Ivan IV Vasilievich the Terrible

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Tsar Ivan IV Vasilievich, better known today as Ivan the Terrible, has shaped and impacted the history of Russia and Europe. Through his childhood, young Ivan dealt with many influences from family members, political figures, and the pressures of assuming the role as figure-head of all Russia. His adult life was dynamically changing and evolving, and it was during this time that he gained the namesake “Ivan the Terrible.” Different factors in the life of every person on earth affect who they one day become. This too was the case for Ivan IV; however, the influences during his early years were so damaging that they ultimately led to his suspected insanity and darkened page in the annals of history. The question examined here is: Was Ivan IV Vasilievich really so terrible, or were his actions just simply misunderstood and blamed on evil nature?

It seems that the fate of Ivan IV Vasilievich was doomed even before his birth. His father, Grand Prince Vasily III, son of Ivan III the Great, ruled Russia with a lighter hand than that of his father; yet, he was troubled by his lack of an heir and problems with succession. Vasily’s wife at the time, the Grand Princess Salomonia, who came from a noble Boyar family had one serious flaw: she was barren. The rule of the Greek Orthodox Church; however, was that divorce is unacceptable, especially on the basis of barrenness. Vasily was understandably in a conflicting situation. While he cared for his wife, he needed an heir. Moreover, when questioning the Boyars as to what he should do, they replied, “Lord, Grand Prince, the barren fig tree must be cut down and cast out of the orchard!” On the other hand, Salomonia contested that it was God’s will that she was barren and she should not be cast aside. Vasily’s ultimately decision was to divorce his wife and send her to a nunnery in Suzdal. This choice did not come without a stern disapproval from the Patriarch in Jerusalem: “If you should do this evil thing, you shall have an evil son. Your nation shall become prey to terrors and tears. Rivers of blood will flow, the heads of the mighty will fall, your cities will be devoured by flames.” Though this ominous warning was given, Vasily III married Princess Elena Glinskaya, Lithuanian residing in Russia. Vasily’s second marriage brought about conflicting views within the Russian court. Her foreign presence in the court, and marriage with the Grand Prince, unnerved those with governmental influence. In addition to this, her...
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uncle was Prince Mikhail Glinsky, who had been arrested and imprisoned for treason. Finally, after four years of trying, Elena gave birth to a son. Oddly enough, chroniclers of the time wrote accounts of unusual thunderstorms occurring all over Russia when the child was born. Whether these stories are true or not is, of course questioned, but they do almost coincide with the warnings that came from the Patriarch.

On August 25, 1530 the announcement of birth was proclaimed to the people on the Square in Moscow, and on September 4, 1530, the child was taken to the Troiista-Sergeyevsky Monastery where he was christened. Following this, he was laid atop the tomb of St. Sergius of Radonezh where he received his name. The thought behind this was that the child would forever be blessed by the Holy Trinity and that St. Sergius would protect him. During a very solemn ceremony, the child was given the name Ivan, which is the Russian equivalent to John, named after John the Baptist. At one point, Vasily prayed for Ivan to St. Sergius, “O Sergius, by your prayers to the Holy Trinity, you gave me my son. Protect him from all evil, seen and unseen, until he has grown in strength. All my faith is placed on you.” It is interesting to note that Vasily’s prayer, appropriate as it was, appeared to be a foreshadowing of what eventually would not come to pass.

While Ivan was a young child, Vasily grew ill due to a boil on his thigh, most likely caused by horseback riding. His condition progressively worsened and he became worried about the succession of Ivan at such a young age. Vasily knew that he would have to act quickly if he were to secure the throne for his son. Calling upon two of his secretaries, Vasily instructed them to covertly return to Moscow and retrieve his will, his father’s, and grandfather’s. Upon returning, Vasily destroyed his first will, which was drawn up while he was still married to Salomonia. The new will left all of Russia to Ivan with Elena serving as Regent until he matured of age. Once the document was official, Vasily decided that he should return to Moscow in secret so that no one is aware of the severity of his condition. Once he arrived, Vasily went through the process of informing those in the government about his will and Ivan as successor.

Before Vasily died, he wished to resign his position as Grand Prince and be ordained as a monk. There was some debate over this decision, but the Metropolitan dismissed their arguments and quickly ordained Vasily as the monk Vassian. On December 3, 1533, Vasily finally succumbed to his ailment. It is interesting to note; however, that he was laid to rest as Grand Prince Vasily (not the monk Vassian) in a stone coffin next to his father in the Cathedral of Michael the Archangel.

Russia had reached a turning point in her history. This was the first time in nearly a century of rule by Ivan III and Vasily III that the nation would go without an

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adult male ruler on the throne. Technically Ivan IV was the official ruler of all of Russia; however, he was three years old. Following his father’s funeral, a ceremony was held for Ivan where the Metropolitan Daniel proclaimed Ivan’s title and placed the orb and scepter in his hands, after which everyone assembled, swore allegiance, and sang the anthem “Long May He Reign,” signifying Ivan IV as Grand Prince of Russia.

Despite the fact that he was only three years old, Ivan was required to sit in on all official ceremonies, as well as political meetings. An ironic point was that politicians and officials in the meetings addressed Ivan as sovereign, lord, and Grand Prince while it was utterly obvious that he contained no real powers. Growing up in this atmosphere had a serious impact on Ivan. Being required to stay at the governmental proceedings, Ivan was constantly surrounded by adults who continued to feed on his lack of ability to control the position. His only playmate during this time in his life was his deaf and mute younger brother, Yuri. Much of his downtime time was devoted to his education, which was overseen by priests. Fortunately, Ivan was in a position to receive a very good education and he quickly became an intelligent student.

Due to Ivan’s young age and incapability to rule on his own, his mother, Elena ruled as Regent; however, her uncle Prince Mikhail Glinsky, who was released from prison after Vasily and Elena’s marriage, was the true power behind the throne. He was the one who handled all the final decisions of the Grand Prince. Not long after Ivan’s ascension to the throne, plots to usurp his title were already in motion. Elena and Mikhail discovered that Ivan’s uncles (Vasily’s brothers) Prince Yury of Dimitry and Prince Andrey Shuisky were devising a plan to place Yury of Dimitry on the throne. The Regent and Boyar Council quickly chained Ivan’s conniving uncle Yury, and had him hauled off to prison to spend the remainder of his days in a cell. Though the young Ivan could not personally prevent this insurrection against him, it seemed that, for now, his Regent was looking out for the Grand Prince’s best interests.

A conflict between Elena and Mikhail soon surfaced when Elena decided to make her relationship with her lover, Prince Ivan Obolensky, known publicly. Mikhail opposed her actions claiming that Obolensky only wanted to gain more influence over Grand Prince Ivan. Seeing this as a threat, as well, Elena was convinced that this was Mikhail’s attempt to seize more power. Going before the Boyar Council, the Regent presented her case against Mikhail and on August 5, 1534, he was arrested and sentenced to life in prison where he subsequently died a few years later. Soon after Mikhail’s imprisonment, Elena bestowed Obolensky with the title of Master of the Horse and made him a member of the Boyar Council. As Mikhail had suspected, Obolensky was soon the...
power behind Grand Prince Ivan.\textsuperscript{22}

Around the age of six, Ivan’s family life began to stir yet again. The constant movement and surges of influence teemed around the Regent continuously. Ivan’s uncle, Prince Andrey Shuisky, who had removed himself to Lithuania, was suspected of starting factions against Elena.\textsuperscript{23} This did not sit well with the Regent and she summoned Andrey to Moscow immediately. Concurring with their thoughts that he would flee, Andrey went to Novgorod, where he began raising a revolt against the Regent and Grand Prince Ivan. A small battle ensued, after which Andrey was informed that he could return to Moscow and live with his wife and son under close guard. Believing this, Andrey went to Moscow where he was trapped. Elena and Prince Obolensky debated his fate and ultimately decided to chain him in the same cell as his brother, where he died six months later.\textsuperscript{24}

Continuing in turbulence, Grand Prince Ivan’s life was rocked once again. On April 3, 1538, Regent Elena died. An eight year old Ivan believed his mother passed away due to natural causes; however, there is debate as to whether she went naturally or was aided with poison. Either way, this unnerved and scared the young Grand Prince. Immediately following her death and an unusually quick and unceremonious burial, Vasily Shuisky, a member of the Boyar Council, assumed the role as Regent.\textsuperscript{25} A week after he came to power, he threw Prince Ivan Obolensky in prison. Vasily’s view of Ivan was simply as his front-man while he as Regent ran Russian affairs.\textsuperscript{26} As time progressed, Vasily Shuisky and the subsequent Boyars periodically changed control as Regent due to death or displacement of their predecessor.\textsuperscript{27} This frequent changing of Ivan’s official caretaker caused conflicting feelings and emotions for Ivan, as well as, teaching the young Grand Prince underhanded methods to achieve personal goals.

By the time Ivan reached the age of ten, he had already been faced with the death of both parents. Moreover, those around Ivan, even his mother during her Regency, were dealing with attempted and successful uprisings and overthrow. This orbital control around the Grand Prince understandably instigated confusion and paranoia for Ivan. He no longer was innocent in ignorance, but rather, he was growing more aware of the ways to manipulate situations. It was towards his later childhood that Ivan began torturing small animals. Much of this unusual behavior is suspected to be the result of the controlling and abusive life he had thus far lived. This type of abuse put Ivan in control of another; smaller, weaker being; similarly as he had be controlled by those stronger than him.

Ivan IV, still considered a child at thirteen, had become weary of the despicable actions of the Boyars. Inviting them all to a banquet after Christmas, he accused them of their intolerable acts towards Russia and for taking advantage

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of him as a child. Moreover, Ivan personally wanted to see that Prince Andrey Shuisky was killed. Ivan was relieved to see the guards seized Prince Andrey Shuisky, handed him over to the huntsman, who proceeded to feed him to the dogs while he was still alive. This action served as Ivan’s movement towards ruling on his own, without the aid of a Regent or the Boyar Council.

As Ivan reached his mid-teenage years, his wild actions surfaced. Along with the sons of the Boyars, the Grand Prince began drinking heavily and participating in massive orgies. While undergoing his rebellious and wild stage that he was denied as a child, the Metropolitan Macarius, one of Ivan’s closest companions, kept the teen grounded with lessons of the Bible and Russian history. This gave Ivan a sense of reverence, as well as, national pride. As a result Ivan desired to see the land he ruled, and toured Russia, making sure to stop at every monastery along the way. Despite Ivan’s repeatedly unrestrained actions, he always remained constant in his belief that God was with him and every action he committed.

While near Novgorod, the sixteen year old Ivan was met by a large group of petitioning Russians who were tired of their present conditions. Not wanting to listen to their complaints, Ivan had his army attack the peasants. After suppressing the peasants, Ivan subsequently beheaded the leaders of the group in front of their comrades. No one with Ivan protested, thus reaffirming to the Grand Prince that he was right in what he had decided upon. Without virtually any negative reinforcement of his actions, Ivan continued to act in shockingly drastic methods.

As Ivan matured, in age, he began considering the idea of marriage. The first person he discussed this with was his confidant Macarius. Understanding the politics of Europe, Macarius encouraged Ivan to avoid looking for a foreign wife due to Russia’s social and political unrest, and that Ivan’s choice should be focused on a woman of Russian nobility. The Boyars were thrilled to hear that Ivan would marry a Russian, mostly because many of them had a daughter, niece, or cousin who could be his future wife. Just as the Boyars were about to hurry home and spread the news, Ivan informed them that he was not finished. In a loud, clear voice Ivan declared that before he would take a wife, he wanted to be crowned Tsar of Russia.

Considering Russia’s claim to be the Third Rome, Grand Prince Ivan IV felt that he too should take on the title of the rulers, such as, Tsar David from the Bible and Tsars Julius and Augustus from Rome. This title of Tsar was so much more than the title of Grand Prince. This represented Russia’s place in prestige with the Bible, Rome, and Byzantium. Moreover, Ivan saw this as an ancient lineage, which would automatically place him above the other rulers of Europe. An inflated opinion, yes, but the ambition behind his choice proved
very beneficial for the future of Russia. After a moment of individual murmurs, the Boyars happily approved Ivan’s second proposal, due to the fact that his future wife would come from one of their families.40

Grand Prince Ivan IV attended his coronation on January 16, 1547 in Moscow.41 The processional went to the Cathedral of the Assumption where Metropolitan Macarius, in addition to the archbishops, bishops, and priests were all waiting. Ivan went forth and sat on a throne covered in a gold cloth with the regalia laid out before him. Macarius gave a blessing to the monarch, placing the crown, or Cap of Monomakh (a symbol of power in old Russia) on his head, and offered Ivan the scepter and globe; while he prayed aloud to God to confer on “this new David” the strength of the Holy Spirit. Then, before the people, Ivan was named “holy Tsar, crowned by God, Autocrat of all the Russians.” The final act of the ceremony involved the priests singing, “Long years to noble Ivan, the good, the honorable, the favorite of God, Grand Prince of Vladimir and Moscow, Tsar and Monarch of all the Russias!”42 Ivan IV Vasilievich had at last become the first Tsar of Russia.

With his coronation complete and the title of Tsar confirmed, Ivan began the process of finding a wife. Ivan was apparently serious about total involvement so that he could find the best Russian woman to be his wife. Initially, a thousand women came to Moscow where they were obviously narrowed down even further.43 Those chosen to remain were housed next to the Kremlin and the Tsar visited them many times to converse. Finally, each girl dressed in her best gown was presented to Tsar Ivan who naturally showed no emotion towards anyone; however, after a moment, Ivan approached Anastasia Romanovna Zakharina-Yurieva, offering her a handkerchief embroidered with gold, silver, and pearls. The other girls were sent home, brokenhearted.44 Ivan and Anastasia were married on February 3, 1547 in the Cathedral of the Assumption.45

The time following Tsar Ivan’s marriage to Anastasia seemed to be one of the truly happy times for Ivan. Though he chose his wife by customary methods used by sovereigns all throughout Europe, Ivan knew how much he loved his new wife. She brought a peace to Ivan that had been absent for many years. Between Anastasia and Macarius, Ivan had two individuals who performed the difficult task of keeping the Tsar on an even plane...as much as possible.

Ivan’s antics ranged from undeserving punishments to undeserving rewards. He saw his authority as all-powerful and above everyone and everything, this of course caused problems for some people of Russia.46 One instance was when seventy prominent men from Pskov approached Ivan to complain about their governor. Ivan, who was angered by the interruption, had the men strip, poured boiling alcohol over their heads, and lit their beards and hair
on fire, one by one, with a candle. Just as he was about to inflict further torment, a messenger rode up and informed the Tsar that the bell of the Kremlin had fallen for no evident reason. Ivan, forgetting about his tormented individuals, quickly returned to Moscow, fearing the bell falling could signify a bad omen.

Once back in Moscow, Ivan faced an even more frightening occurrence when fire engulfed Moscow in April and June of 1547. The damage was unfathomable to Ivan and the citizens of the city. The cupola of the Cathedral of the Assumption, the palaces of the Czar and Metropolitan, two monasteries, several churches with all their wealth, the residences of dignitaries, the arsenals, and the treasury all were destroyed by the great fire. Total, there was an estimated a loss of 1,700 lives, not including children. A devastating occurrence for all, Ivan was deeply affected when Sylvester, the priest from the Cathedral of the Annunciation in Novgorod, informed Ivan that this was God punishing just as he did Sodom and Gomorrah. Ivan took this close to heart and thought his own actions were the cause. The Tsar immediately fell to his knees, agreeing with Sylvester, and prayed reverently.

During this period following the great fire of Moscow, Ivan introduced many new reforms to Russia. Among these listed the Chosen Council, the Domostroy, and social reform. The Chosen Council was a compilation of respected figures that used their wise, loyal judgment to aid in the decisions of state. The Domostroy was a code of laws written by the priest Sylvester which listed out the specifics of everyday living parameters in Russia. Finally, Ivan’s social reform set the peasant class at a lower status, and even tied some to large estates to work for nobles. Though this reform is not always viewed as beneficial in modern times, during Ivan’s life and circumstances it seemed to be the best judgment call at the time. Honestly, he probably did not care for the mass of peasantry; they were simply seen as those who work the land because they could not afford their own property. Serfdom was not officially declared; however, it had spread throughout most of Russia.

While under the guidance of his wife Anastasia and his close friend Macarius, Tsar Ivan stayed virtually calm and made wise decisions. However, after giving birth to their sixth child, Anastasia grew very weak and was required to stay in bed. As bad timing would have it, another fire broke out in Moscow. Aided by the wind, the fire reached the outer walls of Anastasia’s residence sending her into a panic. Ivan took her out of Moscow, but by the time the fire subsided, Anastasia had contracted a severe fever and no medicine could bring it down. Early in the morning of August 7, 1560, Anastasia died. Ivan essentially went insane with the loss of his one, true love.
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Times began to grow worrisome as the Tsar’s actions and decisions grew irrational. The one person he had to help keep his sanity was the Metropolitan Macarius. Unfortunately, three years after the death of his wife, Ivan’s close companion Macarius died.57 The time between these two deaths had been littered with the loss of life around Tsar Ivan. Recent to Macarius’ death, Ivan’s youngest son Vasily, and Ivan’s own brother Yury both succumbed to illness.58 These were the essential ‘last straws’ for Ivan’s quickly slipping mind, which set the tone for the rest of his reign.

Tsar Ivan IV Vasilievich, first Tsar of Russia, did many inexplicable acts during his adult life. Much of his rule can be focused on his extremities that carry negative connotations; however, much of this was essentially in result from the childhood he endured. Losing both his parents at an early age, and having a “normal” childhood replaced with the chaos he endured obviously affected Ivan. Not long after the death of Metropolitan Macarius, the common peasantry of Russia started referring to their Tsar as “Ivan the Terrible,” a name that he has carried throughout all of history. It is interesting to note that Ivan Grozny, as he was called, has grozny meaning “dreadful” or “terrible,” derived originally from grom, meaning “thunder.”59 At Ivan’s birth, ominous thunderstorms are claimed to have occurred all over Russia.60 Moreover, the warning given to Grand Prince Vasily III by the Patriarch of Jerusalem rang true: “If you should do this evil thing, you shall have an evil son. Your nation shall become prey to terrors and tears. Rivers of blood will flow, the heads of the mighty will fall, your cities will be devoured by flames.”61 It is almost eerie to relate the similarities of this comment (provided its accuracy) with that of Tsar Ivan’s life. Was he “terrible” on his own accord, or could it be that Ivan was predestined to be the dark figure he is remembered as? We may never know.

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