

GUNNAR OPEIDE

## Making Sense of *Opričnina*

*L'Etat, c'est à moi.*

There are few subjects that have been more contested in Russian and Soviet historiography than the reign of Ivan IV, the first crowned Russian tsar, in general, and the *opričnina*, in particular. The evaluation of Ivan Groznyj (the Terrible) has varied from the most absolute condemnation to pure panegyrics. One finds in *Ivaniana* a considerable amount of what has been called “jarlykovaja istoriografija”<sup>1</sup>, i.e. efforts to determine whether this or that phenomenon, this or that historical actor is progressive or reactionary, feudal or capitalist, and so forth. This applies in particular to *opričnina*, which, if not straightforwardly either progressive or reactionary, was seen as being both at the same time, that is as contradictory.

One reason for this might be the lack of clarity and consistency in the use of the very term *opričnina*, which has been given several meanings. In textbooks it denotes a certain period in the reign of Ivan IV, from January 1565 to 1572<sup>2</sup>. Secondly, it denotes the tsar and his government's policy in this period; thirdly, it denotes a political-institutional system, a political style and method that may be equated with terror, as a device for consolidating autocracy against the boyar aristocracy. Fourth, it is the aggregate of the *opričniki*, the tsar's personal guard. Finally, there is the original and principal meaning of the word, which is derived from the preposition *oprič'* (besides, apart; *krome* in modern Russian)<sup>3</sup>: a geographically separated part of the country. It was traditionally used for an *udel* (piece of land) which was set aside and given in possession to a widow of a prince or a boyar for the rest of her life. It is especially the last meaning, and the

---

<sup>1</sup> D. N. Al'sic, *Načalo samoderžavija v Rossii: Gosudarstvo Ivana Groznogo*, Leningrad 1988, p. 239.

<sup>2</sup> This is the conventional periodization although it is usually mentioned that there perhaps occurred a brief revival in 1575. Al'sic (op. cit., p. 233) has argued, however, that *opričnina* did not end in 1572 (or 1575), but just changed its name into *osobnyj dvor* (special court), which lasted for the rest of Ivan's life, i.e. to 1584.

<sup>3</sup> The synonymy with *krome* gave Prince Kurbskij the opportunity to dub Ivan's hangmen *kromešniki*, which through the meaning of the adjective *kromešnyj* (which denotes what belongs to the underworld) led to the label *sataninskij polk* (Satan's regiment).

division of the realm into *opričnina* and *zemščina* that has created trouble for those who have sought to find a progressive purpose on the part of the tsar. While Ivan's policies in the main were supposed to be progressive, this division, the institution of a separate *gosudarev udel* (appanage of the grand prince), was something archaic, a tribute to tradition.

While terror, sadism, and pathological lust for power are the ordinary stock-in-trade in the history of mankind, the division of the realm as demanded and instituted by Ivan IV in January 1565 was something quite unheard of and original. Explaining this division, even just understanding it, is something different and much more difficult than understanding other phenomena covered by the term *opričnina*. These might be said to correspond to certain character traits and propensities on the part of the tsar, whereas one could hardly say the same of the division of the land in *opričnina* and *zemščina*. Why did he do it? How can we make sense of it? That is the main question I shall examine in the present article, while the politics of *opričnina* in its various manifestations during the actual period will not be treated. There is only slight reason to assume that the bloody practice and all the vagaries of *opričnina* were conditioned to any appreciable extent by the *motive* for its institution.

First a short reminder of what actually happened. In the beginning of December 1564, Ivan left Moscow with his family and a large train of men and sledges loaded with the state treasury, icons, and tremendous amounts of valuables. After several stops he ended up in Aleksandrovskaia Sloboda, some fifty kilometres north of Moscow, whence he sent two messages. The first one, addressed to the metropolitan, specified all the perfidies committed against his state and himself since he was a child, gave vent to his anger against all his preachers, archbishops and bishops, archimandrites and abbots, his boyars, his *major domo* and equerry, his courtiers and stewards, and all his clerks and scribes, on account of a number of treacherous acts. When he had wished to punish them for this, they were protected by the clergy, and he wanted therefore to abdicate: “и царь и государь и великий князь от великие жалости сердца, не хотя их многих изменных дел терпети, оставил свое государство и поехал, где вселиться, идеже его, государя, Бог наставит”<sup>4</sup>.

The second message was to the merchants and tradespeople and all the orthodox peasants in Moscow, saying that they should not despair because the tsar bore no wrath towards them.

---

<sup>4</sup> *Polnoe sobranie russkich letopisej [PSRL]*, t. 13, Moskva 1965, p. 392.

The confusion was great in Moscow and the metropolitan and all the other prelates decided to send a delegation to the tsar and implore him to return to his state to rule it as he might see fit. Ivan accepted their plea on condition that he might freely punish and execute his traitors, those who had shown disobedience and fallen in disfavour, and that he might introduce “*oprišnina*” and a separate court: “учинити ему на своем государстве себе опришнину, двор ему себе и на весь свой обиход учинити особой”<sup>5</sup>. There followed a detailed specification of what he wanted to take with him into *opričnina* and which parts of the country and of Moscow it was to comprise. The Kremlin was not included; Ivan apparently did not feel at home there and had another *opričnyj centr* when he was in Moscow. The main centre for the new court was the monastery in Aleksandrovskaja Sloboda, but in the future it should be in Vologda, where the construction of a gigantic *kreml’* was started. According to R. G. Skrynnikov, it could not have any other function than as a refuge against internal enemies, as it lay far away from all external frontiers<sup>6</sup>. The *opričnina* Ivan should be free to govern entirely as he pleased, whereas the rest, the larger part of the country, called the *zemščina*, was to be governed in the traditional way (*po starine*) by boyars who were not to remain at Ivan’s new court<sup>7</sup>.

### 1. Main historiographical currents

In the attempts of historiography to come to terms with Ivan IV after 1560 (or 1564) we can primarily distinguish between those who emphasize the tsar’s rational motives and conscious social engineering, and those who do not find constructive purposes on the part of the tsar, focus on his irrational inclinations and impulses, his paranoid personality, or his self-indulgence. Some argue that there were elements of both. Robert Crummey remarks, for instance, that “the issue of aristocratic

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pp. 394-95.

<sup>6</sup> R. G. Skrynnikov, *Velikij gosudar’ Ioann Vasil’ evič Groznyj*, Smolensk 1998, p. 331.

<sup>7</sup> “Выход из положения он [Иван] нашел в том, чтобы выйти из старого двора и устроить себе новый, ‘особный’ двор, в котором он рассчитывал быть полным хозяином. Так как уничтожить старый двор, сложившийся веками, и обойтись без него в управлении государством не было возможности, то царь предложил ему существовать по-старому, а параллельно ему устроили Опричный двор”, (S. B. Veselovskij, *Issledovanija po istorii opričniny* (1963), partly reprinted in *Moskovskoe gosudarstvo* [Istorija otečestva v romanach, povestjach, dokumentach — vek XVI], Moskva 1986, p. 560.

power was real [...], but Ivan's attempt to deal with it was neither realistic nor consistent"<sup>8</sup>. To the second group belong great historians like Karamzin, Ključevskij and Veselovskij. Here we also find a large corpus of books that place a strong emphasis on the individual historical actor. Their authors can broadly be divided between those who were content to write a factual or quasi-factual life story, more or less indulging in the sadistic traits of the tsar's character and the horrors of his deeds while not trying to find explanations and causes beyond his person, i.e. in his background, family relations, surroundings and circumstances; and on the other hand, those who make such attempts while putting less weight on the narrative<sup>9</sup>.

---

<sup>8</sup> Robert O. Crummey, *The Formation of Muscovy 1304-1613*, London and New York 1987, p. 163.

<sup>9</sup> I shall mention one book from this category, recently published by a certain Andrej Nikitin (*Sataninskaja zautrenja*, Moskva 1995). He argues, sometimes convincingly, that *opričnina* was a completely personal affair of the tsar and had nothing whatsoever to do with state political interests. What then were his personal interests or idiosyncracies? After 1560 he came to live in constant and increasing fear, not only of enemies in general, but of a special, though hitherto unknown enemy, the spectre of a more legitimate ruler of Rus', a possible *samožvanec* pretending to be Georgij Vasil'evič, or even the real Georgij Vasil'evič, the son of Vasilij III and his first wife, Solomonija Saburova, who was supposed to have been born in April 1526, more than four years before Ivan.

In all textbooks we learn that Vasilij III, supported by Metropolitan Daniil, divorced Solomonija on account of her infertility and forced her to take the veil in the autumn of 1525; three months later Vasilij married Elena Glinskaja, the mother of Ivan. The most important source for the information that Solomonija gave birth to a child is Herberstein, who in fact merely writes about rumours (cf. Sigizmund Gerberštejn, *Zapiski o Moskovii* [1556], Moskva 1988, p. 87). There are various findings in the Pokrovskij monastery in Suzdal', where Solomonija was locked up as sister Sof'ja, and pieces of circumstantial evidence drawn from a diverse range of sources, such as chronicles, the draft of Ivan IV's will, monasteries' contribution books (*vkładnye knigi*), and so forth, which are important for Nikitin's conclusion that Solomonija must have borne a son, christened Georgij. Vasilij III is supposed to have found out about Solomonija's pregnancy after her tonsure and to have taken some effort to protect her and the child. Some of the people in charge of the Pokrovskij monastery believed a little coffin underground to be the grave of Solomonija's child, who was supposed to have died at the age of five or six. On excavation, however, the coffin was empty apart from a little boy's shirt. Nikitin's interpretation is that Solomonija — in order to save the boy's life — made some people believe that he died by arranging a fake burial. Solomonija herself died in 1542.

As for the question of why Solomonija gave birth to a child only after twenty years of marriage, Nikitin suggests the same answer as to the question of why it took Elena Glinskaja more than four years to produce a child: it was Vasilij III who was sterile (pp.

### 1.1. *Political centralization or not*

In the first, and perhaps largest group, i.e. those who find some historical meaning and purpose in *opričnina*, we should distinguish between two main perspectives, each of them related to a specific question, a fundamental conflict. The first question is: political centralization or not; the second is: autocracy or not. While many authors combine in various ways the two perspectives, the first has S. F. Platonov as its classic representative. For the second perspective we can cite D. N. Al'šic as an energetic spokesman (“быть или не быть самодержавию”<sup>10</sup>).

#### 1.1.1. *Land policies*

Much of the literature on *opričnina* has placed Ivan's division of the realm in the context of policies that tried to reorganize the distribution of landed property so as to strengthen the political centralization.

Platonov's quite elegant model has been influential with Soviet historians in their understanding of Tsar Ivan's policies and *opričnina*. According to Platonov, *opričnina* was Ivan's instrument for overcoming “udel'no-knjažeskaja starina”, the boyar opposition and treason, for accomplishing political centralization, establishing autocracy and consolidating the unified national state. The boyars were attached to the old ways and resisted the tsar and his autocratic endeavours, whereas the lower-rank *dvorjane* (gentry) stood for centralization and supported the tsar. *Opričnina* inflicted a crushing and decisive blow against the boyars and their *udely* and *votčiny* (allodia), while satisfying the *dvorjanstvo*'s desires

---

91ff.). Nikitin has no idea who might have been the father of Solomonia's child, but his guess is clearly that the real father of Ivan IV was Prince Ivan Ovčina Telepnev-Obolenskij, the later favourite of Elena and co-ruler during her regency until her death in 1538 (cf. R. G. Skrynnikov, *Velikij gosudar'...*, p. 245).

Thus, the idea is that Ivan knew about this and was filled with fear, and increasingly so after 1560 when he broke the *modus vivendi* with his boyars and started to wield personal power and behave as a cruel autocrat. Consequently, he would fear more and more that enemies might present a Georgij the elder as a more lawful ruler to challenge his own position. Therefore his wavering between defence (hiding himself, making provisions to get asylum in England, etc.) and attack: sensing that the fear came from the Northwest, he crushed Tver, Toržok, and Novgorod in 1569-70. An important question giving rise to speculation is whom Ivan IV has in mind when in the draft to his will (1572) he enumerates his sins and says that he “committed the crime of Cain (Каиново убийство)” (Nikitin, p. 235).

<sup>10</sup> Al'šic, op. cit., p. 100. Here we should also mention the Danish scholar Bjarne Nørretranders, who in his *The Shaping of Czarism under Ivan Groznyj*, Copenhagen 1964, dedicates a whole chapter to the question of “oligarchy or autocracy?”.

for more land and greater influence<sup>11</sup>. Platonov sees no reason to distinguish between a good and a bad Ivan; as a politician and historical actor he is the same in the second period, the period of *opričnina*, as he was in the first reform period of the 1550s<sup>12</sup>. In spite of Platonov's allegedly "bourgeois" methodology and his efforts to demonstrate "the stability of autocracy"<sup>13</sup> during the crisis of tsarism at the beginning of the 20th century, it is not difficult to recognize his "rationalist" scheme and his positive evaluation of Ivan in general and the *opričnina* in particular in the constructions of many of the later Soviet historians, for example I. I. Smirnov, S. V. Bachrušin and M. N. Tichomirov<sup>14</sup>.

The first Soviet historian who fundamentally opposed this interpretation was S. B. Veselovskij. He argued that a very important premise of the model was misconceived. It was not true, as Platonov had maintained, that *opričnina* in geographical terms comprised the majority of the large

---

<sup>11</sup> S. F. Platonov, *Lekcii po russkoj istorii*, Izd. 10-e, Petrograd 1917, pp. 199-209. "Недовольный окружавшею его знатью, он [Иван] применил к ней ту меру, какую Москва применяла к своим врагам, именно — «вывод». И отец и дед Грозного, следуя старому обычаю, при покорении Новгорода, Пскова, Рязани, Вятки и иных мест выводили оттуда опасные для Москвы руководящие слои населения во внутренние московские области, а в завоеванный край посылали поселенцев из коренных московских мест. Это был испытанный прием ассимиляции, которым московский государственный организм усваивал себе чужие общественные элементы" (S. F. Platonov: *Ivan Groznyj 1530-1584* [1923]; R. Ju. Vipper: *Ivan Groznyj*. Moskva 1998, p. 79). The argument may look elegant, but it begs the question (to which I return below) of why this proven method should necessitate the institution of *opričnina*. It is perhaps also a weakness of the argument that the suspicious elements were resettled not in the usual way, from the outlying, newly conquered territory to the inner areas, but in the opposite direction. It may be more reasonable to regard the so-called "Kazanskaja sсылка" as the first example of political exile in Russian history (cf. R. G. Skrynnikov, *Istorija Rossijskaja. IX-XVII vv.*, Moskva 1997, p. 308).

<sup>12</sup> Platonov, *Ivan Groznyj...*, p. 28.

<sup>13</sup> A. A. Zimin, *Reformy Ivana Groznogo*, Moskva 1960, p. 24.

<sup>14</sup> A. A. Zimin, *Opričnina Ivana Groznogo*, Moskva 1964, pp. 32-47. "Тень логически стройной и привычной концепции С. Ф. Платонова, [...] и по сей день порой затемняет для исследователя сущность опричной политики" (V. B. Kobrin, *Vlast' i sobstvennost' v srednevekovoj Rossii (XV-XVI vv.)*, Moskva 1985, p. 142). Kobrin's main target is Skrynnikov, who in many of the books he has published in the 1990s still retains at least parts of Platonov's model. The same understanding has been quite widespread also in Western literature, e.g. Adolf Stender-Petersen, *Geschichte der russischen Literatur*. Erster Band, München 1957, pp. 209ff. For all his condemnation of tsarist patrimonial despotism, Richard Pipes, too, builds on Platonov's model (*Russia under the Old Regime*, Harmondsworth 1977, pp. 94-95).

holdings of the old *udel* princes and their successors, who therefore — insofar as they did not become *opričniki* themselves — had their landed property and political influence taken from them, while being exiled to outlying areas where they would not play any significant role<sup>15</sup>. Large parts of the land that was included in *opričnina* at its inception in 1565 were meant to provide the new court with material and financial resources<sup>16</sup> and *opričniki* with land. In several of the *opričnina* districts (*uezdy*) in central Russia there were a large number of villages which already belonged to the crown (*dvorcovye sela*). “В Можайском и Суздальском уездах было некоторое количество старых вотчинных земель, а во всех остальных уездах вотчинных земель было очень мало или таковые вовсе отсутствовали”<sup>17</sup>. A prominent historian like A. A. Zimin largely agrees with Veselovskij: “Все основные уезды, изобиловавшие вотчинами феодальной аристократии (Москва, Стародуб, Ярославль, Переяславль-Залесский и др.), оказались за бортом опричнины”<sup>18</sup>. Later extensions of the *opričnina* area, Beloozero and Novgorod east of Volchov, had largely other motives<sup>19</sup>.

There are some circumstances which have made some erroneously assume that *opričnina* comprised more land than it actually did. First, many boyars and other *votčinniki* — and *pomeščiki* as well — were punished or exiled and had their land confiscated in many areas all over Russia. These were mainly men who for various reasons had incurred the tsar’s disfavour (*opala*). Second, many *opričniki* already had land in

---

<sup>15</sup> “и дал княжатам другие земли в виде поместий, которыми они владеют, пока угодно царю, в областях столь отдаленных, что там они не имеют ни любви народной, ни влияния, ибо они не там родились и не были там известны” (Platonov, *Lekcii...*, p. 202).

<sup>16</sup> S. B. Veselovskij, op. cit., pp. 575f. On the basis of the fact that large parts of the northern areas, where there was almost no privately owned land, were included in the *opričnina*, it can be argued that the financial needs of the new court were satisfied so as not to conflict with the interests of the landowners, be they boyars or *dvorjane*.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 578.

<sup>18</sup> Zimin, *Opričnina...*, p. 316. “Вывод об антикняжеской или антибоярской направленности земельной политики в годы опричнины не может быть признан верным” (pp. 340-41).

<sup>19</sup> “Теперь дело шло о том, чтобы путем опричных переселений в уезды, которые царь рассматривал как очаги смуты, ликвидировать в них социальную базу возможных заговоров и мятежей” (ibid., p. 334). However, on the basis of recently discovered sources it may be taken as fact that Jaroslavl' and Rostov *uezdy* were incorporated in *opričnina* in 1569 (A. P. Pavlov, *Gosudarev dvor i političeskaja bor'ba pri Borise Godunove (1584-1605 gg.)*, Sankt-Peterburg 1992, p. 151).

various districts in *zemščina*; in some cases *opričniki* were also allotted new land in *zemščina*. But none of these had the consequence that the actual districts were included in the “gosudarev udel” and brought under the *opričnina* administration. Thus, an *opričnik* did not have to become a landowner in one of the *opričnina* districts<sup>20</sup>.

The *modern* discussion of the character and purpose of the land policies in the *opričnina* period has been concentrated on Suzdal', the core area of one of the most powerful boyar clans, the Šujskie<sup>21</sup>. Skrynnikov applies Platonov's model to the case of Suzdal'. Like most other historians, he acknowledges that remarkably many *dvorjane* were exiled from Možajsk and Suzdal' together with a certain number of boyars. He thinks this made political sense because the Suzdal' princes had preserved political connections with the local non-titular nobility. “Неудивительно, что опричное правительство постаралось изгнать из уезда всех, кого оно подозревало в симпатиях к Суздальским князьям”<sup>22</sup>.

A great number of boyars as well as *dvorjane* were driven away from Suzdal' because *opričniki* were to have land in this area. However, not all the land which was confiscated was distributed; the state kept some of it. Such land could therefore later be returned to the former owners. Most of those who were chased from their land were exiled to Kazan'<sup>23</sup>. In May 1566 the tsar granted an amnesty that permitted most of them to leave their exile. To begin with they did not get new land where they originally came from, but it turned out to be difficult to do this on a large scale. Therefore, more often than not their old lands were returned to them, “podčas sil'no zapustevšie”, provided they had not come into the

---

<sup>20</sup> Zimin: *Opričnina...*, pp. 320-21, p. 327, p. 330, p. 334, p. 341, p. 357.

<sup>21</sup> Zimin (*ibid.*, p. 316), citing P. A. Sadikov's investigations, expresses some doubt as to whether Suzdal' fully belonged to *opričnina*.

<sup>22</sup> R. G. Skrynnikov, *Načalo opričniny*, Leningrad 1966, p. 264, p. 275. We note that this argument undermines the premise of a fundamental antagonism between boyars and *dvorjane*. Veselovskij, criticizing Platonov, wrote on this point: “Ведь только слабому человеку могла прийти в голову дикая идея выселять из уезда сотни рядовых помещиков и вотчинников с тем, чтобы зацепить таким образом несколько княжат” (Veselovskij, *op. cit.*, p. 578). If the purpose was to crush the boyars and favour the *dvorjane*, one would simply drive away the boyars and let the *dvorjane* stay, and to achieve this no *opričnina* would have been necessary.

<sup>23</sup> Zimin suggests that this could also somehow be an attempt to russify the newly conquered areas at the Middle Volga (*Opričnina...*, p. 148).



possession of new owners<sup>24</sup>. This makes it highly problematic to maintain the thesis that the struggle for the landed properties of the titular boyars was an important purpose of *opričnina*.

Kobrin is more consistent than Zimin in his conclusion that “опричина не посягнула на структуру феодального землевладения, не изменила тенденций его развития, хотя и произошли изменения в личном составе землевладельцев и в распределении земельной собственности”<sup>25</sup>. The struggle between boyars and *dvorjane* was above all a myth.

Дело не в том, существовало ли у рядовых феодалов недовольство привилегированным положением и богатством крупных, а в том, что создание в России единого государства и его централизация отвечали коренным интересам господствующего класса в целом, а не какой-то его, пусть и многочисленной, части. И в укреплении аппарата государственной власти, и соответственно в развитии крепостничества, и в расширении границ страны на западе и востоке были в равной степени заинтересованы все феодалы.<sup>26</sup>

Recently, the historian A. P. Pavlov, in a book dealing mainly with the political struggles under Boris Godunov, has tried to revise the views of the land policies in the *opričnina* period which prevailed in the late Soviet period. Earlier historians had pointed out that there were no fewer large princely, boyar landholdings after 1600 than in 1550, and the political influence of the boyars was perhaps even greater than it had been ever before. Pavlov discovered, however, that many great boyars got their families' possessions back only at the turn of the sixteenth century or “pri bojarech”.

He begins his argument by stating that in 1565 boyars were deprived of their properties and exiled to Kazan' from Suzdal' as well as from Rostov and Jaroslavl' although these areas did not yet belong to *opričnina*. After the amnesty of 1566 many of them could come back. But

---

<sup>24</sup> Skrynnikov, *Načalo...*, pp. 320-21.

<sup>25</sup> Kobrin, *op. cit.*, pp. 159-60.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 217-18. The same position is largely reiterated by the author in *Istorija Rossii s drevnejšich vremen do 1861 goda*, pod red. N. I. Pavlenko, Moskva 1998, p. 144. (The author, who died in 1990, apparently wrote his text for a 1989 edition, which has then been used unaltered in the 1998 edition which I cite).

then, in 1569 Rostov and Jaroslavl' were included in *opričnina*, and Starodub in “sostav ‘dvora’” by an *ukaz* in 1579-80, and from all these areas many landowners were banished for a second time<sup>27</sup>. With regard to the Šujskij princes in Suzdal', Pavlov finds it difficult to say what happened to their landed property during the *opričnina*. They sat on their old land after *opričnina*, but that does not imply that they held it throughout the entire period. Pavlov carefully suggests that “в 70-х— начале 80-х гг. Шуйские всем родом были зачислены в состав особого ‘двора’; возможно, их представители служили и в опричнине в конце ее существования”<sup>28</sup>.

As a conclusion to his retrospective analysis of extant cadasters from the 1580-90s and the early decades of the period after *smuta*, Pavlov writes “о весьма последовательном претворении опричной программы в жизнь”<sup>29</sup>. He says repeatedly that *opričnina* delivered a blow to the large boyar *votčiny* of particular princely clans and areas, or of the whole boyar aristocracy in general<sup>30</sup>. By a policy of *divide et impera*, the *opričnina* government weakened the corporate solidarity of the boyar aristocracy, and also severed its links with the provincial gentry and servicemen. While many boyars sooner or later got their *votčiny* back, these were now not inherited family *votčiny*, but *votčiny* by charter (*žalovannye*); correspondingly, the boyar aristocracy was transformed from a hereditary (*rodovaja*) aristocracy to a service (*služilaja*) aristocracy consolidated around the throne<sup>31</sup>.

Elsewhere in recent Russian and late Soviet historiography we find a variety of positions in the question of the meaning of *opričnina*. Some authors occupy intermediate or compromise positions. N. E. Nosov wrote in a 1983 textbook that the land policies of the *opričnina* period “значительно ослабили экономическую и политическую мощь ‘великих’ боярских родов”, and that “опричнина нанесла сокрушительный удар по оппозиционным кругам боярства”<sup>32</sup>. In some textbooks from the 1990s we find a tendency to revert to the positions of older Soviet

---

<sup>27</sup> A. P. Pavlov: Op. cit., pp. 152-55.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 151.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 150.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 150, p. 154, p. 158, p. 200.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., pp. 200-03.

<sup>32</sup> *Kratkaja istorija SSSR* (otv. red. N. E. Nosov), Moskva 1983, t. 1, p. 114.

historiography, but with a radically different evaluation<sup>33</sup>. The same tendency is also one we can discern in recent writings by Skrynnikov; that is, he retains more or less his previous interpretation of Ivan's policies in the 1560-70s, but sees them now in a predominantly negative light.

Skrynnikov writes:

Могущество аристократии опиралось, в первую очередь, на ее земельные богатства. Добиваясь неограниченной власти, Иван IV попытался ограничить княжеско-боярское землевладение, использовать процесс упадка родовых княжеских вотчин в целях расширения фонда государственной земельной собственности.<sup>34</sup>

Nevertheless, Skrynnikov several times poses the question of why Ivan could not deal with his real or imagined enemies and their *votčiny* without instituting *opričnina*<sup>35</sup>. His attempt to answer the question goes as follows: The land expropriations in Novgorod in the last quarter of the 15th century had followed tradition in that they were dependent upon sanction from the Boyar дума. “В опричнине Иван IV избавился от опеки думы, что позволило ему произвести массовую конфискацию

---

<sup>33</sup> “К 1565 г. царь перешел от реформ к насильственной централизации. [...] В стране началась полоса репрессий. [...] И после отмены царем не оправдавшей себя опричнины деспотичный режим сохранялся. [...] Централизация через террор привела к экономическому и политическому кризису 70-80-х годов” (*Kratkoe posobie po istorii Rossii*, otv. red. A. P. Korelin, Moskva 1993, pp. 23-24). In another textbook we read of “the separatism of the feudal aristocracy”, that the goal of *opričnina* was “to extinguish the remnants of feudal fragmentation”, and that the result was to undermine “the political role of the boyar aristocracy which had opposed centralization”. The effects of *opričnina* could, however, only be short-lived, because it was an attempt to go against the economic laws of feudalism. Finally, the author asserts that centralization and the strengthening of state power (*gosudarstvennost'*) was an objective necessity for Russia, but draws attention to an alternative course of centralization — more like the policies of the *Izbrannaja Rada* — which could lead to a “сословно-представительную монархию с ‘человеческим лицом’” (*Posobie po istorii otečestva dlja postupajuščich v VUZy* (redkollegija), Moskva 1994, pp. 84-86).

V. D. Nazarov follows the sceptical line of interpretation in the tradition of Ključevskij and Veselovskij (A. N. Sacharov, A. P. Novosel'cev (otv. red.): *Istorija Rossii s drevnejšich vremen do konca XVII veka*. Moskva 1997, pp. 428-40).

<sup>34</sup> Skrynnikov, *Velikij gosudar'* ..., p. 300.

<sup>35</sup> Skrynnikov, *Istorija*..., p. 307

княжеских вотчин”<sup>36</sup>. This understanding comes up against the problem that many of the gains were lost by the reversal of the policies in the amnesty of 1566. Skrynnikov tries to find an anachronistic solution. The land policies begun in 1565 would lead to an enormous growth in the state funds of land, to the liquidation of private property, and the crown “gobbling up society”: “Однако посягательство на частную собственность привело к единственному результату: опричная политика потерпела крушение”<sup>37</sup>.

### 1.1.2. *Abolishing the appanage system*

What, then, was the goal of *opričnina*? According to Kobrin, it was “анти-удельной. [...] политика опричнины была направлена против пережитков удельной системы”<sup>38</sup>. The same opinion was held by Zimin. How do they argue that *opričnina* was directed against the “remnants of the feudal fragmentation”, that it was an instrument of political centralization? They have more or less retained the second part of Platonov’s thesis, and it is evidently much more difficult to argue for that part alone without the premise underlying the first part. Who are the enemies of centralization, who support the “feudal fragmentation”? Zimin asserts that it was the “feudal aristocracy” in general, the “feudal reaction”. This is the adversary against which the weapon of *opričnina* was launched. But who was this weapon directed against if *opričnina* — arguably — was *not* a systematic assault on the landed property of the same feudal reaction? On the one hand Zimin gives a large inventory of boyars and other *votčinniki* who incur the tsar’s wrath or suspicion, are killed, tonsured, exiled, or incarcerated and stripped of their properties. Here are names in abundance, but, as far as I can see, it is said of none of them that they supported “reactionary” policies, decentralization and fragmentation. When Zimin on the other hand speaks of the “feudal reaction”, there are no names, with two exceptions, one person: Vladimir Starickij, the tsar’s cousin, and one town: Novgorod<sup>39</sup>. After the

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 314; idem: *Velikij gosudar’...*, p. 301.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Kobrin, *Vlast’ i sobstvennost’...*, p. 160. It is, however, hard to see that Kobrin argues positively for this view. That was perhaps not his intention either: the chapter which the quoted passage concludes bears the title “Na čto ne posjagnula opričnina”.

<sup>39</sup> “...there was not a single Novgorodian among the tsar’s *opričniki*” (A. A. Zimin, “On the Political Preconditions for the Emergence of Russian Absolutism”, *Articles on Russian and Soviet History, 1500-1991. Vol. 1: Major Problems in Early Modern*

liquidation of Starickij and the carnage in Novgorod in the winter of 1569-70, the *udely*, “the most important remnants of the political fragmentation”, were largely abolished in Russia; and “в этом следует усмотреть основной положительный результат опричных преобразований”<sup>40</sup>. To me this is very meagre; it is out of proportion to all the efforts and costs of *opričnina*. Both results could undoubtedly have been achieved without this institution; Russian society had hardly become morally so much more sensitive since the times of Ivan III and Vasilij III that Groznyj needed *opričnina*’s demoralizing effects, which surely were unintended.

Now, Zimin allows generously for inconsistencies in Ivan’s centralizing policies; they were often conducted in forms which originated in the appanage period. *Opričnina* itself was already a peculiar *udel*<sup>41</sup>. It was characterized by traits that were more archaic than modern. Even though *Bol’soj dvorec* nominally belonged to *zemščina*, “*dvorcovyj apparat*”, inseparable from the person of the tsar, not only provided the pattern for the organization and administration of the *opričnina*, “no i vošel v nego so vseimi osnovnymi učreždenijami”. This archaic political instrument

---

*Russian History*, New York and London 1992, p. 96. This is a translation of Zimin’s contribution to a Soviet collection of articles, *Absolutizm v Rossii (xvi-xvii vv.)*, Moskva 1964.). The accusation that the town was treasonably connected with Lithuania was very likely made up. The sacrifice of thousands of innocent lives can in no way be justified, but “such was the barbaric essence of feudal struggle”. And finally, the crucial point: “the liquidation of the independence and economic power of Novgorod was a necessary condition for the completion of the struggle against the country’s political fragmentation” (ibid., pp. 97-98).

<sup>40</sup> Zimin, *Opričnina...*, p. 362. Skrynnikov goes against this interpretation; see his *Tragedija Novgoroda*, Moskva 1994, p. 80, and conclusion in the same book: “Опричный разгром Новгорода невозможно оправдать ссылками на необходимость преодоления пережитков удельной раздробленности или экономической обособленности древней земли” (p. 154).

<sup>41</sup> Zimin, *Opričnina...*, p. 478. “...the government strove to accomplish the liquidation of the last appanages through the creation of a new ‘state appanage’” (“On the Political Preconditions...”, p. 101). S. O. Šmidt tried to resolve the paradox by a reference to Marx, who wrote about “врожденная человеку казуистика — изменять вещи, меняя их названия, и находить лазейки для того, чтобы в рамках традиции ломать традицию, когда непосредственный интерес служит для этого достаточным побуждением” (quoted in “Voprosy istorii Rossii XVI veka v sovetskoj istoričeskoj literature 1950-x — načala 1960-x godov” [1962], S. O. Šmidt, *Rossija Ivana Groznogo*, Moskva 1999, p. 41).

was good enough for Ivan's *udel*, but inadequate for the general state tasks of the *opričnina*. After the end of *opričnina*, *dvorcovyj apparat* therefore regained its genuine court functions<sup>42</sup>. "Prikaznoj apparat", however, remained throughout in *zemščina*, with one exception.

Кроме Четверти и дворцовых ведомств, ни одна изба не перешла в опричнину. Существование двойного управления, когда земщиной с общегосударственными «избами» ведала Боярская дума, а опричниною с дворцовыми ведомствами — царь, осложняло и тормозило процесс централизации государственного аппарата, происходивший во время опричнины.<sup>43</sup>

The sense and practice of justice which the authorities tried to develop and maintain in the 1550s, was during *opričnina* replaced by complete legal arbitrariness, "господством внесудебной расправы, [...]". Особенно бесчинствовали опричники<sup>44</sup>. Zimin points out that, though there were many members of the "feudal aristocracy" who suffered during *opričnina*, there were at the same time several "krupnejšie knjažesko-bojarskie familii", the flower of the boyar дума, that were not hit and even got a greater role to play than before. The fact that the government of the country after Ivan's death "perešlo v ruki bojarskogo soveta", can only be understood "исходя из того факта, что во второй половине XVI в. Боярская дума не только сохранила, но и упрочила свои политические позиции"<sup>45</sup>.

Zimin sums up in the following way the contradictory character of *opričnina*:

Вместе с тем опричнина была очень сложным явлением. Новое и старое переплеталось в ней с удивительной причудливостью мозаичных узоров. Ее особенностью было то, что централизаторская политика проводилась в крайне архаичных формах, подчас под лозунгом возврата к старине. Так, ликвидации последних уделов правительство стремилось добиться путем создания нового государева удела — опричнины. Утверждая

---

<sup>42</sup> Zimin, *Opričnina...*, pp. 376-77.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 380.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 382. See also pp. 370-71.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 370.

самодержавную власть монарха как непреложный закон государственной жизни, Иван Грозный в то же время передавал всю полноту исполнительной власти в земщине, т. е. основных территориях России, в руки Боярской думы и приказов, фактически усиливая удельный вес феодальной аристократии в политическом строе Русского государства.<sup>46</sup>

### 1.2. *Autocracy or not?*

The other perspective which centres upon the fundamental question of autocracy or not, is, of course, also present in the works of the authors who attribute great significance to the land policies of *opričnina*. Al'šic, however, whom I have already mentioned, holds the land policies to be of minor importance. Insofar as there were conflicts and contradictions between boyars and *dvorjane*, they did not concern the question of whether there should be centralization or not, but what kind of centralization, who should rule the centralized state and how, which social groups' interests it should favour<sup>47</sup>. Thus, in this perspective centralization is already decided and acclaimed, if not accomplished, and therefore an irrelevant question. The crucial issue is who shall have real power in this state, the monarch himself or his advisors and his apparatus.

This is also the question on which Veselovskij concentrates. Moreover, this perspective has sometimes been brought into focus by several other historians as well. The reason why it has been rather rarely in the foreground, is evidently that it was regarded as closely tied to the first perspective; Zimin, for example, remarks that when *opričnina* hit at the remnants of feudal fragmentation, it strengthened the tsar's autocratic power<sup>48</sup>. Other historians who more fully apply this perspective are L. V. Čerepnin og N. E. Nosov, who in turn inspired the emigré historian Alexander Yanov<sup>49</sup>. Nosov criticizes the “unilinear scheme” in analyses of the growth of the centralized state, “стержнем которой является отождествление самодержавия и централизации”, and he quotes L. V. Čerepnin, who wrote that “государственная централизация может проходить в разных формах. Централизация и самодержавие — не

---

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 479.

<sup>47</sup> Al'šic, op. cit., pp. 238-39.

<sup>48</sup> Zimin, *Opričnina...*, p. 368.

<sup>49</sup> Alexander Yanov, *The Origins of Autocracy: Ivan the Terrible in Russian History*, Berkeley 1981.

синонимы”<sup>50</sup>. He believes that there was an alternative to the “autocratic-bureaucratic” principle which was realized under Groznyj, namely the “estate-representative principle (soslovno-predstavitel’noe načalo)”<sup>51</sup>. Al’šic takes up on this and asserts that precisely this was the principle underlying the policies of the so-called *Izbrannaja Rada*, or “the government of compromise” in the late 1540s and 1550s. And when Ivan did away with his government in 1560 and increasingly condemned its practices in the 1550s, it simply meant that he was rejecting this *soslovno-predstavitel’nyj* principle in favour of the autocratic principle<sup>52</sup>.

Nosov thinks there was a double tendency in the centralization process towards 1550 — “samoderžavno-krepostničeskaja” and “soslovno-predstavitel’naja”; they conflicted sharply with each other, but were at the same time organically interconnected in their manifestations as well as their final results. It is not clear how he thinks Russia’s subsequent historical path might have been if “Ivan’s *opričnina* had [not] interrupted the organic development of Russian society”<sup>53</sup>.

---

<sup>50</sup> N. E. Nosov, “Stanovlenie soslovnogo predstavitel’stva v Rossii v pervoj polovine XVI v.”, *Istoričeskie zapiski*, t. 114 (1986), p. 151.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. This seems perhaps to be an attempt to make Russian history more ‘European’. It should, however, first be remarked that these two principles hardly represented two different alternative forms of centralization in, e.g. French history. Here the estates were usually fighting against centralization, and in the centralization that was achieved, there was to some extent a compromise between the two principles. Moreover, in the long run the estate principle was weakened, partly as a prerequisite for centralization, partly, and more importantly, as its consequence, in the French Revolution. If there were estates in 16th-century Russia, they were — as argued by some of the above-mentioned historians — not enemies of centralization. Is it possible to imagine them as taking the initiative for and being the leading force in centralization? No, not if we consider them as standing in contradiction to some bureaucratic principle, if they looked upon the alliance between monarch and bureaucracy as upon an adversary and a foreign, repulsive force. It should be remarked that no centralization can be imagined without bureaucracies. The estates as centralizers would themselves either have to be served and supported by a bureaucracy, or themselves become a bureaucracy.

<sup>52</sup> Al’šic, op. cit., pp. 53-61, p. 95, pp. 107f.

<sup>53</sup> Nosov, op. cit., p. 175. “Именно она [опричнина] усилила в самодержавии московских царей черты восточного деспотизма со всеми крайностями его проявления. Опричная политика — это политика контрреформ, проводимых царизмом в интересах бюрократии и наиболее крепостнически настроенных слоев дворянства и столичного купечества. Она не смогла полностью изменить общий ход развития русской государственности — земские соборы и земское самоуправление продолжали существовать, но бесспорно, что опричнина способствовала усилению влияния и значения приказного строя” (ibid.).



## 2. What was *opričnina* about?

The interpretation I shall propose has something in common with the perspective of Al'šic as well as that of Veselovskij and Ključevskii, but I depart from the former's perspective in that I do not see the constructive historical meaning which he attributes to Ivan's ideas and policies. Thus my position will be closer to that of the two latter historians. It is also superficially close to the interpretation put forward by the late V. B. Kobrin and A. L. Jurganov who argued that the Russian state which was formed in the second half of the 16th century, was a despotic autocracy of an Eastern type, mainly due to the lack of feudal contract that was characteristic of Western Europe in the Middle Ages<sup>54</sup>.

I shall first give a brief presentation of my interpretation of *opričnina*. In my view it all had to do with how Ivan could wield autocratic power in a really concrete sense. He complained in his correspondence with Kurbskij that in the 1540s and 1550s he was excluded from power and ordered about by his servants, that he was ruler in name only but not in fact. He felt his position had become somewhat equal to that of the Polish king, whom he could not but despise. He regards this as an assault on his divine right, as treason, and from 1560 onwards he tries to put the situation right, by cursing, exiling, tonsuring and executing those he regards as the main culprits. Applying collective suretyship (*krugovaja poruka*), he attains the opposite of what he wants, that is, he welds together the groups with which he was in conflict. People begin to run away, which makes Ivan believe that his problem was not a structural one, but came from moral defects, disloyalty, cowardice, ungodliness, etc. in the whole body of persons who peopled his court and chancelleries. It appears to him a many-headed monster; as soon as he chops off one or several heads, new ones just grow out. To his self-created problem Ivan finds a solution which consists not only in drawing away from the hated staff and having a new court with a reliable life-guard, but also in radically simplifying the political work of governing.

---

<sup>54</sup> V. B. Kobrin, A. L. Jurganov, "Stanovlenie despotičeskogo samodržavija v sredne-vekovoj Rusi. (K postanovke problemy)", *Istorija SSSR*, 1991, no. 4, pp. 54-64. Their line of reasoning is followed by V. M. Panejach, the author of the first part of the collective work (B. V. Anan'ič otv. red.) *Vlast' i reformy: Ot samodržavnoj k sovetskoj Rossii*, S.-Peterburg 1996, especially pp. 70-91.

This is the point of dividing the realm: Let the monster take care of *zemščina* in the old way; in *opričnina* he can wield power as he pleases on a relatively primitive level where nobody will overshadow him with their brilliance. *Opričnina* was also called *gosudarev udel*, which indicates that it was an old-fashioned appanage principality, the *votčina*, the patrimony of the prince, his unconditional private property, where Ivan at the head of his men could collect riches, take tribute, plunder and pillage like the first Varangians and Rjurikid princes. There were no complicating formalities as far as the law, immunities and property rights were concerned. It was only as *votčinnik*, and not as a ruler entangled in a complex network of internal and external dependencies, that Ivan could make himself an autocrat and realize what he in his letter to Kurbskij proudly described as “vol’noe Rossijskoe samoderžavie”.

*Opričnina* aimed at giving Ivan the possibility to exercise power under much simpler conditions so that the business of governing could be handled with a small apparatus in which Ivan did not become a dependent functionary of his subordinates. This had, however, the result that the varnish of civilization was peeled off Ivan, as well as many of his *opričniki*; they became what was called “sataninskij polk”. In terms of political development this was not even reactionary, but rather regressive; we can regard it as an instance of *volja* applied in politics, the ruler’s *volja*.

### 2.1. *The tsar and tradition*

I believe that Ivan’s problem emerges as a result of the clash between subjective and structural, historical factors. It is difficult to deal with them separately; I shall start with the tradition in which Ivan found himself. It is easy to see, when reading his writings, that he justifies his ideas and actions mainly with recourse to tradition.

We should ask: how did Ivan learn about and assimilate tradition? Mostly as a pupil, by listening to ecclesiastics, by absorbing his cultural environment, but more and more by reading and self-study. But he lacked one very essential ingredient: unlike most of his predecessors, as well as his successors, he could not be present and observe and learn how his father, the late grand prince, ruled, how he did politics and related to his boyars. What he did observe while growing up was the political chaos and the in-fighting of the boyar clans and disrespectful attitudes towards himself, the grand prince, all of which constituted a negative lesson; what was righteous, should perhaps be the opposite of this. Having no experience of his father’s government, Ivan would very likely tend to

figure out how it really should be in an utterly abstract and unrealistic fashion. His notions of what autocracy could possibly mean were formed in an exclusively theoretical way, as the result of reflections on his reading, and became exaggerated and rigid, lacking the mellowing and flexibility that comes from practical life.

This bent was likely to be considerably strengthened when he, as the first Russian ruler, was crowned tsar in 1547.

We have to look at some of the elements of the tradition Ivan assimilates. I believe we have to examine Ivan in the light of fundamental conservative traits of medieval Russian culture. Even if notions like Moscow as the “Third Rome” or the “New Jerusalem”, “Holy Russia” and so forth, taken separately, did not have any great influence, they can, in combination, be regarded as an indication of a more widespread belief in the perfection of Muscovite Russia as the only truly Christian country from the end of the 15th century onwards. As Čiževskij puts it: “The general belief of the time was that all possible and necessary values had already been found and that they existed in Russia”<sup>55</sup>. Against this background, the idea of the normative limits of power acquires a new sense: the prince shall break neither divine laws nor time-honoured norms and customs; on the contrary, his role is to defend them. Misfortune will afflict a country that is ruled by a prince who is disrespectful of the traditions of the fathers. The conservative writers showed no sign that they wished a more active state which set itself new goals and therefore had to enhance its power. In this frame of ideas we encounter a combination of absolute conservatism and normative limitation of princely power.

It is also from this perspective that Russian writers depict and explain the Time of Troubles: the tsars at the time were not rightful ones, consequently not autocrats, or, in the view of some, they were autocrats<sup>56</sup>; in any case they represented novelties that broke with

---

<sup>55</sup> Dmitrij Čiževskij, *History of Russian Literature. From the Eleventh Century to the End of the Baroque*. The Hague 1971, p. 232.

<sup>56</sup> For instance, Chvorostinin condemned the Pretender (Pseudo-Dmitrij) for having placed “autocracy higher than human custom” (quoted in Vladimir Val’denberg: *Drevnerusskie učeniija o predelach carskoj vlasti*. Petrograd 1916, p. 367).

tradition, which is why so many calamities were visited upon the country<sup>57</sup>.

To some extent one may agree with Val'denberg when he writes that Ivan conceded certain limits to his power<sup>58</sup>. This we have to relate to Ivan's deep conservatism, while he found himself prematurely in a situation which was modern in the sense of confronting him with new challenges due to the enormous enhancement of the powers of the realm and military entanglements with Western neighbors. It is abundantly clear in Ivan's writings: he is almost exclusively preoccupied with laws and norms grounded in religion and history. He saw it as incompatible with his role to be instrumental to or even tolerate offences against these norms.

Parts of the correspondence with Prince Kurbskij can be read as a quarrel about who has broken sacrosanct traditions and who will suffer the worst punishments after death, the tsar or Kurbskij<sup>59</sup>. Kurbskij complains that Ivan has departed from the tradition of taking advice from the boyars and the best men in the land and listening to them, while Ivan laments that he was ousted from power by his servants, that power by tradition belonged to him and nobody else and he was now taking it back. This leads us to two issues: First, the image of princely power traditionally held by the Russian princes as well as by society at large, and second, the relationship between grand princes and their subordinates.

---

<sup>57</sup> See Daniel Rowland, "Did Muscovite Literary Ideology Place Limits on the Power of the Tsar (1540s-1660s)?", *Russian Review*, vol. 49 (1990), pp. 125-55, especially pp. 139ff.

<sup>58</sup> Val'denberg, op. cit., p. 352, p. 437.

<sup>59</sup> In Bjarne Nørretranders' apt expression the correspondence is "a piece of psychological warfare" (op. cit., p. 22). Even if Edward Keenan (*The Kurbskii-Groznyi Apocrypha: The Seventeenth-Century Genesis of the "Correspondence" Attributed to Prince A. M. Kurbskii and Tsar Ivan IV*, Cambridge (Mass.) 1971) is right, and its real author was Prince Semen Šachovskoj in the early 17th century, it is still an important document of Russian political thought of the time, and we have to see it as constructed on the basis of then extant documents as well as a very sensitive understanding of how the protagonists were likely to think. Still, in the following I refer to and quote from the *Correspondence* on the assumption that Ivan and Kurbskij were its authors. Cf. Rowland, op. cit., pp. 142-43.

## 2.2. *Power as patrimony*

The wills of the Muscovite princes from the 14th century on are important evidence of the patrimonial character of power in old Russia<sup>60</sup>. The princes' principal concern was to keep the wealth and property they already had within the family and to acquire more; they had an acquisitive attitude towards wealth and power.

This is not the place to discuss at great length how the Russian version of patrimonial monarchy came about in the first place. I shall just make a point regarding the idea of the Eastern (Tatar or Byzantine) roots of patrimonialism and suggest a schematic model. The idea of patrimonialism as something essentially Eastern has the corollary, or is dependent upon the assumption, that patrimonial monarchy was a Russian speciality which was virtually non-existent in Western Europe. In my view, however, this was not so; cf. also Weber, to whom Richard Pipes refers when elaborating his concept of patrimonialism<sup>61</sup>. The patrimonial, familial attitude is something very human and will often tend to prevail for a certain period of time when power is formed and grows from the bottom up in violent struggles between contestants belonging to the same ethnic or cultural orbit. By contrast, *political* power is in a sense an artificial kind of power. In political history the great task or challenge has been for political power to bring out and to fruition its *political* potential. The strongest blocking forces in this process have been the human sources of other types of power.

Now, there was in medieval Russian history an opposition between the political and the patrimonial-possessional. The power of the first princes (in the 9th and 10th centuries) was mainly predatory and possessional. Then a political, unitary component was added, largely stimulated by the introduction of Christianity. At the time of the peak of power of the Kievan princes (in the 11th century) the possessional/political divide was only slightly visible, mainly because their possessional interests depended upon the unity of the trade network that constituted the political factor. It was only with the reduction of the significance of long-distance trade that the two sides parted because the possessional drive increasingly found its objects in land and circumscribed territories. The political side

---

<sup>60</sup> See for example V. O. Ključevskij, *Kurs russoj istorii* (lekcija 22), *Sočinenija v vos'mi tomach*, Moskva 1957, t. 2, pp. 29-34.

<sup>61</sup> See Pipes, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-24. For Weber, see ch. 12, "Patriarchalism and Patrimonialism" in his *Economy and Society* (transl. from the German), Berkeley 1978, pp. 1006-69.

was isolated and reduced to a rather abstract ideal, which was mobilized only occasionally in defence against common enemies. The final destruction of the political side came when the Tatar Khan set himself up as overlord of all Russian princes: he arrogated to himself the politics, and exempted the princes from any responsibility for common defence against external enemies. During the 13th and 14th centuries narrow-mindedness and petty concerns made their mark on the activities of the Russian princes, while *political* princely power, which was tsaristic and autocratic, belonged to the Khan. Beneath this political level there was in Russia a kind of free-for-all competition to acquire land, assets, and resources of any kind in which most methods were permitted and applied so long as they did not harm the Khan's interests. The princes' possessional concerns became unrestrained.

Such was the heritage. Slowly the Muscovite princes took back at least some of the political components, but they tended to a large extent to become patrimonialized, or to come into a state of tension with the patrimonial mentality. In the words of Ključevskij: "...с тех пор как обеспечен был успех московского собирания Руси, в Иване III, его старшем сыне и внуке начинают бороться вотчинник и государь, самовластный хозяин и носитель верховной государственной власти"<sup>62</sup>.

### 2.3. *Grand prince and boyars*

What kind of relations is such a patrimonial prince likely to have with his servants or boyars? The relations were often quite problematic. Vladimir Monomach already complained like a disgruntled landowner in his *Poučenie* that he had to look after everything himself because he could not rely on his servants and officers<sup>63</sup>. The first perceptions of the tyrant in Russia share with the West the idea that evil rulers were God's punishment for the sinfulness of the people, but quite often they also put the blame on evil advisors when the evil rule is such as to ruin the people, in contrast to the Western notions of tyrants<sup>64</sup>. One wonders whether this may be the result of a widespread impression that princely power in some essential respects was weak. It is indeed quite striking to see how frequently the theme of evil, young, inexperienced or stupid advisors

---

<sup>62</sup> Ključevskij, op. cit., (lekcija 26), t. 2, p. 128.

<sup>63</sup> *Izbornik: Sbornik proizvedenij literatury drevnej Rusi*. Moskva 1969, p. 155.

<sup>64</sup> Val'denberg, op. cit., pp. 110-12.

occurs in Russian political literature. The idea is structurally analogous to the later popular belief in the good tsar.

The wills of the Muscovite grand princes of the 14th century reinforce the impression that reliable men were few and far between. Grand Prince Simeon Gordyj called on his successors not to listen to “lichich ljudej”, but to “отца нашего владыки Олексея, такоже старых бояр, хто хотел отцю нашему добра и нам”<sup>65</sup>. The time of Dmitrij Donskoj has been said to be the golden age of the Russian boyars, and he advised his sons thus: “Бояр своих любите, честь им воздавайте по достоинству и по службе их, без согласия их ничего не делайте”. In his last speech to his boyars, he said: “Отчину свою, которою передал мне бог и родители мои, с вами сберег, чтил вас и любил, под вашим правлением свои города держал и великие волости. [...] Вы же назывались у меня не боярами, но князьями земли моей”<sup>66</sup>.

Originally, there had been a close and personal relationship between the grand princes and their boyars. To some extent the boyars were independent of the grand prince; they depended on princely power in general, but not on a particular prince because they could choose between several princes. In the 16th century, the general dependence upon princely power was realized by increasing dependence upon the only ruling prince who remained after the power struggles, the grand prince of Muscovy. The grand prince himself, who had previously been relatively dependent upon his boyars since they were a scarce resource, now had a looser and more impersonal relationship to his boyars and became more independent of the individual boyar because Moscow was filled with princes and boyars. But Muscovy’s growth and the growing and more complicated administration had the consequence that the grand prince became more dependent on boyars in general as well as other categories of personnel.

In his major 1939 work, *Der Prozeß der Zivilisation*, Norbert Elias pointed out in his analysis of the growth of the French kingdom that when a powerful person, *in casu* a king, concentrates in his own hands and monopolizes increasing power and resources and makes more and more persons and groups of persons dependent upon himself, he will

---

<sup>65</sup> *Duchovnye i dogovornye gramoty velikich i udel'nych knjazej XIV-XVI vv*, Moskva — Leningrad 1950 [Slavica-Reprint Nr. 40, Düsseldorf and Vaduz 1970], no. 3, p. 14.

<sup>66</sup> “Slovo o žitii velikogo knjazja Dmitrija Ivanoviča”, *Pamjatniki literatury drevnej Rusi, XIV-seredina XV veka*, Moskva 1981, p. 217.

himself tend to become dependent, not upon the dependent individual, but upon the whole collectivity of dependent individuals, for the preservation and exploitation of the monopolized resources: “The more comprehensive the monopolized power potential, the larger the web of functionaries administering it and the greater the division of labour among them; in short, the more people on whose work or function the monopoly is in any way dependent, the more strongly does this whole field controlled by the monopolist assert its own weight and its own inner regularities”<sup>67</sup>.

It is important to note that it was a similar situation that Ivan Groznyj found himself in as Tsar and Grand Prince of the whole of Rus’. He has two options; Elias continues:

The monopoly ruler can acknowledge this and impose on himself the restraints that his function as the central ruler of so mighty a formation demands; or he can indulge himself [sich gehen lassen] and give his own inclinations precedence over all others. In the latter case the complex social apparatus which has developed along with this private accumulation of power chances will sooner or later lapse into disorder and make its resistance, its autonomous structure, all the more strongly felt<sup>68</sup>.

Elias sees this as an effect of what he calls the “monopoly mechanism”. We must not confuse this with the problems monarchs had for many centuries with unruly groups of nobles who resisted centralization from their strongholds in the provinces, nor with the issue of institutional or constitutional limits upon the power of monarchs<sup>69</sup>.

---

<sup>67</sup> Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process* [The History of Manners and State Formation and Civilization], (transl. from the German) Oxford 1994, p. 348.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 348-49.

<sup>69</sup> For all his speculative endeavours, Andrej Nikitin succeeds in pointing out something very essential concerning the relations between monarchs and their realms: “При абсолютизме, даже в его наивысшей форме, монарх менее самостоятелен и неизмеримо меньше значит в жизни страны (как это ни покажется странным на первый взгляд), чем короли раннего средневековья, действительно управлявшие своей страной лично, объезжая ее в сопровождении дружинников, верша суд и расправу... [...] Знакомясь с историей России XVI века, я видел, что в ней отчетливее, чем в какую-либо другую эпоху, проступает независимость государства от его правителя” (op. cit., pp. 133-35).



Most monarchs have reacted adequately to this tendency to become dependent upon a growing staff of supposedly loyal subordinates; Ivan Groznyj did not. Apparently he was an exemplary monarch until about 1560, but he must have been grinding his teeth if we are to believe what he writes in his letters to Kurbskij.

We should perhaps be a bit sceptical of Kurbskij's account of the advice whispered in the tsar's ear in 1553 by an old monk: "If you want to be an autocrat, do not have beside you even one advisor who is wiser than yourself, since you are better than everybody else. Then you shall sit safely on your throne and keep everybody firmly in your hand. But if you have men beside you wiser than yourself, you will involuntarily obey them"<sup>70</sup>.

How could Kurbskij know? This fits, however, wonderfully in the context of Ivan's life and career. In the will he writes in 1572 he advises his sons as if his first attempt to heed the words of the monk did not work out very well, and now contemplates another variant of the same. We saw above that the grand princes of the 14th century quietly admitted that they relied on their boyars; here we see that Ivan Groznyj, for his part, after a life full of self-inflicted trouble with his subordinates, believes it possible to manage without them by teaching himself all the arts of governing land and people and he admonishes the *careviči* correspondingly:

Всякому делу навькайте, и божественному, и священническому, и иноческому, и ратному, и судейскому, московскому пребыванию и житейскому всякому обиходу, и как которые чины ведутся здесь и в ьных государствах, и здешнее государство с иными государствами что имеет, то бы есте сами знали. Также и во обиходе во всяких, как кто живет, и как кому пригоже быти, и в какове мере кто держится, тому б есте всему научены были. Ино вам люди не указывают, вы станите людям указывать. А чего сами не познаете, и вы сами стате своими государствами владети и людьми<sup>71</sup>.

---

<sup>70</sup> А. Kurbskij, *Istorija o velikom knjaze Moskovskom*. Parts published in *Moskovskoe gosudarstvo* (= *Istorija otečestva v romanach, povestjach, dokumentach. Vek XVI*), Moskva 1986, p. 449.

<sup>71</sup> *Duchovnye i dogovornye gramoty...*, no. 104, p. 427.

#### 2.4. *The law, kings and state-building*

Now I return to the two principal questions that have been paramount in the literature on Ivan IV and his Russia: Centralization or not, and autocracy or not. To highlight these we have to deal briefly on a theoretical level with a central question concerning the growth and development of the European monarchies from the 15th to the 18th century.

We have to distinguish between three aspects of the growth of the European monarchies. The first is their nominal growth, the extension of their borders; the second is their real growth, i.e. political centralization, the growth and concentration of the power of the state; the third is the strengthening, or at least preservation, of the power of the monarch in this consolidated state, i.e. its absolute character. The last two correspond to the two main perspectives in most historians' understanding of *opričnina* which we have discussed above. What should command our interest is the connection between the second and third aspects. We should reflect on the reason why in so many European countries the emergence of a strong, centralized state power seemed to coincide with, if not depend upon royal absolutism. Moreover, I think that the Soviet historians were right when they took as their premise that there was a close correlation between the two, and if centralization was 'progressive', it would not be 'progressive' to weaken the power of the tsars of the 16th-18th centuries.

Georg Simmel writes on the sociologically observable phenomenon that the subordination of a group under *one single person* can result in a pronounced unification or homogenization of the group ("eine sehr entschiedene Vereinheitlichung der Gruppe"); this subordination can even be the effective reason for the emergence of a spirit of community which could not otherwise be achieved ("einer sonst nicht erreichbaren, durch keine sonstige Beziehung angelegten Gemeinsamkeit")<sup>72</sup>. This insight can be applied to gain a synthetic overview over the development of legal and political aspects of power from the Middle Ages to the Early Modern period<sup>73</sup>.

---

<sup>72</sup> Georg Simmel, *Soziologie: Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung* [1908], Frankfurt a. M. 1992 (= Gesamtausgabe, Bd. 11), pp. 168-70.

<sup>73</sup> The overview may seem too simplified. For more on this subject I refer especially to the following: *The Cambridge History of Medieval Political Thought c. 350-c. 1450*, ed. J. H. Burns, Cambridge 1988; Susan Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities in Western Europe, 900-1300*, Oxford 1984; *The Cambridge History of Political Thought 1450-1700*, ed. J. H. Burns, Cambridge 1991.

The greater part of medieval legal thought was based partly on locally circumscribed customary law, and partly on the assumption that the law was already given. There was little room for creativity in legislation, “new” laws were “discovered”. Hence the fundamental conservatism and localism of the law. Later, a number of factors called for a break with this situation. Some of them resulted from the growth in the scope and complexity of the life-worlds of monarchs and important social groups, so that more and more cases occurred where neither known law, nor custom had any answers. The time had come to create new law and to break with tradition and “the good, old law”. Since new laws had to deal more and more with issues which no longer had a local or customary character, they became more remote and abstract. They were to regulate activities where relations between the actors could not be perceived and experienced concretely as a whole. They were propagated in terms of precedent, objectivity, and universal validity which could hardly be attuned to the habitual perception of reality. There has until modern times been a tenacious aversion against the objectivity of the law, and there has been considerable debate, not only in Russia, as to whether the state was better governed by the best laws or the best men. Power relationships were regarded as personal; most people saw it as the natural order of things to subordinate themselves to persons, whereas one would have a hard time trying to make them comply with abstract principles or ideals. However, this problem could be overcome when the king was the sovereign legislator. The king would embody the objectivity and the universal validity of the law; obedience to the king would imply obedience to the law.

The way had already been theoretically prepared since the 13th century by the debates of jurists on the political implications of central concepts in Roman law. There was the issue of whether *princeps* was bound (*alligatus*) by or freed from the law (*legibus solutus*), that is, whether he was subject to or above the law; there was the maxim that what pleases the prince has the force of law (*quod principi placuit, legis habet vigorem*); there was the idea of the prince or the *imperator* as the living law (*lex animata*), that is, the law was supposed to dwell in the prince’s breast. It was in the evolution of these and other ideas that the strengthening of royal power was theoretically and ideologically underpinned from the 16th century on.

But this is not the whole story. As we know, absolutism was transitory. The course from dispersed, locally circumscribed and personally

styled power to the centralized and impersonal state in which we live, passed — somewhat paradoxically — through the concentration of power in the hands of absolute monarchs. Now, an impersonal moment inhered already in the medieval concept of kingship: it was kingship as duty and office, the notion of the crown as not just a kind of headgear, but an abstract entity to which all subjects owed obedience even when the king in person was absent. Most important in this context is the idea of the king's two bodies, “the body natural and the body politic”. It is the King body politic that is above the (positive) law; in his body natural he is bound by the law as everybody else. Although the physiological metaphors of the two bodies were used for the first time by English jurists in the middle of the 16th century, the very idea that kings were “mixed persons” had a long ancestry. Even Aristotle made a distinction between “the friends of the prince and the friends of the principedom”, which might have inspired Alexander to distinguish between “a friend of Alexander and a friend of the king”<sup>74</sup>. In the later Middle Ages the most frequent distinction was between the king's public person and his private will; both the king as a public person and the concept of the crown might serve as restraints on the private desires of the king. Royal counsellors swore allegiance to the king as well as to the Crown and were assumed to be “obliged to protect the Crown even against the king. King and Crown no longer were the same thing”<sup>75</sup>. The king was only guardian of the Crown, and the Crown was always in the position of a minor<sup>76</sup>. In English political thought the King's body politic was first and foremost the King in Parliament. Fiction or not, it was powerful enough for Parliament to summon “in the name and by the authority of Charles I, King body politic, the armies which were to fight the same Charles I, king body natural”<sup>77</sup>.

The idea that monarchs were “mixed persons” can easily be found in medieval Russian thought, but it is hard to find someone espousing the idea of one side restraining the other. One of its best known representatives, Iosif Volockij, has a bad reputation with those who look for forces of freedom and abhor autocracy in Russian history. Citing his

---

<sup>74</sup> Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology*, Princeton 1957, p. 498.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 360.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 377.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

pronouncement that the prince “by nature” is like other men, “by his power, however, he is like God (podoben vyšnemu Bogu)”<sup>78</sup>, they see him as ideologically preparing autocracy. The question is whether this differs much from the Western European or Byzantine versions of the duality of kings, whether it really is “a purely eastern perception of the tsar”<sup>79</sup> and amounts to “a pure deification of the tsar’s person”<sup>80</sup>. Even if Iosif after 1503 finally arrives at what D’jakovov calls “a theory of theocratic absolutism”, there remains a reservation (sderžka), in that he tries to place the authority of the clergy higher than that of the state power, “ne buduči uveren v ee stojkosti”. And the faithful Josephite, the Metropolitan Daniil, adds the same reservation in his lesson (slovo) on obedience to the power: people should obey only “Божие повеление творящим”, because “по закону Божию начальство им есть”, and if the powers command us [to do] something “вне воли Господни [...], да не послушаем их”<sup>81</sup>.

Most medieval political theory, in the West as well as in the East, worked with analogies between the heavenly kingdom and the subordinated earthly kingdoms, and as God was the ruler in the former he had installed the kings as rulers in the latter. The analogy in itself permitted writers to picture the kings as minor earthly gods, and it was perhaps more a question of style and effective rhetoric than of conceptual change when some kings actually were so styled. And a most extreme form of royal self-divinization is that by James VI of Scotland (from 1603 James I of England), in whose *Trew Law of Free Monarchy*, published in 1598, the following statement is found: “The state of monarchy is the supremest thing upon earth: for kings are not only God’s lieutenants upon earth, and sit upon God’s throne, but even by God himself they are called Gods”<sup>82</sup>.

---

<sup>78</sup> Quoted in M. D’jakovov, *Vlast’ moskovskich gosudarej: Očerki iz istorii političeskich idej drevnej Rusi do konca XVI veka*, S.-Peterburg 1889 [Slavistic Printings and Reprintings 159, The Hague 1969], p. 99. A chronicler quoted from a Greek source under the year 1175: “Естьством бо земным подобен есть всякому человеку цесарь, властью же сана яко Бог” (ibid., p. 41).

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 99.

<sup>80</sup> G. V. Plechanov, *Istorija ruskoj obščestvennoj mysli*. T. 1 [Sočinenija, t. 20]. Moskva — Leningrad 1925, p. 140.

<sup>81</sup> Quoted by D’jakovov, op. cit., pp. 129-30.

<sup>82</sup> Quoted in George H. Sabine and Thomas L. Thorson, *A History of Political Theory*, Hinsdale (Ill.) 1973, p. 368. I agree with Robert Crummey that this would have “sounded a note of unimaginable blasphemy” to Muscovite minds (“Court Spectacles in Seventeenth-Century Russia: Illusion and Reality”, *Articles on Russian and Soviet History*,

Iosif's formulation may be somewhat different from the formulation of Maksim Grek who has received higher ratings from the historians: "Царь есть живой и видимый одушевленный образ самого царя небесного"<sup>83</sup>, and this is also more attuned to Western formulations. It does not, however, seem to imply any human-royal distinction. Nor does Metropolitan Makarij when he writes of the crowning of Ivan that the elevation of the prince's power does not make his power more unlimited; on the contrary, "еще больше ее ограничение в смысле необходимости для царя более строго соблюдать божественные законы"<sup>84</sup>. He is here expressing an idea which belongs to another tradition, that of divine law as distinct from positive law. We thus look in vain for ideas which correspond to the restraining of the king's will that is implied in the concept of the king's two bodies<sup>85</sup>.

This is particularly clear when we turn to Kurbskij and Ivan. According to B. Nørretranders, Kurbskij rejects the distinction "between the Czar with a divine mandate and a human being under God's guidance. He recognizes no divine-humane double role"<sup>86</sup>. If this is right, it shows that Kurbskij's political thought was rather poor, although from a modern point of view it can be mistaken for a kind of liberalism.

In Ivan there was much vacillating from one extreme to another, which might give the impression that he harboured several creatures within himself, but that has nothing to do with the idea of kings as mixed persons as set forth above. In Ivan it is difficult to discern any duality; though aware of the divine character of his royal dignity, having received his throne from God, he refuses to be saddled with anything other than a human nature. He wants to be a 'normal' human being with 'normal'

---

1500-1991. Vol. 1: *Major Problems in Early Modern Russian History*, New York and London 1992, p. 135).

<sup>83</sup> Quoted in Vladimir Ikonnikov, *Opyt issledovanija o kul'turnom značenii Vizantii v russkoj istorii* (1869), [Slavistic Printings and Reprintings 166] The Hague 1970, p. 313.

<sup>84</sup> Quoted in Val'denberg, op. cit., p. 289.

<sup>85</sup> There is, though, an old idea taken up by Maksim Grek which may be seen as a first step in the right direction, and that is when he in his definition of an autocrat says that he should not submit to his passions (in Ikonnikov, op. cit., p. 313). Perfectly lacking such a concept is Vassian Patrikeev's scepticism concerning autocracy: What if the monarch is insane? (cf. Dmitrij Tschizewskij, *Russische Geistesgeschichte*, München 1974, p. 109).

<sup>86</sup> Nørretranders, op. cit., p. 65.

human weaknesses<sup>87</sup>, but one who is endowed by God with the right to rule over other men without restriction. This is quite to be expected when we keep in mind the patrimonial tradition.

### 2.5. *The modelling of an autocrat that failed*

Ja. S. Lur'e joins Nørretranders in the opinion that Ivan must have felt particularly upset by the first accusation in Kurbskij's letter which was included already in the way he addressed the tsar: "Царю, богом препрославленному и среди православных всех светлее явившемуся, ныне же — за грехи наши — ставшему супротивным (пусть разумеет разумеющий), совесть имеющему прокаженную, какой не встретишь и у народов безбожных"<sup>88</sup>. To this reproach Ivan returned ten times and expended the utmost efforts on its refutation, Lur'e writes<sup>89</sup>. The examples he gives are in my view not the best ones. I think we have to consider Ivan's immediate answer on the first pages of the letter as the most indicative of his concerns. Kurbskij is blind and unable to see the truth, he writes: how could he imagine himself worthy of standing at the throne of the Almighty when it is actually he, together with his devilish advisors, who has trampled under foot all the holy things, they who actually have brought him, Ivan, so much suffering by their snake-like cunning:

Вы ведь со времени моей юности, подобно бесам, благочестие и державу, данную мне от бога и от моих прародителей, под свою власть захватили. Разве это и есть «совесть прокаженная» — держать свое царство в своих руках, а своим рабам не давать господствовать? Это ли «против разума» — не хотеть

---

<sup>87</sup> Some examples: "Советуешь нам то, чего сам не делаешь! По-наватски и по-фарисейски рассуждаешь: по-наватски потому, что требуешь от человека большего, чем позволяет человеческого природа, по-фарисейски же потому, что сам не деля, требуешь этого от других". "...хоть я и ношу порфиру, но, однако, знаю, что по природе я так же подвержен немощам, как и все люди, а не так, как вы еретически мудрствуете и велите мне стать выше законов естества" (*Perepiska Ivana Groznogo s Andreem Kurbskim* (perevod), otv. red. D. S. Lichačev, Moskva 1981, p. 126, p.148).

<sup>88</sup> *Perepiska...*, p. 119.

<sup>89</sup> Ja. S. Lur'e, "Perepiska Ivana Groznogo s Kurbskim v obščestvennoj mysli drevnej Rusi", *Perepiska...*, p. 227. Cf. Nørretranders, op. cit., p. 27.

быть под властью своих рабов? И это ли «православие пресветлое» — быть под властью и в повиновении у рабов? [...] А о безбожных народах что и говорить! Там ведь у них цари своими царствами не владеют, а как им укажут их подданные, так и управляют. Русские же самодержцы изначала сами владеют своим государством, а не их бояре и вельможи! И этого в своей озлобленности не смог ты понять, считая благочестием, чтобы самодержавие подпало под власть всем известного попа и под ваше злодейское управление. А это по твоему рассуждению «нечестие», когда мы сами обладаем властью, данной нам от бога, и не хотим быть под властью у попа и вашего злодейства! Это ли мыслится «сопротивно», что вашему злобесному умыслу тогда — божьей милостью, и заступничеством пречистой богородицы, и молитвами всех святых, и родительским благословением — не дал погубить себя? Сколько зла я тогда от вас претерпел! Обо всем это[м] подробнее дальнейшие слова известят<sup>90</sup>.

And, indeed, Ivan does inform the reader in abundance about how he was cut off from power by the boyars as well as the priest Silvestr and Aleksej Adašev. In his first letter we encounter about twenty times different variations of the theme of whether it is right for slaves to command their master, thinking that they know the better while the master knows nothing, or whether the slaves have good reason to be morally disgusted when the tsar decides that he no longer wants to be pushed around by them. Even thirteen years later, in his second, much shorter letter to Kurbskij, he harps on the same theme<sup>91</sup>. I consider this to be not only a major component of Ivan's political thought, but also the overriding subjective factor motivating him to institute *opričnina* half a year after the first letter.

“Послание идейно подготавливало почву для опричнины и ее терпора”, writes Skrynnikov and continues: “Боярскому своеволию царь может противопоставить лишь тезис о неограниченном своеволии монарха, выступающего в роли восточного деспота. Власть монарха утверждена Богом и не может быть ограничена в пользу бояр или

---

<sup>90</sup> *Perepiska...*, p. 125-26.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 166f.



кого бы то ни было другого”<sup>92</sup>. I think, however, that Skrynnikov somewhat misses the point. Neither a Western absolutist monarch nor an Eastern despot would have had the need to divide up the realm; *opričnina* is not explained by reference to Eastern despotism, nor by Ivan’s oft-quoted statement that he is free to reward as well as to execute his subjects. The really decisive issue is not accessible in terms of the ideological question of the limiting of the tsar’s power by other agencies. He may himself have thought sometimes in such terms, but that would be a *quid pro quo*. There will always be a natural way of constraining the excessively wilful nature of monarchs, either by way of counsel and advice or by the sheer intractability and unmalleable materiality of the world in which they find themselves. Both factors tend, as Elias has shown, to enhance their weight with the growing size of the realm and increasing power of the state. Nobody is to blame for that, although it might seem to Ivan that some men have deliberately arrogated to themselves more power than is their due. Moreover, the power increase which had taken place in Russia would necessitate or simply imply policies conducive to breaches of traditions and norms. And it was as such breaches Ivan felt the imagined presumptions and power-seeking of the boyars and the *duma*. When the growth of the realm and its power on the one hand makes the tsar more dependent upon his subordinates, and on the other hand makes these subordinates carry out tasks that imply breaches of norms, Ivan considers both their subjective guilt. They have broken with tradition and transgressed their limits both in relation to himself and to society.

It is true that Ivan has absorbed ideas of absolute, unlimited kingship instituted by God, but it looks as if he does not know how to apply them beyond a rhetorical level. He does not know how to model in practical terms his role as autocrat according to these ideas: he is culturally as well as biographically determined not to attain the cultural resourcefulness which would enable him to understand the necessary qualities of the relationship between kingship and enhanced state power which are covered by the maxim: *l’Etat, c’est moi*. He is only able to utter: the state, it is mine. The first allows for a perception of the monarch as having two

---

<sup>92</sup> Skrynnikov, *Velikij gosudar’* ..., p. 239.

bodies, the monarch as partly depersonalized, whereas the second places the monarch indivisibly outside the state, as an owner who always distinguishes easily between himself (human being with a normal nature etc.) and his property.

Behind Ivan's tragic position lies a misconception of autocracy that is conditioned by the patrimonial outlook on power, which would fit better in a small appanage principality than in a large, unified state. Ivan argues his case by drawing on historical analogies, and what characterizes autocratic power is essentially the same throughout history, whether in the old Kingdom of Israel, the Roman Empire in the time of Christ and Paul or in the time of Constantine, or, finally, in Rus' from the time of Vladimir. He does not take historical change into account and believes that autocracy is the best, the natural and the only God-given form of monarchical power for any country, large or small, at any historical time. Countries which deviate from this, he thinks of as godless. He achieves next to nothing when he applies to Russia Byzantine or Roman models in which the patrimonial outlook was virtually absent in politics, or ideas from the tiny Israelitic realm two millennia earlier.

Of all the ideas on autocratic power which he has in his arsenal, there is, finally, only one left for him to employ (apart from capricious cruelty and arbitrary violence). After one of the passages where he rejects the arrogant leading lights who would treat him as a stupid and ignorant infant, he continues: “Мы же уповаем на божью милость, ибо достигли возраста Христова, и, помимо божьей милости, милости богородицы и всех святых, не нуждаемся ни в каких наставлениях от людей, ибо не годится, властвуя над многими людьми, спрашивать у них совета”<sup>93</sup>.

It would seem to be a matter of fact that there is a limit to the number of people one can rule while asking nobody for advice. This last point was likely to be more important to Ivan than the first one in the

---

<sup>93</sup> *Perepiska...*, p. 156. This seems to be a variation on an idea expressed by an “anonymous” *iosifljanec* that the tsar in performing his divine tasks acts on his own (*edinolično*), because “Бог не требует ни от кого-же помощи, царь же от единого Бога” (quoted in D’jakonov, *op. cit.*, p. 107).

circumstances in 1564: Reduce the numbers, the amount of work, the complications, if only he can get away from the offending excellence of his own subjects, as well as from real or imagined threats to his life. Simplify the conditions!<sup>94</sup>

There was partly a duplication, partly a transferral to *opričnina* of state or court chancelleries from *zemščina*. There was, however, a clear tendency for what came to belong to *opričnina* to be related to court functions and Ivan's household and personal security, and not to the business of governing the tsardom at large. If one can speak of institutions of "big politics", they remained in their entirety in *zemščina*<sup>95</sup>.

All this is not to say that Ivan severed his links to them; his assignment of the affairs of his tsardom to the boyars in the *zemščina* was to some extent a formal one. As stated already in the *ukaz* on *opričnina*, all the boyars and remaining personnel that were to stay in *zemščina*, "... [Иван] велел быти по своим приказом и управу чинити по старине, а о болших делех приходити к боярам; а ратные каковы будут вести или земские великие дела, и бояром о тех делех приходити ко государю, и государь з бояры тем делом управу велит чинити"<sup>96</sup>. Ivan, for instance, kept control of important decisions in the Livonian war and diplomatic exchanges. And he could have his *opričnina* guard exert

---

<sup>94</sup> There is, as far as I can see, only one scholar who has previously spoken of simplification as a possible explanation of *opričnina*, and that is Nørretranders. After a short discussion of some examples of the psychologization of Ivan, he draws on a British psychiatrist (William Sargant) who pointed out that people who are continually exposed to ambivalent and stressful situations often react "by simplifying a situation that, in one way or another, has become intolerably complicated and uncontrollable. The simplification may, formulated in religious terms, consist in the individual's self-surrender, or, in psychological terms, it may consist in the refusal to participate in the situation in question" (op. cit., p. 134). Nørretranders sees Ivan's introduction of *opričnina*, "a state within the state", as a kind of simplification, in some kind of analogy with the psychological simplification, of the political situation, by refusing "to take part in a situation that had grown too complicated for him, and consequently either he had to disappear or he had to get rid of his adversaries" (p. 135). I agree with him on this point, but I find that he makes Ivan's response too rational when he in the subsequent discussion tends to regard *opričnina* as an adequate answer to the real problems of governing and administering Russia.

<sup>95</sup> Cf. Veselovskij, op. cit., pp. 558ff.

<sup>96</sup> *PSRL*, t. 13, p. 395.

pressure and apply terror, that is, have his power felt everywhere in the country, as he might wish. The old Boyar *duma* had its status reduced, and the leading role in it was played by those boyars who were closest to Ivan and travelled between Moscow and Aleksandrovskaia Sloboda. As Al’šic remarks, although perhaps somewhat exaggerating: “Важно, что дума как учреждение перестала быть ‘высшим органом государства’ и превратилась в покорную, низшую по сравнению с царским опричным правительством инстанцию”<sup>97</sup>.

We have seen above that the notion of kings as mixed persons and the idea of the king’s two bodies were beyond Ivan’s purview of his situation and his role. But, having been placed in charge of an empire and pushed into a personally intolerable situation, he reacts by unwittingly creating something which parallels the division between the “king body politic” and the “king body natural”. “Царь захотел в земщине быть государем, а в опричнине остаться вотчинником, удельным князем”<sup>98</sup>, as Ključevskij put it. Ivan is unable to give an adequate form to his role as autocrat, adequate that is to a country like Russia in the second half of the 16th century; instead he goes on to mould his realm to fit the role he is able and willing to fulfill. Not suspecting that he must see himself as divided, he divides the country instead. Ideally, one could for a moment contemplate Ivan’s division of the country as a possible and constructive method for reconciling the political and possessional-patrimonial sides in historical development, by permitting the body natural to satisfy itself in *opričnina*, while the body politic would be born, grow and mature in *zemščina*, and both could then slowly grow together in harmony. As it turned out, however, no body politic was born, whereas the body natural as well as the country in its entirety came out utterly disfigured.

*E-mail: gunnar.opeide@hum.uit.no*

---

<sup>97</sup> Al’šic, op. cit., p. 125.

<sup>98</sup> Ključevskij, op. cit., (lekcija 29), t. 2, p. 185.