

Absolutism in Russia

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Part One: Through Ivan IV

Although Russian history parallels the history of Western Europe, historians continue to debate if it is an Eastern or Western country. Its sheer size (nine time zones) and polyglot population make the question virtually unanswerable. Even though it seems predominantly Western, its history and its culture differ from the West in several significant dimensions.

The Kievan principality in present day Ukraine disintegrated into smaller units following the death of Yaroslav the Wise in 1054, similar to the political disintegration of Europe following the death of Charlemagne. From that point forward, however, Russian history took a different turn, and a system of rule evolved that was unknown in the West. In the period from 1250 until 1700, differences between Western European history and Russian history are most profound. Even the absolute monarchy established in that country differed from the absolute monarchies of France, Spain, and Prussia.

Russia was formerly known as the Grand Duchy of Muscovy. It was a small landlocked area, twice the size of France, and with a population of eight million people.

The Mongol Invasions: During the thirteenth century, Russia was overrun by Mongol armies ruled by Timujin, who took the title of Genghis Khan, ("supreme ruler") one of the greatest conquerors of history. His armies subdued all of China in five years, and then marched toward Europe; they reached the plains of Hungary in 1242 at a time when the armies of Europe were powerless to stop them. The Pope led prayers for deliverance from the scourge. In 1242, the Mongol army suddenly stopped and returned to its homeland to settle a dynastic dispute over Genghis' successor. Had it not been for his fortuitous death, it is entirely possible that they would have reached the Atlantic. The Russians called them *Tatars*. During their rule of Russia, they converted to Islam, and thus exposed the country to that Eastern religion. The iron rule of the Mongols in Russia isolated the country from Europe, and prevented it from developing simultaneously with the rest of the continent.

The Mongol Army was known as the Golden Horde, and was particularly ruthless. They had no concept of cities or farms, and despised that which they did not understand. That which they despised, they destroyed. Entire cities were often slaughtered and burned. In one instance in Persia, Genghis Khan himself stood in a Persian mosque, and warned the people of the town that he had come to utterly destroy. In one instance, a Mongol commander built a pyramid of human heads outside a Persian city as a warning to the city that it must surrender. The rulers of the city refused, and in the ensuing siege, no one was left alive.

An eyewitness account of Mongol brutality was recorded by John of Plano Carini, the papal ambassador to Mongolia who passed through Kiev which the Mongols had sacked in 1242:

The Mongols went against Russia and enacted a great massacre in the Russian land. They destroyed towns and fortresses and killed people. They besieged Kiev, which had been the capital of Russia, and after a long siege, they took it and killed the inhabitants of the city. For this reason, when we passed through that land, we found lying in the field countless heads and bones of dead people, for this city had been extremely large and very populous, whereas now it has been reduced to nothing: barely two hundred houses stand there, and those people are held in the harshest

slavery.

The Mongols ruled the Slavic population of Russia for over 200 years. They united the several bickering Slavic princes by forcing them to submit to the rule of the great Khan, and requiring them to pay tribute and furnish slaves. If they rebelled, the Mongols quickly crushed the rebellion. Although they ruled with an iron hand, the Mongols retained local politicians for tax collection and administrative purposes. They allowed the prince who served them best and paid them the most handsomely to retain the title "Great Prince." Eventually, the princes of Moscow became hereditary great princes, as they had become particularly adept at collecting the Khan's taxes and putting down revolts.

One of the most important of the Great Princes of Moscow was Ivan I, (r. 1328-1341) who became known as Ivan Moneybags because of his extreme stinginess. He collected the harsh Mongol taxes ruthlessly and skimmed some off the top for himself, thus amassing a huge fortune. He even loaned money to other princes who were less frugal than he and did not have the necessary funds to pay their taxes. In 1327, he led a combined Russian-Mongol army and destroyed a city which had rebelled, and was rewarded by his Mongol Overseers by being made general tax collector for all Slavic lands under Mongol control. He also convinced the metropolitan of Kiev (the leading churchmen of the area) to settle in Moscow, which gave Ivan even greater prestige.

The great princes of Moscow increased their holding and influence over the next hundred years. During the reign of Ivan III (r. 1462-1505) controlled all the territories around Moscow. He was strong enough to stop paying tribute to the Khan as his supreme ruler; in fact there is some evidence that he and his successors considered themselves Khans. After the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453, they saw themselves as the heirs of both the Caesars and Orthodox Christianity, the one true faith. All the other kings of Europe were heretics; only the Great Princes were rightful and holy rulers. They thus considered themselves the unique and absolute rulers of their domains, and took the title Czar, (often spelled Tsar), the Slavic corruption of "Caesar."

The concept of the Czar being a holy ruler was promoted by the Orthodox Church following the fall of Constantinople. They often spoke of "holy Russia," and the "third Rome." The monk Pilotheus once said, "Two Romes have fallen, but the third stands, and a fourth there will not be." Ivan III also married the daughter of the last Byzantine emperor, which enhanced the idea of Moscow's imperial inheritance. The Czars were thus the worthy successors to the Khans and the true Christian rulers, exercising absolute power as a God-given right.

As Ivan gained power, the Russian nobility, known as *Boyars*, lost power. At the same time, the Russian peasants lost their freedom of movement and were tied to the land. In the 1480's Ivan conquered the principality of Novgorod and confiscated eighty percent of the land. The previous owners were either executed or relocated near Moscow. Ivan kept over half the land for himself, and distributed that which was left to a new group of "service nobility" on condition that they serve in his army. He required all Boyars outside the area to serve him if they wished to keep their lands. They had no choice, as there were no competing princes with whom they could ally. Ivan's rule was total, complete, and absolute.

Ivan the Terrible: Ivan IV (r. 1533 – 1584) was the first Grand Duke of Moscow to take the title of Czar of Russia. His father was Vasily III who died in 1533 when Ivan was three. He was the second son, but his older brother Fyodor was a deaf mute, and could not reign. Vasily had named Ivan as his heir; and his mother together with a group of loyal Boyars ruled as his regent. He was often either ignored or mistreated by everyone except his nurse, to whom he was very close. When Ivan was age eight, his mother was poisoned and his nurse taken from him, an event which left him severely traumatized.

After the death of his mother, Ivan was alternately abused or ignored by the Boyars who ran the court. He

lived in virtual poverty inside his own palace, and was dressed up only when he was needed for court occasions. On those occasions he was dressed in robes and placed on the throne, to make his visitors think that the Russian monarchy was stable; however as soon as the occasion was ended, he was stripped of his robes and left in rags again. He never forgave or forgot this mistreatment.

As the rivalry in the Palace for the power of Russia escalated into a bloody feud, Ivan witnessed horrible things. Living in poverty he watched and heard murders, beatings, and verbal and physical abuse regularly. Incapable to strike at his tormentors, Ivan took out his terrible frustrations on defenseless animals, which he subjected to the horrific tortures in the fantasy that he was inflicting them on the men who terrorized him. On many occasions, he threw cats and dogs from the walls of the Kremlin to watch them die or become crippled.

On December 29, 1543 when he was sixteen, Ivan surprised his boyars by calling them to a meeting. He condemned them for their neglect of him and the nation, and denounced them for their misconduct, telling them he would punish their leader as an example. At a signal from Ivan, a heavily armed group of huntsmen seized Prince Andrew Shuisky and dragged him off. Outside, before a large crowd of Moscow citizens, the screaming prince was thrown into an enclosure with a pack of starved hunting dogs that immediately fell on Shuisky and devoured him. Thereafter, in a majestic ceremony in which gold coins were poured down upon his head, he crowned himself Czar.

Ivan remained paranoid and mentally unbalanced for the remainder of his life. He never lost his penchant for cruel torture, once ordering an elephant tortured to death because the unfortunate animal had stepped on his foot. On another occasion, an archbishop whom he suspected of disloyalty was sewn up in a bearskin and thrown into a pen of hungry wolves while Ivan watched. There is an unverified story that he ordered a boyar and his wife executed for an imagined offense, after which he took their infant son in his arms, carried the child to the top of the church tower, and threw it off. His extreme cruelty and the absolute power he exercised earned him the name of Ivan Grozny — "The Terrible."

Ivan married Anastasia Romanov, a member of a popular Boyar family as his bride, and soon declared war on the remnants of the Mongol Empire. Between 1552 and 1556, he greatly expanded Russian territory. At the same time, he abolished the distinction between hereditary boyar property, and land granted temporarily by the Czar for services rendered. Henceforth, all nobles, regardless of birth or standing, held their land on condition of their service to the Czar. Titles to all lands in Russia were his.

In 1560, following a war with the Polish-Lithuanian State, Ivan's beloved Anastasia died. Her death, together with quarrels with the Boyars over the war, made Ivan even more unbalanced and dangerous. In December 1564, in a dramatic move, the tsar, accompanied by his family and members of his household, left Moscow, ostensibly never to return. The royal caravan, however, did not travel far and settled down in the nearby Aleksandrovskaia Sloboda, which was to serve as Ivan's official residence until the end of his reign. Shortly thereafter Ivan, in messages to the Muscovites, announced his intention to abdicate. He bitterly attacked the boyars and the clergy, whose failings had allegedly forced him to renounce his royal status, but he exonerated the merchants, artisans, and the common people from all responsibility.

The not-unexpected result of this curious maneuver was the prayerful request of the Muscovites to Ivan to reconsider his decision and to resume his duties on his own terms. This he agreed to do; the price was a large indemnity to defray the cost of the royal flight, the surrender and execution of the leading boyars, and the creation of the *oprichnina*, a royal domain directly controlled by the tsar.

The *Oprichniki* were the forerunners of the Secret Police. They rode through Moscow, dressed in black and riding black horses. The emblem of their authority was a broom and a dog's head. The oprichniki constituted a security police whose relentless aim was to purge the land of treacherous elements. Ivan's victims suffered heartless torture. Many were drowned or strangled or flogged to death; some were impaled, others roasted on

a spit, still others fried in large skillets. The entire city of Novgorod was put to torture on the charge that its archbishop was planning to hand over the city to the Lithuanians. Sixty thousand of its citizens were butchered in a week-long orgy. But churchmen, boyars, and merchants whom Ivan suspected of treason were not the only ones to suffer. His favorites, the oprichniki leaders, died in an agonizing torture more fiendish than anything they had devised for their victims.

Ivan gathered around him at the Alexandrov Monastery, which became his headquarters and residence, a picked bodyguard of three hundred oprichniks whom he clothed in monk's garb and whom he commanded as abbot. His prodigious drinking bouts with his companions alternated with courts of cruelty where he tried out new methods of torture against his unfortunate victims. On occasion the tsar himself led the church service, preaching temperance and virtuous living to his oprichnik-monks and offering prayers for those he had condemned to death.

The name oprichnina disappeared seven years after its adoption, and the expanding territory under the new administration took on the name of "court land" or "domain land". It became a state within the state, complete with its own regularly constituted organization and functioning under time-honored administrative forms, but under completely new, unquestionably loyal officials, who owed their position, their land, and their very lives to the service they rendered the tsar. Here in his "domain" where the tsar ruled without let or hindrance, Ivan executed or tonsured or banished most of the old hereditary landowners and confiscated their estates. He transplanted thousands of leading families from one district to another in an obvious effort to destroy their influence, for he saw their power as a threat to good government and even to national survival. A few old boyar families voluntarily surrendered their lands and sought service in the new order, but in each case they received in exchange for their ancestral holdings distant new estates which they retained only under service tenure. The new landowner-vassal relationship made the gentry in the domain land completely subservient to the tsar.

Ivan's endless wars and demonic purges left much of central Russia depopulated. It was increasingly difficult for landed Boyars to squeeze a living for themselves out of the few peasants left on their landholdings. Since they demanded more and more from the Peasants, the peasants flew the coop, moving into territories Ivan had recently conquered. There they formed outlaw armies and free groups known as Cossacks. They maintained their independence beyond the reach of the landlord or Ivan's officials. To counter their flight, Ivan completed the process of tying the peasants to the land. They were then bound to serve the landholders perpetually, and the landowners were in turn bound to serve the Czar.

Ivan also assumed that Russia's trade and industries belonged to him also, so he tied them in place also, and taxed them heavily. Mines and means of production became royal monopolies. This was in marked contrast to Western Europe where capitalism had encouraged free enterprise and competition.

Two years before his own death in 1584 Ivan quarreled with his oldest son over the son's wife, whom Ivan despised. In the heat of argument, he struck his son with a cudgel and killed him. He never overcame the grief his vicious temper had brought him. The murder doomed the dynasty to extinction, for Ivan's sole remaining heir, his younger son Fedor, was a simpleton whose marriage was barren. Ivan himself died three years later, falling sick after a game of chess. He was 54 at the time of his demise. On his deathbed, as was the custom, he took monastic orders so that he could die a monk. For all his cruelty, he was an intensely religious man.

The end of the dynasty would bring turmoil. The chaos in which Ivan left the administration, the bitterly resentment of the boyars who had survived his purges, the sense of insecurity and fright felt by men of every class, the foreign enemies whose hatred of Russia Ivan's campaigns of pillage, torture, and desolation had sharpened--all compounded to leave the land weak and divided. For many years there would be serious question whether the nation could survive.

In the 1950's, Russian authorities opened Ivan's tomb, and examined his remains. From their study, they were able to reconstruct an image of him at the time of his death. They also discovered large amounts of mercury in his bones. Mercury was considered a remedy for violent headaches, from which Ivan reportedly suffered. Since Mercury is now known to be extremely toxic, it is entirely possible that his mental problems may have been at least partially due to mercury poisoning.