Few figures in history have such a bad reputation as Ivan IV. His reign in Russia, during the 16th century, is viewed as a time of terror. There is such a high focus in history on his cruelty that he was given the name Иван Грозный, which in an English translation means “Ivan the Terrible”, also written as “Ivan Grozny”. However in Russian Грозный, which would be “the Terrible” or “Grozny” in English, actually is an adjective related more to the term “formidable” than “terrible”. The English definition of formidable is “inspiring respect or wonder because of size, strength, or ability”. So the origination of the moniker “Ivan the Terrible” was taken out of context from the inability to completely translate a word or phrase from Russian to English due to a difference in word usage and meaning. This does not mean that Ivan did not commit acts worthy of his moniker “the terrible”. However, these acts, which are deemed terrible, provide insight into Ivan’s reign and lend a stronger support for his justification as a formidable ruler rather than simply a terrible one.

In addition to faulty translations there is a problem with reliable sources concerning the reign of Ivan IV. History’s dependency on primary sources is a major downfall in the proper study of Ivan and his reign. The destruction of Russian history documents during the “Time of Troubles” and also during the great fire of Moscow in 1626, attribute to the aforementioned downfall.

Ivan’s reputation as terrible was not without merit. There were numerous instances of ruthlessness and cruelty throughout his life, starting from childhood. However, Ivan’s reputation was not entirely deserved. He was shown nothing but violence and cruelty throughout his development. Ivan was a victim of circumstances that impacted him psychologically to the point where he was not mentally fit to be the Tsar, yet he remained in the position anyways. The events that followed were the consequences.

Ivan Vasilyevich was born in August of 1530 to then ruler Vasily Ivanovich III and his second wife Elena Glinsky. Even Ivan’s birth was foreshadowed as a terrible event. Vasily III’s first wife could not produce a male heir. Vasily grew impatient with her and requested permission for divorce from the Metropolitan. The Metropolitan granted this request and Vasily married Elena Glinsky, who gave birth to Ivan. This

2 Dr. Joseph Cafaro, “Vasily III and Ivan IV” (lecture, LaGrange College, October 11, 2011).
marriage was denounced by a group known as the “non-possessors” led by Vassian, a Russian monk. The non-possessors denounced all forms of ecclesiastical wealth, believed monks should live strictly by their vows, and that the Church and State should be completely independent of each other. This conflict climaxed at a Church Council in 1531 in which the Church sided against Vassian and the non-possessors.\(^3\) Outraged, Vassian puts a curse on any male heir of Vasily saying they will be pure evil. The patriarch of the Greek Orthodox Church in Jerusalem told Vasily III in reference to his divorce, “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, and your cities will be devoured by flames.”\(^4\) Before he was even born, Ivan was not given the opportunity to be anything but evil.

Vasily III died in 1533 when Ivan was only three years old. Under Vasily III, the Boyar class was limited in power. The balance of power was held from the crown and not the aristocracy. With the death of Vasily III, this balance was thrown off. Following the death of his father, Ivan was the new ruler of the Russian kingdom. But being only three years old, there was no way Ivan could be placed at the helm of the kingdom. So his mother, Elena, ruled the country in his name.\(^5\) However, Elena had to enlist the help of members of the boyar class to maintain an effective rule. This alliance led to the reigniting of the turmoil between the Boyar class and the crown, with many nobles being suspected of plotting against Ivan and his mother so that they could take over the throne.

Elena died unexpectedly in 1538, it was alleged that she was poisoned.\(^6\) Ivan was only eight years old at the time of his mother’s death. At this young age Ivan lost his father, his mother was murdered, and he witnessed the uprising of the nobility against one another and him.\(^7\) The three major boyar powers, the Glinskies, Belskies, and Shuiskies fought incessantly to determine who would have the power of Ivan now that both of his parents were gone.\(^8\) This power struggle continued from the death of Elena in 1538 until Ivan IV officially took the throne ten years later in 1547. He watched the Boyars torture and execute one another in a struggle for power, with no concern that it was Ivan who was the ruler of the kingdom. **Surprisingly, Ivan** was never threatened directly nor was he acted against. All of the

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\(^3\) Cafaro, “Vasily III and Ivan IV”.


\(^7\) George Vernadsky, ed., *The Nikonian Chronicle on Boyar Rule During the Childhood of Ivan IV, 1539-1543* from *A Source Book For Russian History From Early Times to 1917 Volume I* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 132-133.

violence he witnessed came from the Boyars against one another. There was also
the threat of Lithuania, Poland, Turkey, and the Crimean Tatars. These events took
their toll on Ivan. He grew to hate and distrust the Boyar class; this sentiment was
seen throughout his reign. With nothing but death and destruction surrounding
him, Ivan took the throne and his policies made henceforth were impacted by the
catastrophe that was his childhood.

Throughout his childhood, Ivan was difficult. Little documentation of his
life exists between his mother’s death and his coronation but it is known that Ivan’s
cruelty and ruthlessness became evident early on. Ivan and his friends rode horses
through the streets of Moscow and Ivan used his whip to frighten the townspeople.

At the age of thirteen, Ivan had his first noble put to death.

Ivan was officially coronated and took the title of Tsar on January 16,
1547. Ivan declared himself the supreme ruler over all of Russia and her territory.
Even in his coronation, Ivan defied any other form of authority. He convinced the
patriarch of Constantinople to send him a document-affirming his status without
inviting the patriarch to the coronation. In doing this, he received the recognition
from the Church without giving in to their rights to bestow the crown on the ruler’s
head thus giving them the power over the ruler. Ivan declared himself the supreme
Christian monarch. Ivan’s mission was to “to conduct humanity through the snares
and hazards of the present unstable era to ultimate salvation of damnation.”

Ivan’s official reign started on questionable terms. Fires, allegedly set by
a member of the Glinskie family, ravaged Moscow and the center of the city was
damaged greatly. One of Ivan’s uncles was executed for this travesty. This was the
first instance that Ivan had to stand up and assert his authority and directly refuse
to have any more of the Glinskie family executed. After this, the remainder of the
Glinskie family fled to Lithuania.

Ivan hated the Boyar class. His hate for the Boyar class made Ivan lean to
the lower classes for support. Ivan garnered a popular image with the common
people of his kingdom. According to Dr. Samuel Collins, court physician to Tsar
Aleksey Mikhaylovich in the seventeenth century, “the people loved him [Ivan] very
well, for he treated them kindly, but chastised his Boyars.”

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9 \text{ Cafaro, “Vasily III and Ivan IV”.}
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10 \text{ Florinsky, } Russia: \text{ A History, } 183.
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11 \text{ George Vernadsky, ed., “The Nikonian Chronicle on the Coronation of Ivan}
\text{ IV, January 16, 1547” from } A \text{ Source Book For Russian History, } 133-134.
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12 \text{ Hosking, } Russia \text{ and the Russians, } 108.
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13 \text{ Hosking, } Russia \text{ and the Russians, } 109.
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14 \text{ Hosking, } Russia \text{ and the Russians, } 111.
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15 \text{ Maureen Perrie, “The Popular Image of Ivan the Terrible,” } The \text{ Slavonic}
\text{ and East European Review 56, no. 2 (April 1978): 275.}
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Because of his strained relationship with the Boyar class, Ivan made a point to reach out to the local cities and towns and try to get them involved in their affairs. This was done through the Sudebnik of 1550. This law code attempted to do away with the Boyar class's interaction with local taxation, judicial processes, and government. Ivan knew that if he was going to be a successful leader, he had to gain the support of the common people. For the most part the common people had just as much of a problem with the Boyar class as Ivan did. When Ivan limited Boyar influence in local affairs, this pleased the people and helped his image. But this all fell through as the Boyar class was financially involved to the point where if anything went wrong in the local affairs, they were the ones who had to foot the bill.

While Ivan had major issues with the Boyar class from the beginning of his reign, he attempted to make amends to the best of his ability. This happened at the Council of Reconciliation in 1549. This council was Ivan's attempt at recreating his reign from its fiery beginnings and starting anew, both spiritually and physically. He started with a march to the Monastery of St. Sergius in order to make amends with God. He then went to the Boyars and told them of his displeasure with them but he also addressed his own mistakes. After this, Ivan attempted to consult the local elites more frequently on matters involving the State. However, this did not imply that Ivan completely trusted the Boyars. Ivan realized he could not trust the Boyars with the matters of all affairs, especially those that concerned the local people more so than the State. Because of this Ivan continued to enlist the help of people from the lower social class for his closest confidants and council to supplement his Boyar council. These men became known as Ivan's "Chosen Council."

Whether he had ulterior motives or not is unclear, but Ivan made an attempt to reconcile his differences with the Boyar class. This reconciliation is a prime example that Ivan was not terrible all the time, executions and torture were not a part of his everyday reign as history has a tendency of making it appear.

During Ivan's early reign and through the middle of his reign, he never fully exemplified what it was that made him so terrible as he has been called. He only acted when acted against, as made evident by the setting of the fires in Moscow. He was not the nicest to the Boyar class, but the Boyar class did nothing but try to take

16 Hosking, *Russia and the Russians*, 112.
18 Hosking, *Russia and the Russians*, 112.
Ivan's power from him so they did not deserve the niceties. Throughout the 1540s and 1550s Ivan attempted to reform Russia and make her better. He reinforced the army and forged an alliance with the Cossacks to help protect Russia’s borders. Ivan conquered Kazan, which helped to greatly limit the threat of the Tatars. Ivan based all of his actions, logical and morally questionable alike, on doing whatever it took to better the Russian state. If he saw a threat, he did his best to deal with it efficiently. This was exactly what any good leader in Ivan's position would have done.

However, Ivan's lack of mental stability due to the trauma he experience in his life became more evident as time wore on. Between the death of his wife, Anastasia, and his mental illness, Ivan was not in a fit state to be running a kingdom. His mental stability was deteriorating and it was only a matter of time before things got worse. The most notable occurrence of the “terrible” in Ivan IV’s reign was his establishment of the Oprichnina:

Early in December 1564, the good people of Moscow witnessed an unusual occurrence: the tsar, accompanied by his family and a numerous retinue carrying his jewels, treasury, and household belongings, left the capital and departed for an unknown destination. The royal caravan finally settled down at Aleksandrovokia Sloboda, which became a kind of second capital for the rest of Ivan’s reign.22

Ivan was finally pushed over the edge by the Boyar class. He felt betrayed and wrote a letter to the people describing “all the treasonable deeds of the Boyars and voevody and various officials, the treasonable deeds they had committed and the harm they had brought to his realm...”23 The Boyars begged Ivan to return to Moscow, Ivan agreed under the condition that he could rule as he saw fit. This was the turning point for Ivan. Ivan split Russia into two territories: the zemshchina and the oprichnina. The zemshchina was the public land, left to the control of the Boyar class. The oprichnina was the land Ivan inhabited.24 Ivan also created a private army known as the oprichniki.

The Oprichnina lasted until 1572. During this time, Ivan commanded the oprichniki to find and eliminate “corruption, treason, and heresy.”25 Ivan started with simply exiling the Boyars whom he saw as a threat, but his distrust and paranoia grew so much that having the Boyars banished was not enough. He wanted them killed.

22 Florinsky, Russia: A History, 200.
24 Richard Pipes, Russia Under the Old Regime (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1974), 94.
25 Hosking, Russia and the Russians, 123.
The Oprichnina unleashed a reign of terror on Russia. Ivan’s *oprichniki corps* rampaged across the land executing those deemed disloyal. They were exempt from all state authority and only answered to Ivan. Sometimes the *oprichniki* targeted individual people, sometimes they targeted entire areas. An example where the *oprichniki* targeted an entire area was seen at Novgorod in 1569.26 Ivan suspected that the leaders of the city were conspiring with the Lithuanians and he was not going to be betrayed by his own territory.27 Ivan ordered people to be tied by their hands and feet and dragged behind sleighs or thrown off of the Volkhov bridge.28 Anywhere from 3,000 to 15,000 people of all classes were killed in Novgorod. By the time the Oprichniki left, Novgorod was considered a ghost town. Ivan’s goals in Novgorod were simple, he had to eliminate the threat in order to maintain power and stability in the Russian state. Ivan did what was best, in his eyes, to maintain the state’s authority and do what he thought was best for Russia.

From a historical perspective, the Oprichnina was either “constructive and statesmanlike or bloody and despotic.”29 Ivan IV claimed he did it for the people. According to Professor D.N. Alshits, Ivan had the “reputation of a fighter for truth and justice”.30 The Oprichnina portrayed Ivan as a ruthless executor, but he was fighting against the Boyars in the best interest of all of Russia. Ivan wanted to help the people. Yes, there were instances were innocent people were caught in the crossfire but there is no evidence indicating that Ivan ever went after the common people with the intention of harming them. His issues during the Oprichnina were against the Boyar class.

In 1572, Ivan ended the Oprichnina and combined the *Oprichnina* and Zemshchina into the Bolshoi Dvor (Great Court). However, Ivan needed a way to keep public opinion on his side. A descendent of Chingis Khan, Simeon Bekbulatovich, was coronated as Grand Prince of Russia and Ivan took the title of Prince of Moscow. This showed Ivan abdicating the throne without actually giving up power because he bestowed the title on Simeon, who was never elected31. This was a smart move on behalf of Ivan because it maintained his control and he continued his rule without revolt from the people.

Ivan died in 1584 and did not leave a competent male heir. He killed the son meant for the throne, Tsarevich Ivan. They got in an argument over his son’s wife and it ended with Ivan striking and killing his Tsarevich. Ivan had two other sons but Dimitri was not recognized as a legitimate son because he was from Ivan’s seventh

26 Cafaro, “Vasily III and Ivan IV”.
marriage and Fedor was mentally handicapped. 32 Ivan’s death with no competent male heir set the stage for the rise of Peter the Great.

Whether characterized as Ivan “the Terrible” or not, the reign of Ivan IV was important to the creation of the Russian state. Ivan’s life was never an easy one. From early childhood all Ivan saw was violence, and violence breeds violence. Ivan acted against those that acted against him. The actual terrible acts committed by Ivan during his reign were no more than a reaction to the events surrounding him. 33 Personal tragedies created a mental instability that bred paranoia and caused Ivan to act against the Boyars in extreme fashion, but he felt endangered and was both protecting himself and doing what he thought was best for the Russian state. Ivan was formidable and commanded respect. Some historians see that as being terrible or the sign of a tyrant, when all Ivan was attempting to achieve was a strong Russia. A developing Russia needed a strong and inspiring leader, and that’s what Ivan aimed to be.

32 Hosking, Russia and the Russians, 127.
Bibliography


