wound up at Ivan's hunting lodge, Aleksandrovskaia Sloboda, which he had been fortifying. From there he sent two letters to Moscow, one addressed to the metropolitan (head of the church) and the boyars, in which he accused both of various forms of treason, including disagreeing with him, and made a number of demands. The other, addressed to Moscow's commoners, exonerated them from blame. Given the townspeople's demonstrated ability to riot and lynch aristocrats, this letter applied significant pressure on the boyars. Ivan threatened to abdicate if his demands were not met, which would have led to turmoil and mass violence. The boyars seem to have been unable to imagine any alternative to the legitimate ruler. Ivan got what he wanted.

Ivan's first demand was that he receive a free hand to punish anyone in any way he chose without delay, legal process, the traditional consent of the boyars, or the clergy's right of intercession on behalf of the accused. As he later explained in letters to Kurbsky and elsewhere, although he had always felt he should be "free to reward and punish," he had to follow judicial procedures and endure the clergy's interference. That was all very well for lesser rulers, like Elizabeth I, whose power was limited, or the Holy Roman Emperor, who was elected, but Ivan found it infuriating that his power, while absolute in theory, was not unlimited in practice. He insisted not on the power to do anything specific but on the absolute freedom to exert his untrammelled will.

Ivan's other demand resembles nothing earlier or later in Russian history. He split his realm by creating an *oprichnina*, a word that had previously indicated the portion of a nobleman's estate left to his widow. In Ivan's usage, it meant something like "an apart-realm," and Kurbsky refers to *oprichniki* (*oprichnina* men) as "except-niks" (*kromeshniki*). Ivan would rule the *oprichnina* as he chose, while the rest of the kingdom, the *zemshchina* (land), would be governed as before. Over the years, *oprichnina* territory expanded through official decree and the *oprichniki*'s marauding.

Ivan's *oprichniki*—a terrifying army sworn to avoid all contact with *zemshchina* people, including their own relatives—dressed in black and wore a uniform featuring a dog's head and a broom, to show they would sniff out treason and sweep it away. While some nobles who lived in *oprichnina* territory were allowed to join Ivan's men, most were expelled to the *zemshchina*, with their wives and children sent after them on foot. As Isabel de Madariaga notes in her splendid study *Ivan the Terrible: First Tsar of Russia* (2005), during the expulsion noble ladies were forced to give birth in the snow, and "any peasant who attempted to assist them on the way

was promptly executed.” The dead were left unburied, a special horror at a time when Christian burial was supremely important.

Madariaga explains that there followed “a veritable orgy of arrests and killings, in which it is difficult to detect a specific policy.” Historians have struggled to find a rationale for Ivan’s decision to establish the *oprichnina*. If his goal was to plunder in order to finance his war on Livonia, as some have suggested, then why the wanton destruction of taxable assets? Why the indiscriminate killing of servitors when soldiers were needed? Some have argued that Ivan’s actions resemble those taken by contemporaneous Western rulers consolidating central power, and that his repression of the boyars was “progressive.” But no Western ruler ever thought of dividing his realm in half so that one part could prey on the other. And if this was a war on the boyars, Crummey notes, it is hard to explain why “the social composition of the oprichnina court and that of the zemshchina was virtually identical.”

As Madariaga notes, historians seem to have combed the evidence for support for their belief that Ivan must have acted in a rational way: “Hence theories had to be devised, according to the intellectual fashions current at the time, which made it possible to interpret events as having been planned with a view to well defined and positive outcomes.” In the twentieth century, that meant describing a struggle with the tsar and lower-ranking gentry on one side and the “reactionary” upper nobility on the other. When explanatory fashion shifts, some other narrative will doubtless be found to explain what happened.

Russians were especially shocked that along with massacring the elite, Ivan executed their families and followers. For the first time in Russia, it became common to kill a condemned man’s wife and small children—as well as his peasants—and to devise imaginative forms of torture. When Ivan turned on the administrator I.P. Fedorov, his henchmen raided Fedorov’s lands and murdered retainers. Entire families were summarily killed, some by Ivan himself. “Even the wives of the peasants were stripped naked and driven ‘like beasts’ into the forests, where they were cut to pieces,” Madariaga writes. “Many women were hanged on the gates of their houses, others cut to pieces and the bits shoved down holes in the ice whence people drew their water supplies.” When Metropolitan Filipp objected, he was imprisoned and eventually strangled by the *oprichnik* Maliuta Skuratov, whose notoriety rivals that of Stalin’s sadistic NKVD chief Nikolai Yezhov.

The *oprichniki* were free to do anything they liked. Courts were instructed to find them not guilty of any charges. Pillage, rape, and seizure of property were the obvious consequences. It reached the point where brigands would dress up as *oprichniki* to preclude any resistance. During Ivan’s long war against Livonia, he briefly lost one town when Russian defectors dressed as *oprichniki* persuaded the guards to open the gates and took over.

Heinrich von Staden, a repulsive foreign adventurer who joined the *oprichniki*, describes in his memoir one of his plundering expeditions. Staden explains matter-of-factly that “if a prisoner did not want to respond nicely” by revealing the location of his wealth, men “held him and tortured him until he told.” Running up some stairs during a raid, Staden was “met by a princess who wanted to throw herself at my feet. Seeing my angry face, she turned to go back into the room. I struck her in the back with the axe and she fell through the doorway.” He boasts that he set off

on Ivan's expedition against Novgorod in 1570 sharing a horse with two other men but returned with forty-nine horses and twenty-two wagonloads of goods.

The attack on Novgorod began by devastating towns on the way. Ivan's men sacked Tver for five days. Arriving in Novgorod, Ivan piously attended the Epiphany service before resuming the mayhem. Humiliation was a crucial part of his repertoire: he married Archbishop Pimen to a mare and drove him out of town seated backward on the animal. Then Ivan conducted treason hearings. After men, women, and babies were tortured, *oprichniki* broke holes in the ice to drown them in the river. Red hot stoves were used. Foreign observers report Ivan running a spear through people and chopping up their bodies. Eyewitnesses later told a Danish envoy that there were enough corpses to clog the river and cause floods. The population of Novgorod, the realm's second-largest city, was about 30,000; Ivan's hearings led to the executions of some 2,200 people, but that number includes neither the *oprichniki*'s own victims nor deaths from starvation and freezing occasioned by the destruction.

Worse soon followed. On July 25, 1570, Ivan began his executions on Moscow's Pagan Square. He appeared, armed and dressed in black, as the public looked on at huge stakes in the ground and cauldrons of cold and boiling water that had been set up in the plaza. Three hundred people crawled forward on broken limbs to hear their fate. Ivan pardoned 184. The rest suffered the tortures of the damned. Ivan's long-term foreign negotiator, Ivan Viskovatyi, was stripped, bound, and had pieces of his body cut off, one by one. The *zemshchina* treasurer, Nikita Funikov, was doused alternately with boiling and freezing water. Once again officials were killed with their wives and children. As Madariaga observes, the victims suffered "in various ingenious ways, some having their ribs torn out, others flayed alive or impaled until finally an old man...tottered up. Ivan ran him through with a spear, then stabbed him sixteen times." Nothing of this kind had ever happened in Russia. As a display of Ivan's arbitrary will and his ability to do anything imaginable, nothing better could have been devised.

Much as Stalin concluded the Terror of 1936–1938 by purging the purgers, Ivan next turned on the leading *oprichniki*. Then, in 1572, he abolished the *oprichnina*—indeed, he forbade anyone ever to use the word. Again, no one knows why. He sprang his next surprise three years later by pretending to abdicate in favor of a baptized Tatar, Semyon Bekbulatovich. Needless to say, Ivan kept the treasury and all real power in his hands, but his humble, self-denigrating, and obviously insincere petitions to the ostensible new ruler have come down to us. Even historians ingenious enough to discover a rationale for the *oprichnina* have admitted defeat in accounting for this episode.

In 1581 Ivan murdered his son Ivan. Like his father, the tsarevich was a pious sadist—he composed a saint's life and participated in Ivan's torture sessions. As the story goes, Ivan, who had forced his son to divorce two wives, came upon the third, who was pregnant, improperly clad. Enraged, he hit her. When the tsarevich rushed to her defense, Ivan struck him with his scepter or some other instrument and, to his horror, killed him. Ilya Repin's famous painting *Ivan the Terrible and His Son Ivan* depicts the tsar, with an expression of extreme shock on his face, holding his mortally wounded son in his arms. Ivan's daughter-in-law miscarried; the tsar had destroyed both his child and grandchild.

Ivan never recovered. Tortured by guilt, he made up long memorial lists (*Sinodiki*) of people he had killed, some listed by name and others “known only to God,” so he could do penance by paying monasteries to pray for their souls. Only his son Fyodor, who was mentally and physically deficient, remained to succeed him. After Fyodor’s brief reign, a line of princes tracing its origins to Russia’s first ruler ended. Part of Ivan’s legacy, then, was the ensuing fifteen-year “Time of Troubles”—a period of chaos, civil war, and foreign invasion.

Many scholars, including Halperin, ask whether Ivan achieved what he intended. The problem, as Madariaga acutely observes, is that the only evidence of Ivan’s intentions besides his letters to Kurbsky is the outcome of his actions, and so one finds oneself reasoning in a circle. Others have argued that Ivan was insane, without defining just what they mean by “insane.” Halperin gives two puzzling reasons for rejecting the insanity argument. One is that Muscovites of Ivan’s time “had a conception of insanity, which Ivan did not fit.” Yes, but when historians call him insane they mean according to our criteria, not those of sixteenth-century Russians. Halperin also insists that “the insanity theory of the oprichnina renders any rational explanation of its realia superfluous. If Ivan were insane of course the details of the oprichnina would make no sense.” “If Ivan were insane,” he repeats, “then the oprichnina had no goal.” But there is often a method to madness. The actions of paranoids, for instance, make sense to themselves, and very definitely have a goal.

Halperin instead argues that Ivan created the *oprichnina* because, torn between personal piety and the demands of office requiring him to act impiously, he wanted “to divorce himself from the rest of Muscovite society.” That involved confiscating lands, which unforeseeably led to resistance, to which the *oprichniki*’s pillaging was a response. Repeatedly minimizing Ivan’s responsibility for his actions—while denying he is doing so—Halperin contends that the *oprichnina*’s horrors were “certainly not what Ivan intended,” but rather a “by-product,” taking on a life of its own, as terror often does. I do not think one can be certain of Ivan’s intentions, but this theory seems especially dubious. How could Ivan not anticipate that seizing people’s hereditary estates and driving their wives and children into the snow would prompt resistance? And how does that explain the sadistic tortures at Novgorod and Moscow? How is it possible to give a group of armed thugs, trained in extreme violence, absolute legal immunity and not anticipate what would happen?

In the same spirit, Halperin maintains that although “Ivan decided which tortures to apply, to whom, and with what frequency...he never applied the fire or other instruments of torture himself,” as witnesses say he did. Halperin’s only evidence for this is that “physically torturing his subjects was probably beneath his imperial dignity.” Why would Ivan have found one beneath his dignity and not the other? Even if you believe that there is a difference between participating in torture and devising, ordering, and directing it, what moral difference is there?

Ivan was not a monster, Halperin argues, because he was never “all ‘bad’” and was always “a human being.” But to say that a ruler, like some of our own time, is a monster is not to say he was not human; it is to say he was a very bad human. It hardly matters whether Ivan was “all bad.” Halperin says Ivan could not have committed his horrors “alone,” “by himself,” since others had to participate. But no one claims that evil rulers don’t need henchmen.

Perhaps historians have failed to understand Ivan's purposes because they look for a certain kind of purpose, like creating a centralized state, building a modern economy, or some other recognizable political objective. Any other purpose, even if Ivan stated it explicitly, would not look like a purpose at all. In his second letter to Kurbsky, Ivan writes, "You began still more to revolt against me...and I therefore began to stand up against you still more harshly. I wanted to subdue you to my will"—*volya*, a word that, as Madariaga correctly explains, can denote "total freedom to pursue one's arbitrary will, not freedom under the law." Could it be that Ivan's main purpose was simply the ability to exercise his will without restraint? That would explain why he demanded not specific reforms but the right to act outside all law and tradition. If his actions seem arbitrary, it may be because arbitrariness was his primary goal.

Stalin, too, used arbitrary terror, with people arrested by quota, and achieved the ability to do anything he liked. But, unlike Ivan, he did so to accomplish ideologically driven goals. Ivan wanted unlimited power for its own sake, perhaps, so that he would never again experience anything like his childhood frustration of will—regardless of whether the object of his will was a pair of shoes or the suffering of another person. If so, the best preparation for understanding him may be *Crime and Punishment*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, and Dostoevsky's other great explorations of the state of mind in which "all is permitted." Several Dostoevsky characters strive to become what Ivan Karamazov calls "the man-god," a being whose will encounters absolutely no restraint: "There is no law for God. Where God stands the place is holy." That was the condition to which Ivan the Terrible aspired, not to realize any specific goal but as the supreme goal in itself.

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In 1971 the historian Edward Keenan argued that the Kurbsky–Ivan correspondence was a seventeenth-century forgery, but the suggestion met with immediate skepticism and has convinced very few ever since. ↵