

## The Many Deaths of Ivan the Terrible and Their Interpretations

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### ABSTRACT

Born on August 25<sup>th</sup> 1530, Ivan the Terrible lived a relatively long life but was thought to be dead many times. During his childhood many rumors about his death circulated, contributing to the instability of court politics. In March 1553, shortly after his triumph, the conquest of Kazan (October 2 1552), he fell extremely ill, and a tragicomedy was played around his bed about the would-be succession. The many tales about this episode do not add up and were rewritten several times. Ivan's real death, on March 18<sup>th</sup> 1584, is recorded in very different ways in English and Russian sources. This paper explores the mechanics of History writing in Muscovy and the birth of Kremlinology abroad. The positivist approach consists of eliminating "errors" in each tale and establishing a plausible reconstruction of the chain of events. We try to understand the purpose of each narration and the reason why some elements are kept or omitted.

**Keywords:** Christian death, Ivan the Terrible, Muscovite historiography, Russian Orthodox Church, Succession to the throne.

Ivan the Terrible was born on August 25<sup>th</sup> 1530, lost his father at the age of 3 (December 4<sup>th</sup> 1533) and his mother at the age of 8 (April 8<sup>th</sup> 1538). During his childhood many rumors about his death circulated in Russia and abroad, contributing to the instability of court politics at that time. Ivan survived, though, to become the first Russian Tsar (January 16<sup>th</sup> 1547) and to conquer the Tatar city of Kazan (October 2 1552). But shortly after that, in March 1553, the Tsar fell extremely ill, and a tragicomedy was played around his bed about the would-be succession. The situation is reported in Muscovite chronicles and in Ivan's famous correspondence with prince Andrei Kurbskii. The main feature of these tales is that they do not add up but give us quite different versions at different times. Finally, Ivan the Terrible died on March 18<sup>th</sup> 1584, almost exactly 430 years ago. His last moments are duly recorded by English and Russian sources. But upon reading them, one has the sensation that native and foreign authors describe totally different events. To explain these discrepancies one has to explore the mechanics of History writing in Muscovy and the birth of "Kremlinology" abroad. Russian official chronicle compilations (*svody*) have been repeatedly edited during Ivan the Terrible's reign and one can feel his imprint on this process. Foreign sources, especially Jerome Horsey's tale of Ivan the Terrible's last hours, show the prejudices of their author and the state of England's relations with Russia. A positivist approach consists of eliminating "errors" in each tale and establishing a plausible reconstruction of the chain of events. I shall try to understand the purpose of each narration and the reason why some elements are kept or omitted.

Ivan's attitude is modeled on his father's legacy. As he only knew him for a very short time, his memory depended on oral memory and Muscovite annals. The so called *Nikon's Chronicle*, starting from the Kievan period, was compiled in the years 1522 to 1539. The *Chronicle of the Beginning of the Reign*, covers the years 1533 to 1552. Shortly after that, the Metropolitan Makarios, head of the Russian Church, imagined a new kind of history,

arranged by reigns and called the *Book of Degrees of Royal Genealogy* (1556-1563). Later, probably between 1568 and 1576, Ivan the Terrible used the same material for his *Illuminated Chronicle*. This gave new versions of crucial events, particularly for the years 1533-1553. Both the *Book of Degrees* and the *Illuminated Chronicle* were interrupted in the middle of Ivan's reign. Later annals, some of them non official, filled the gap.

## I. His Father's Death: A Model

Muscovite official sources give a very thorough account of Basil III's last months<sup>1</sup>. Nearing the age of 55, Basil had reached the term of a Muscovite sovereign's life expectancy: Dmitri Donskoi died at 38, Basil I at 54, Basil II at 47. Only Ivan III, Basil III's father, reached 65. Basil III was a very pious man who liked to "philosophize about his soul" with monks<sup>2</sup>. He turned the practice of pilgrimages into a court ritual and before his second marriage to Elena Glinskaia, he made frequent trips to the Holy Trinity Saint-Sergius monastery (80 km north of Moscow) to pray for an heir. After having fathered Ivan and his brother Yuri, he kept this habit and mixed devotion with pleasure by hunting in the countryside.

In September 1533, in the middle of his progress in the greater Moscow region, he fell ill. A tumor grew on his groin and soon he was not able ride a horse anymore. His retinue had to bring him back to Moscow lying in a cart as discretely as possible, in order to keep foreign diplomats in the dark about the sovereign's condition. In the capital, Basil took council with his boyars about his last will and consulted his German doctor. This very influential man, one Nicholas Bülow, confessed his impotence: "Can I make a living from the dead? I am not God". Basil answers stoically: "I am yours no more". He then took steps to become a monk, something "he wanted for a very long time". This practice of taking the habit *in articulo mortis* was well known in Russia and in the Muscovite family. Alexander Nevski (d. 1263), the father of Daniel, the first prince of Moscow, died as a monk. From Daniel (d. 1303) to Ivan II (d. 1359) all Muscovite princes who had time enough to take their last dispositions did the same. But this tradition came to an end with Dmitri Donskoi (d. 1389). From then on, it becomes clear that the head of the Muscovite dynasty, now a major power in Eastern Europe, cannot just renounce his power. The reason is simple: in case he would not die quickly, he would be a menace to his own heir, creating a potential duality of power. Basil II, who had to fight a long and ugly dynastic war to keep his throne (1432-1453) had, maybe more than any other the wish to enter a monastic order on his deathbed. Yet, he was denied his vows by his entourage in 1462<sup>3</sup>. It was a paradox of autocracy that the autocrat could not cease to be one.

Basil III also had to face stiff opposition when he declared his monastic vocation. His younger brother Andrei went back to the origins of the Russian ruling dynasty, saying:

<sup>1</sup> *Povest' o bolezni i smerti Vasilija III*, in *Pamjatniki literatury Drevnej Rusi*. [7] *Seredina XVI veka*, Moscow, 1985, p. 18-47 [Hereafter: PLDR.7]; P. Gonneau, « Vasilij III et Charles Quint face à la mort ou le prince et l'habit des anges : essai d'étude comparative », in *Être catholique, être orthodoxe, être protestant : confessions et identités culturelles en Europe médiévale et moderne*, éd. par M. Derwich, M. Dmitriev, Wrocław, 2003, p. 235-251.

<sup>2</sup> *Polnoe sobranie russkix letopisej* [Hereafter PSRL], t.13, p. 418.

<sup>3</sup> «They did not give him this freedom», PSRL.18, p. 215; PSRL.25, p. 278; PSRL.26, p. 220; PSRL.12, p.114-115 ; PSRL.8, p.149.

that Vladimir, Grand Prince of Kiev died without becoming a monk, and asked if he was considered unworthy of the eternal rest of the Just?<sup>4</sup>; on his side Basil had prominent members of the Court clergy. At the very last moment, Metropolitan Daniel had to threaten prince Andrei with excommunication to go on with Basil's tonsure.

Meanwhile, Basil had sent for icons and ordered prayers that testify both to State ritual and his own devotion. He was presented with the Icon of the Mother of God of Vladimir, already a kind of palladium for Muscovy. His father Ivan III had prayed in front of this image before his military expedition that brought down Novgorod in 1471. Basil also venerated the icons of St. Nicholas of Gostuni and St. Catherine<sup>5</sup>. In a kind of trance, he called on the Saint herself: « Lady Catherine the Great, it is time for us to reign »<sup>6</sup>. Among Russian Saints, he called on St. Sergius of Radonezh, holy founder of the Trinity monastery who gave him his son Ivan.

The political aspects of the sovereign's last moments are not forgotten. The young heir to the throne was brought to the bedroom of his father. Basil blessed him with the pectoral cross of late Metropolitan Peter (d. 1326), the first Muscovite Saint, and reminded the audience that all Muscovite princes did the same with their sons, starting from Ivan I Kalita (d. 1341). Thus, Peter's protection is transmitted from generation to generation<sup>7</sup>. His wife, Elena, was less welcome. She was admitted to her husband's deathbed, but Basil had little patience for her laments and said to her: "Woman, cease, do not cry" and assured her that he had provided for her "as suits", which meant that she would receive a dowry, no more. When she insisted, he called in their second son, Youri, only a year old. He offered him another venerable pectoral cross, but one could guess he had not that in mind in the first place. Finally, he gave Elena a last kiss and dismissed her<sup>8</sup>. This episode is very revealing when compared to the treatment of Elena's destiny in the later pages of Muscovite official sources. Ivan the Terrible had them rewritten in order to substantiate the thesis that his father chose his mother as regent, which is evidently not the truth.

The atmosphere was even more intense in Basil III's last hours. At the end of his bed he had placed an old servant, Fedor Kuchetski, who saw Ivan III's death, and instructed him to watch carefully when he would be about to pass away. Then, and then only, his confessor would have to give him the last sacraments. To his second brother Yuri, Basil also talked about their father's death and told him he felt that his moment was close<sup>9</sup>. The rite of tonsure began, in spite of Andrei, the younger brother. Basil wanted to become a monk of Saint-Cyril of Beloozero Abbey, but the abbot of this well-known monastery was not present in Moscow to receive him; thus the Trinity-Saint-Sergius would do. Suddenly no one could find the monastic cope prepared for the ceremony and kept hidden. The Trinity's cellarer had to strip off his own cope to accommodate the grand prince. Basil died under his new name of Barlaam on December 4: « As they put the Gospel on his chest, Shigona [one of his closest

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<sup>4</sup> PLDR.7, p. 40.

<sup>5</sup> PLDR.7, p. 38.

<sup>6</sup> PLDR.7, p. 40.

<sup>7</sup> PLDR.7, p. 36.

<sup>8</sup> PLDR.7, p. 38.

<sup>9</sup> PLDR.7, p. 38-40.

advisors] saw his spirit quit him, like a thin smoke ». The epilogue of the tale makes some allusion to sanctity: Basil's face was white, his purulent wound ceased to smell and a soft odour filled the space around him. But these signs were not followed by miracles and grand princes did not join the ranks of saints<sup>10</sup>. Basil was then treated as a monk in preparation for the funeral, but he would not be buried in his monastery. Like almost all his male ancestors, he is brought to the church of the Archangel Michael (*Arkhangelski sobor*) recently rebuilt in 1505-1509<sup>11</sup>. Soon, an icon was painted and placed upon the wall above his tomb. It depicted the grand prince as a monk, facing his patron saint, Basil the Great<sup>12</sup>. Thus Basil III's ultimate message to his son is that he has two callings: royal and monastic. This idea was already expressed in the Vita of Dmitri Donskoi: "While holding the rank of a tsar, he lived as an angel [that is a monk] »<sup>13</sup>.

## II. Ivan's Childhood: The Imprint of Death

There seem to have been regular concerns about young Ivan's and Yuri's health and they were rumored to be dead several times. Of course part of this was ordinary Court gossip, especially in time of regency. Yet, death cast a long shadow upon the young grand prince. Between 11 December 1533 and June 1534, one Ivashko the Black declared that sorcerers were responsible for Basil III's death. They were still on the run, hidden in Moscow by powerful people and ready to exercise again their evil trade. Of course, Ivashko offered to reveal names for a reward<sup>14</sup>. At the end of June, Russian gentlemen crossed the border to Lithuania and told everyone that Ivan and his brother Basil (sic) were dead, but the news was kept secret in Moscow<sup>15</sup>. Again, in autumn 1542, the Tatars of Crimea heard rumors about Ivan's death. The perils of infant illnesses were real enough and we know from one letter from his father to his mother and by Ivan's own correspondence with Andrei Kurbskii, that the young grand prince was very particular about the time and the content of his meals<sup>16</sup>. But other reasons than his personal health can explain the somber tone of his childhood.

In the course of five years, Ivan lost all his closest male parents and finally his mother. The circumstances of these disappearances were either *raison d'état*, or suspicious death, at least in the eyes of the young child. One week after his father's passing away, on 11 September 1533, Basil III's eldest surviving brother, Yuri, was arrested and thrown into jail, although he had sworn fidelity to Ivan. Such political elimination came as no surprise to one

<sup>10</sup> PLDR.7, p. 42.

<sup>11</sup> Nikon's Chronicle devotes a long entry to the new arrangement of tombs under the year 1507, PSRL.13, p.6-8. See also I. L. Buseva-Davydova, *Xramy Moskovskogo kremlja : svjatyni i drevnosti*, Moscow, 1997, p. 126-127 (with plan).

<sup>12</sup> *Vera i vlast' : èpoxa Ivana Groznogo*, Moscow, 2007, n° 39, p. 106-107. The icon is 216 by 164 cm.

<sup>13</sup> PLDR.4, p.214.

<sup>14</sup> M. Krom, *Vdovstvujučee carstvo: političeskij krizis v Rossii 30 – 40-x godov XVI veka*, Moscou, 2010, p. 98-99, 112.

<sup>15</sup> *Radzivillovskie akty iz sobranija Rossijskoj nacional'noj biblioteki. Pervaja polovina XVI v.*, éd. M. M. Krom, Moscow; Warsaw, 2002, n° 31, p. 86.

<sup>16</sup> *Pis'ma russkix gosudarej i drugix osob carskago semejstva*, t. 1, Moscow, 1848, p. 3-5; *Perepiska Ivana Groznogo s Andreem Kurbskim*, éd. Ja.S. Lur'e, Ju.D. Rykov, M., 1993, p. 28.

who was familiar with the corridors of power in Muscovy, yet it was only the beginning. On 19 August 1534, Mikhail Glinskii, Elena Glinskaia's uncle and protector was also arrested. In both cases, the Court stood unanimously behind these decisions and Elena Glinskaia approved them. It was precisely thanks to them that she became the regent. One may not believe the foreign diplomat Sigismund von Herberstein who wrote that Elena was impatient to get rid of her uncle because he blamed her for her liaison with a favorite, but it is clear that she sacrificed her own clan in order to assume the central position of caretaker or regent<sup>17</sup>. Uncle Yuri and Mikhail Glinskii died in their jail in August and September 1536. Yuri is said to have suffered "a martyr's death, tormented by hunger"<sup>18</sup>.

The next in line for succession, besides Ivan's younger brother, was his last uncle, Andrei. Very soon mutual distrust between him and the Muscovite elites brought his doom. In May 1537 he tried to organize an uprising among the little nobility in the region of Novgorod, but he was persuaded to deposit arms and come to Moscow<sup>19</sup>. But as soon as he entered the capital he was arrested, on 2 June and he died "a suffering death", in December<sup>20</sup>. He left a wife and a son who spent some years as prisoners, before being restored to their rank (December 1540). Vladimir Andreevich, Prince Andrei's son, would be Ivan the Terrible's closest parent on the male line, to his own peril.

Elena Glinskaia had become the "mistress" of the political game in June 1537, but she perished a few months later, on 3 April 1538. Ivan would keep the memory of a young and fragile widow, surrounded by hostile foreign powers and attacked by traitors in her own country<sup>21</sup>. This paranoid vision of permanent plots and of death would come back to him many times, even after he assumed imperial power by being crowned Tsar in Moscow on 16 January 1547. This was especially true of the political and dynastic crisis of 1553.

### III. The Crisis of 1553: The Plot Within the Plot

The situation of the Muscovite state in autumn 1552 was excellent. On October 2, Ivan the Terrible commanded the forces that took by storm the city of Kazan, capital of a Tatar khanate, heir to the Golden Horde, that had menaced and sometimes humiliated Moscow for two centuries. Returning home, Ivan learned that his wife, Anastasia, had given birth to their first son. Ivan then emphasized his bond with his ancestor Dimitri Donskoi, the first Russian prince who defeated a Tatar general at the Battle of Kulikovo (1380). Before and after his campaign, Ivan visited the Trinity-St-Sergius monastery, as Dmitri Donskoi had supposedly done, to secure the benediction of Abbot Sergius<sup>22</sup>. Ivan the Terrible chose also to name his

<sup>17</sup> S. von Herberstein, *Zapiski o Moskovii v dvux tomax*, éd. A.I. Malein, A.V. Nazarenko, Moscow, 2008, t.1, p. 100-102; M. Krom, *Vdovstvjuščee carstvo*, p. 108, 137.

<sup>18</sup> PSRL.13, p.115, PSRL.29, p.27; M. Krom, *Vdovstvjuščee carstvo*, p. 168, note 1; PLDR.8, p.340.

<sup>19</sup> Local chronicles describe how Andrei was tricked into submission on formal instructions from Elena Glinskaia. PSRL.26, p. 317-318; PSRL.28, p. 357; PSRL.34, p.25. Novgorodian chronicles confirm most of the tale, PSRL.4.1, vyp. 3, p. 616 and PSRL.43, p.241. Muscovite sources pretend that Elena promised nothing and that her general made offers in his own name, far outstretching his instructions. This is a ploy to exonerate Elena from the charge of perjury. PSRL.29, p.29; PSRL.8, p.294.

<sup>20</sup> PSRL.13.121.

<sup>21</sup> *Perepiska Ivana Groznogo s Andreem Kurbskim*, éd. Ja.S. Lur'e, Ju.D. Rykov, M., 1993, p. 27.

<sup>22</sup> A. Vaillant, « Les récits de Koulikovo, 'Relation des chroniques' et 'Skazanie de Mamaï' », *Revue des études*

son Dmitri and to have him baptized at the Trinity. Yet, in March 1553, when he fell severely ill, to the point that he saw himself dying, Ivan discovered that his boyars were not ready to swear fidelity to his son. This episode is one of the most frequently edited in Muscovite official historiography of the time, so that one has to peel off every layer of the tale.

The earliest narrative sources are quite laconic, wishing to sweep away the annoying facts. The *Chronicle of the Beginning of the Reign* states simply that “the great fire, that is the ardent illness” brought upon Ivan at that time was a celestial warning and drove everyone back to piety<sup>23</sup>. It seems therefore logical that Ivan, as soon as he was cured, should take with him his brother, his wife, and his son on a pilgrimage. He visited Trinity-St-Sergius, St-Nicholas on the Pesnosha and went as far as St-Cyril of Beloozero, up north. But on his way back, in June, Tsarevich Dmitri died suddenly<sup>24</sup>. The *Book of Degrees* states that Dmitri was the victim of an «illness», without further details<sup>25</sup>.

Eleven years later, Ivan himself, in his first letter to Andrei Kurbskii (June 1564), accused two of his closest advisers, Aleksei Adashev and the priest Sylvester, and many other (unnamed) “so-called good servants” of the monarchy: seized by the lust for power, as they see their Tsar dying, they were prepared to kill his infant son and to crown his cousin, Vladimir Andreevich<sup>26</sup>. Kurbskii did not answer the charges, certainly considering them to be part of the many fantastic accusations made by Ivan. But later, in his book *History of the Grand Prince of Muscovy* (ca. 1573-1578), he turned the episode of the Tsarevich’s death into a moral tale about the folly of the prince and his punishment<sup>27</sup>. Ivan’s pilgrimage was painted as an absurd enterprise, against which he was strongly advised by a holy man, Maxim the Greek. This venerable monk, who had suffered under Basil III’s reign explained to Ivan that his vow was unreasonable, because travel would expose him and his family to serious risks. Besides, God and the saints hear our prayers from wherever we speak. But Ivan would not listen, even when Maxim predicted that he would lose his son. He preferred to consult another monk, who was the exact opposite of Maxim. Bassian Toporkov, an evil courtesan (in the eyes of Kurbskii at least), formerly very close to Basil III, told Ivan: « If you wish to be an autocrat, do not keep beside you a single counsellor wiser than yourself, for you yourself are better than all; thus you shall be firm in the realm and you shall hold all men in your hands ». Ivan was delighted: “O, even if my father had been alive, he would not have given me such useful advice!”<sup>28</sup>.

Can we trust Kurbskii on this? He has been proven wrong many times and this tale seems too perfect to be true. Yet, Maxim the Greek and Bassian Toporkov are genuine and it is a fact that the Tsarevich Dmitri died during the trip to Beloozero, whether on the way there (as Kurbskii states) or back (as in the *Chronicle of the Beginning of the Reign*)<sup>29</sup>. A

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slaves, 39 (1961), p. 59-69 ; P. Gonneau, *À l’aube de la Russie moscovite*, p. 30-32, 226-232.

<sup>23</sup> PSRL.13, p. 222-223, 229-231.

<sup>24</sup> PSRL.13.231-232.

<sup>25</sup> SKDS, t. 2, p. 375.

<sup>26</sup> PIGAK, p.25, 32.

<sup>27</sup> PLDR.8, p. 262-264,272.

<sup>28</sup> PLDR.8, p. 262-266 ; Fennell, p.82-83.

<sup>29</sup> PSRL.13, p. 232.

17<sup>th</sup> Century chronicle omits the discussions with Maxim and Bassian but reports that the Tsarevich was drowned. The royal party was travelling by boat. Since Dmitri's nanny carried him in her arms, she was herself carried by the Tsarevich's uncles Daniel Romanovich and Basil Mikhailovich Zakharin<sup>30</sup>. By accident, she dropped the child who fell into the Sheksna River<sup>31</sup>. This sorry tale, with folk connotations, may well have been a later addition, but it testifies to the shock inspired by Dmitri's demise.

Meanwhile, Ivan the Terrible was obviously not content with the tale of his own illness as it stood. He (or someone close to him) devoted a lot of attention to the episode while supervising the redaction of his *Illuminated Chronicle*, between 1568 and 1576. The timing of this enterprise is telling. In January 1565, Ivan had left his capital, Moscow, and introduced a new regime, the *oprichnina*, dividing the country in two halves. In October 1568, he ordered the current annals to be sent to him from Moscow. Muscovite historiography is then interrupted, pending a complete rewriting. The *oprichnina* was suppressed around September 1572, but Ivan kept a strong taste for *coup de théâtre*. In autumn 1575 he simulated a new abdication and staged a puppet sovereign, of Tatar origin, Semen Bekbulatovich. One of the reasons for this was his renewed fear of treason. Thus one can understand the need to give a more detailed narration of the events of 1553. In fact, Ivan gives us two successive tales.

The *Synodal Tome* of the *Illuminated Chronicle* represents a first try. Its main text is taken from the *Chronicle of the Beginning of the Reign*, but it is supplemented with additions and deletions in the margins. According to them, on July 1554, a well-known courtier prince Nikita Semenovich Lobanov-Rostovki, under questioning, confessed what went on a year earlier. Between March 1 and 3, he was approached by Prince Vladimir Andreevich and his mother, who recruited sympathizers. Meanwhile many boyars were saying that swearing allegiance to tsarevich Dimitri meant in fact obeying to the Zakharin clan. This would be a dishonor, considering the low rank of this family. But everything was hushed up when Ivan the Terrible recovered<sup>32</sup>.

The *Imperial Book* of the *Illuminated Chronicle* gives us a second look at the events. It was copied after the *Synodal Tome* and its main text incorporates many of the corrections we see in the margins of the former. But here it goes farther. One can read a special report, *About the tsar's illness*, written as a kind of diary of the three first days of March 1553<sup>33</sup>. On the first day, as Ivan thought he was about to die, only seven boyars (of a total of 30) accepted swearing fidelity to his son Dmitri. Those who did not were said to be negotiating with Vladimir Andreevich and his mother (but there is no question of killing young Dmitri). There may be also people playing a double game. Then the priest Sylvester tried his own game. Described, with marked hostility (very much in the spirit of Ivan's letters to Kurbskii) as an all-mighty favorite and a friend of Vladimir's cause, he supported the tsar's cousin and protested against the fact that he was kept apart and could not see the sovereign. On March 2, most of the members of the Privy Council accepted to swear allegiance. But other courtiers

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<sup>30</sup> The Zakharins are the family of tsarina Anastasia, daughter of Roman Yuriev Zakharin. The clan will become more famous under the family name Romanov.

<sup>31</sup> PSRL.34, p. 229, Moscow Chronicle, dated from 1635-1645 by its editor.

<sup>32</sup> PSRL.13, p. 237-238.

<sup>33</sup> PSRL.13, p. 522-526.

demand to see Ivan in person, suspecting that he may be already dead. Finally, the door to the tsar's bedroom was opened. Ivan made a moving address, exhorting the boyars not to "forget their soul"; they will serve his son, not the Zakharins. Meanwhile he told the Zakharins to brace themselves for the fight because they would be the first to be executed if his son lost the throne. And there could be secession and civil war, because loyal servants should flee abroad with the tsarevich if he was denied his heritage. In the end, even the recalcitrants swore the oath. On 3 March, Ivan recovered and called Vladimir Andreevich who had to swear also, followed by his mother. But the conclusion was bitter: "Therefore there was a great enmity between the Sovereign and Prince Vladimir Andreevich, trouble and revolt among the boyars and in the kingdom scarcity of everything"<sup>34</sup>.

It is difficult, almost impossible to say which version is the closer to the truth. The personal memory of the story teller (probably Ivan himself) is faulty at least on some details. For example, he is sometimes wrong about the exact rank of some of the protagonists in March 1553. And Vladimir Andreevich did not swear once, but three times, on three different oaths<sup>35</sup>. The aftermath of the crisis is nonetheless confusing, because some of the "rioters" of March 1553 were, in fact, promoted, such as Fedor Adashev<sup>36</sup>. And the two most prominent Zakharins, Daniel and Basil, were set aside for some time<sup>37</sup>. It seems, in fact, that Ivan was forced to listen to the complaints of the Court against them and accepted that they be set back to their proper place. The discrepancies are even more striking about Ivan's own death, thirty years later.

#### IV. Ivan's Last Hours: The Chessplayer or the Monk?

Thanks to the discovery of a Northern maritime route to Russia and the founding of the Muscovy Company (1554), we have an interesting corpus of English sources on Ivan's reign. The most precious is Jerome Horsey, a direct witness to Ivan's death. Endowed with "a delicate blend of ruthlessness and charm", he worked for the Company between 1573 and 1591 and became "an ideal link" between Russia and England, but acquired many enemies in both countries<sup>38</sup>. The eleventh chapter of his *Travels* show very vividly the mix of disarray, improvisation, and efficiency displayed on 18 March 1584 in the inner circle of the Kremlin<sup>39</sup>.

The atmosphere was heavy. Everyone was "wearied and tired with the devilish tyrannical practices, horrible influences, and wicked devices of this Heliogabalus". Ivan had alarmed his in-laws, the Godunovs, with his renewed projects of marriage to an Englishwoman. There were rumors that he was ready to give his crown to the heir of this future match, instead of to Fedor, the last remaining son of his first marriage, and Irina Godunova's husband. Ivan did not ignore that the Godunovs "plotted a remedy to cross and overthrow all these designs". He

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<sup>34</sup> PSRL.13, p. 526.

<sup>35</sup> On 12 March 1553, April and May 1554. SGGD.1.460-468.

<sup>36</sup> A. I. Filjuškin, *Istorija odnoj mistifikacii* : Ivan Groznyj i "Izbrannaja rada", Moscou, 1998, p. 83.

<sup>37</sup> A. I. Filjuškin, *Istorija odnoj mistifikacii*, p. 92-93.

<sup>38</sup> *Rude and Barbarous Kingdom: Russia in the Accounts of Sixteenth-Century English Voyagers*, ed. L.E. Berry, R.O. Crummey, Madison ; Milwaukee ; London, 1968, p. 250.

<sup>39</sup> *Rude and Barbarous Kingdom*, p. 303-307.



hired magicians from Lapland to know the future, but they predicted that “the best signs and strongest planets of heaven [are] against [him], which would produce his end by such a day”.

Ivan was “carried every day in his chair into his treasury”. On that fatal 18 March 1584, “the prince beckoned to me [Horsey] to follow”. The memorable scene that followed inspired the Russian painter Aleksandr Litovshenko (1835-1890) who illustrated it. Horsey goes on: “I stood among the rest venturously and heard him call for some precious stones and jewels. Told the prince and nobles present before and about him the virtue of such and such, which I observed”. Then follows a kind of conference held by Ivan himself: “This fair coral and this fair turquoise you see; take in your hand; of his nature are orient colors; put them on my hand and arm. I am poisoned with disease; you see they show their virtue by the change of their pure color into pall; declares my death”. But the tsar was not yet resigned to bid his farewell. On another whim, he ordered: “Seek out for some spiders.” He forced his physician, Johan Eilof<sup>40</sup>, to scrape a circle thereof upon the table; put within it one spider and so one other and died, and some other without that ran alive apace from it. “It is too late, it will not preserve me”. The conference in the Treasury went on with the examination of a most precious diamond, ruby, emerald, onyx. Then, all of a sudden, Ivan declared: “I faint; carry me away till another time”.

This alert was only the first, and Ivan recovered quickly. As Horsey comments: “In the afternoon peruseth over his will and yet thinks not to die<sup>41</sup>. Instead of calling a priest, “he sends his favorite to his witches again to know their calculations. He comes and tells them the emperor will bury or burn them all quick for their false illusions and lies. The day is come; he is as heart whole as ever he was. “Sir, be not so wrathful. You know the day is come and ends with the setting of the sun.” About the third hour of the day the emperor went into it, took solace himself and made merry with pleasant songs as he useth to do, came out about the seventh hour well refreshed; brought forth, sets him down upon his bed, calls Rodion Birkin, a gentleman whom he favored, to bring the board. He set his men, his chief favorite and Boris Fedorovich Godunov and others about him. The emperor in his loose gown, shirt, and linen hose fainted and fell backward. There was a great outcry and stir; one sent for aqua-vitae, another to the apothecary for marigold and rosewater and to call his ghostly father and the physicians. In the mean he was strangled and died.

In itself the word *strangled* does not seem to mean that there was foul play, but Horsey is perfectly aware that no one was very eager for the tsar to recover, especially after the date predicted for his death. The magicians from Lapland were not the only one fearing retaliation. The conclusion of the chapter shows that a new man takes charge:

“Some show of hope was made for recovery to still the outcry. The said Bogdan Bel’skii and Boris Fedorovich, unto whom the emperor had bequeathed, the first, of four other

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<sup>40</sup> Johan Eilof (or Eylof) was court physician in the last years of Ivan IV.

<sup>41</sup> It may or may not be the testament still kept in Moscow’s archives and published in Duxovnye i dogovornye gramoty velikix i udel’nyx knjazej XIV-XV vv., éd. L.V. Čerepnin, Moscow ; Leningrad, 1950, p. 426-444. This document is a late 19th c. copy and its authenticity has been discussed, see V. I. Koreckij, « Smert’ groznogo carja », Voprosy istorii 1979.9, p. 102 (supposes another testament, destroyed by Godunov) and C. Soldat, Das Testament Ivans des Schrecklichen von 1572. Eine kritische Aufklärung, Lewiston ; Queenston, Lampeter, 2013.

noblemen and brother to this Emperor Fedor Ivanovich his wife and empress that must now succeed, the government of all, go out upon the terrace, accompanied so suddenly at hand with so many and other multitudes of the nobility, his familiar friends, as it was strange to behold. Cried out to the captains and gunners to keep their guard strong and the gates sure about the palace, with their pieces and matches lighted; the gates of the castle presently shut and well watched. I offered myself, men, powder, and pistols to attend the prince protector; he accepted me among his family and servants, passing by with a cheerful countenance upon me said, "Be faithful and fear not."

Muscovite chronicles give us a totally different account. According to them, Ivan the Terrible suffered from a grave illness, and he foresaw his end. He sent for metropolitan Denis and ordered him to perform the rite of monastic tonsure. He entrusted his son Fedor with Russia's scepter and died under the name of Jonah<sup>42</sup>. One cannot help but notice the strict coincidence with Basil III's death. This is how it should have been. A later narrative source, more independent from the Court, the so called *Muscovite Chronicle*, betrays what really happened. Ivan died so suddenly that his confessor arrived too late. Father Feodosi Viatka, a survivor of the *oprichnina* regime performed the tonsure *post mortem*. This was, of course an uncanonical practice, but the official truth prevailed: Ivan died as a monk and should be remembered as such, yet as a Tsar he is buried in the Arkhangel'skii Sobor, with his father and ancestors<sup>43</sup>.

## Conclusion

Ivan the Terrible died on a tense day, trying to relax among his courtiers. In spite of a first alert (fainting), he did not follow his father's path by calling for his clergymen, icons and prayers, neither did he send for his sons and his wife. Granted, Tsarina Maria Nagaia was his seventh spouse and did not have, in the eye of the sovereign, the same status as his long lost Anastasia. There was no ceremony of oath to the heir of the throne, maybe to avoid the open resistance of the boyars, as in 1553. Ivan died suddenly, leaving all the burden of power at once, but Boris Godunov rose to the occasion and took charge. Yet, Ivan had long ago provided for a perfect death, almost in the fashion of ex-emperor Charles V (Carlos Quinto). As early as 1567, upon a visit to the Abbey of St Cyril in Beloozero, he had told the brethren that he wanted to become a monk; six years later he wrote them a very long Epistle in the best fashion of pastoral literature<sup>44</sup>. His testament, written probably in the summer of 1572, is also full of repentance<sup>45</sup>. Most of all, after he killed his son Tsarevich Ivan, in 1581, Ivan sent to the major abbeys of his realms long lists of all his victims (about 2700 persons, including women and children!)<sup>46</sup>. This *Obituary of the Disgraced* marks Ivan's reconciliation with all those he "dispatched" to a better world. And of course, Ivan's father's confessor knew that

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<sup>42</sup> PSRL.14, p.2 (Ivan dies on 19 March); PSRL.14, p. 34-35 (Ivan dies on 18 March); PSRL.29, p.219 and 222 (the new tsar Fedor, upon his coronation, evokes his father's passing).

<sup>43</sup> PSRL.34, p. 229.

<sup>44</sup> Poslanija Ivana Groznogo, éd. D.S. Lixačev, Ja.S. Lur'e, Moscow; Leningrad, 1951, p. 162-192.

<sup>45</sup> Duxovnye i dogovornye gramoty velikix i udel'nyx knjazej XIV-XV vv., n°104, p. 426-444.

<sup>46</sup> Published in R.G. Skrynnikov, Carstvo terrora, St-Petersburg, 1992, p.529-544.

the Tsar wanted to die as a monk, just like his father. Basil III had just the time to perform the ritual of tonsure before the “little fume” of his soul went away. Ivan was caught by surprise, but his intentions were clear enough. Whose tale is right? Horsey’s or the one written by an anonymous Russian chronicler who described Ivan’s Christian death? I would propose both of them are.

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