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Russian History Revisited: Ivan IV and the Muscovy Company

In 1553-1554 the English merchant Richard Chancellor, who was a confidant of the English court, travelled to Tsardom of Rus and was granted an audience with young Ivan IV (the Terrible). Chancellor appeared in Russia amid the unfolding geopolitical confrontation of a religious and civilizational character between intensely protestantised England and the rest of the Christian world, mostly Catholic. The analytical findings, forwarded by Chancellor to London were, in fact, geopolitical. [Martirosyan 2008] England sought trade paths to Persia and India bypassing its chief European rivals and knew that Russia could provide such a path.

Chancellor described the life in Rus, her relationships with the neighbouring countries, her cities, laws, the personality of Tsar Ivan IV. In fact, the writings of Chancellor, his companions and followers betray their intrinsic prejudice against the countries of the East (and the peoples of other “newly-discovered” continents), which has become the staple of the English imperialism:

“The empire and government of the king is very large, and his wealth at this time exceeding great. And because the city of Mosco is the chiefest of all the rest, it seemeth of itself to challenge the first place in this discourse. Our men say, that in bigness it is as great as the city of London with the suburbs thereof. There are many and great buildings in it, but for beauty and fairness nothing comparable to ours. There are many towns and villages also, but built out of order, and with no handsomeness : their streets and ways are not paved with stone as ours are: the walls of their houses are of wood: the roofs for the most part are covered with shingle boards. There is hard by the city a very fair castle, strong, and furnished with artillery, whereunto the city is joined directly towards the north with a brick wall: the walls also of the castle are built with brick, and are in breadth or thickness eighteen feet. This castle hath on the one side a dry ditch, on the other side the river Moscuia, whereby it is made almost inexpugnable...

They are a kind of people most sparing in diet, and most patient in extremity of cold, above all others ; for when the ground is covered with snow, and is grown terrible and hard with the frost, this Russe hangs up his mantle, or soldier's coat, against that part from whence the wind and snow drives, and so making a little fire, lieth down with his back towards the weather : this mantle of his serves him for his bed, wall, house and all: his drink is cold water of the river, mingled with oatmeal, and this is all his good cheer, and he thinketh himself well and daintily fed therewith, and so sitteth down by his fire, and upon the hard ground roasteth as it were his weary sides thus daintily stuffed ; the hard ground is his feather-bed, and some block or stone his pillow: and as for his horse, he is as it were a chamber fellow with his master, faring both alike. How justly may this barbarous and rude Russe condemn the daintiness and niceness of our captains, who, living in a soil and air much more temperate, yet commonly use furred boots and cloaks ! But thus much of the furniture of their common soldiers. But those that are of higher degrees come into the field a little better provided...

There is one use and custom amongst diem which is strange and rare, but yet it is very ridiculous, and that is this: when any man dieth amongst them, they take the dead body and put it in a coffin or chest, and in the hand of the corpse they put a little scrawl, and in the same there are these words written, that the same man died a Russe of Russes, having received the faith, and died in the same. This writing or letter, they say, they send to St. Peter, who receiving it (as they affirm) reads it, and by and by admits him into heaven, and that his glory and place is higher and greater than the glory of the Christians of the Latin church, reputed themselves to be followers of a more sincere faith and religion than they : they hold opinion that we are but half Christians, and themselves only to be the true and perfect church. These are the foolish and childish dotages of such ignorant barbarians.” [Pinkerton 1810] Careful attention was paid to the fact that Russia had many enemies and managed to tame them. Lithuania, Poland, Sweden, Denmark, Livonia, Crimea, Nogai are



"terrified of the Russian name." The conclusion that Chancellor made about Russia was that if the Russian knew their strength, no one could compete with them, but they did not know it.

Hugh Willoughby, Chancellor's companion, wrote: "They (Russian fishermen)... being dismissed, spread by and by a report abroad of the arrival of a strange nation, of a singular gentleness and courtesy: whereupon the common people came together, offering to these new come guests victuals freely, and not refusing to traffic with them, except they had been bound by a certain religious use and custom not to buy any foreign commodities, without the knowledge and consent of the king.

By this time our men had learned that this country was called Russia or Moscovy, and that Juan Vasiliwich (which was at that time their king's name) ruled and governed far and wide in those places. And the barbarous Russes asked likewise of our men, whence they were, and what they came for: whereunto answer was made, that they were Englishmen sent into those coasts, from the most excellent king Edward the Sixth, having from him in commandment, certain things to deliver to their king, and seeking nothing else but his amity and friendship, and traffic with his people, whereby they doubled not, but that great commodity and profit would grow to the subjects of both kingdoms...The barbarians heard these things very gladly, and promised their aid and furtherance to acquaint their king out of hand with so honest and a reasonable request. In the meantime Master Chancelor entreated victuals for his money of the governor of that place and required hostages of them, likewise, for the more assurance of safety to himself and his company. To whom these governors answered, that they kneu not in that case the will of their king, but yet were willing in such things as they might lawfully do to pleasure him: which was as then to afford him the benefit of victuals."

Yet Chancellor and his company were impressed with the splendour of the Tsar's reception, as well as his majesty, ease and dignity. "There was a majesty in his countenance proportionable with the excellency of his estate", he wrote. They pointed out the young Tsar's forbearance and courtesy, the fact that Russians were devoted to their emperor, whom they simultaneously dreaded and loved. It was reported that the Tsar was ready to listen to complaints and assist, missed nothing, made no fun hunting or playing music, was concerned only with two thoughts: how to serve God and how to destroy the enemies of Russia.

Ivan IV rewarded the ambassadors with a letter to King Edward VI that was remarkable for its generosity of feeling. Upon Chancellor's return to England the first joint-stock company in Elizabethan England, the Muscovy Company, was chartered in mid 1555. A detailed inventory was signed by Tsar Ivan IV, of the privileges granted to English traders in Russia. From then on they traded wool, copper, lead, spices and ammunition for furs, fish, wax, tar, timber, flax, felt and yarn. [The Muscovy Company]

The principal shareholders of the company, however, were members of the English Royal Privy Council and one of its "special" activities was evidently to spy for the English throne. For thirty years the company had been unprofitable, funded from the royal treasury.

Together with the company, a graduate of Cambridge, healer, astrologer, magician and spy named Elizeus Bomelius (Bomeley) appeared in Moscow, who became a personal physician of Ivan IV. Bomeley was skilled in manufacture of poisons, and some historians find it highly plausible that he had been slowly poisoning the tsar, as well as his wife and son Ivan Ivanovich, with mercury, which caused Ivan's fits of uncontrolled fury.^{i, ii}

The ultimate goal of London was geopolitical: the English sought to reach out for the Eastern countries, with their fabulous riches. And while the Catholic countries pursued their policy by military force, London attempted to get a monopoly on trade with Russia. England realised the untold profits the land and river routes to the East promised and tried to set over them full control so as to have an absolute monopoly on the trade exchange both in the West and the East.

At first everything went as planned: the Muscovy Company received the monopoly on trade with the Russian state, then the right of free trade, and in 1569 - a unique right of duty-free-transit trade with the East by way of the Volga. However, the unrestrained avarice of the English partners led to the fact that in 1570 after one of his ferocious attacks, in a spell of brightening,

Ivan IV divested the Muscovy Company of all sorts of benefits. True, later, as a result of many requests, some of these benefits were restored, but the monopoly was not to be renewed.

Ivan IV knew the value of dynastic marriages and wanted a good interstate union with England. At one time, being left a widower, he attempted to propose to Queen Elizabeth. In response, the head of the Secret Service in England, Lord Burghley (in Moscow called "Lord Burle") in his instructions to Randolph, the British Ambassador in Rus, directly ordered only to seek privileges for British merchants and evade in every way any negotiations on the alliance, especially on the marriage basis. [Martirosyan 2003]

Ivan the Terrible's life patently falls into two parts, where two different persons reveal themselves. Generous and just, by universal acclaim, before 30 years of age, cruel and bad-tempered – in his later years. The character of Ivan IV, as well as the history of Russia in general, has been frequently misrepresented, given a negative bias or plainly belied in the Western historiography. For instance, Jerome Horsey, head of the Muscovy Company, informed the European public that the bloodthirsty Ivan IV had brutally murdered 700,000 people in Novgorod, when he was subjugating that town, even though there were hardly 30,000 people living there. A modern historian, Ronald Hingley, also misrepresents and grossly exaggerates facts, calling the Oprichniks, the Tsar's militia, 'licensed gangsters' and writing that Ivan the terrible "had... been engaged in warfare no less bloody (than wars with foreign countries) with his own subjects."

However, there is evidence that at the time of his reign there were no executions without trial, and, according to the historian R.G. Skrynnikov, who had spent several decades painstakingly gleaning facts, the total number of those executed during the "mass terror" in the time of Ivan IV was from 3,000 to 4,000 - all under court decision and in accordance to law. And those were the dashing times in the world: the St Bartholomew's Day massacre in France took the lives of from 5,000 to 30,000 people; the number of those executed under Henry VIII is estimated at 72,000, under Elizabeth I – 89,000 (by the way, under "Bloody Mary" just 287 people were executed).

Prince Kurbsky, who had defected to Lithuania, in his writings lashed out at Ivan IV, accusing him of many a bloody deeds, which later largely proved to be false, the fact convincingly shown nowadays by facts from archives and records. However, Kurbsky's accounts were largely uncritically reiterated in the writings of influential Russian historians, including Nikolay Karamzin.

The Romanovs dynasty, who came to succeed Ivan IV, also generally misrepresented him. Thus a highly important document of Ivan IV's time, called 'Stoglav', had been forbidden for study by Patriarch Nikon.

But contrary to this, Ivan IV cannot be estimated otherwise but as a great tsar, an exceptionally able ruler from the historical and statehood perspectives. Ivan IV collected the vast Russian lands under a single sceptre, continuing the tradition of Ivan I Kalita of Moscow, Dmitry of the Don, Ivan III. He annexed the Kazan and the Astrakhan Khanates, conducted the Livonian War for the access to the Baltic Sea, stopped the attacks of the Crimean Khan, began annexing Siberia. He enlarged the area of Rus 30 times.

Ivan established equality among all segments of the population: at the time the serfdom in Russia did not exist; peasants were obliged to stay on the land of a landowner only until they paid for its rent, then they could move where they chose, as for their children, they were considered free from birth. Though proponent of strong centralised power, Ivan IV nevertheless drew on the old Russian tradition of the veche democracy. Since 1549 he began to call the Zemsky Sobors (Soviets of the Land), which solved the most important questions of the state. It differed from the Old Russian veche by the fact that it, firstly, was nation-wide and, secondly, people of all estates were represented there. The other important body of governance was the Boyar Duma, the council of aristocracy. The Zemsky Sobor with the Boyar Duma were a kind of model legislative body for those times. The Russian historian V.O. Kliuchevsky defined the Zemsky Sobor as "a special type of popular representation, different from the Western representative assembly." The Zemsky Sobor was not called randomly, when the monarch

needed money, as frequently was the case with English Parliament; it was a truly collegiate body to decide matters of state and society importance. Then, there was a more democratic foundation to the Sobor than to Parliament: it represented all the strata of the population, with the commons including not only burgesses, artisans, but many peasants. In general, Ivan made little distinction of rank and title and surrounded himself with advisors from all walks of life, including those from a peasant background.

He revised the code of laws, issued by Ivan the Great, introducing the jury, liquidating judicial privileges of the aristocracy and strengthening the role of the system of the judicial bodies of the state (Sudebnik of 1550). The Sudebnik provided the active participation of the elective representatives of peasants (rural heads, jurymen, tselovalniki, dvorskie etc) in the legal proceedings. According to it, the arrest of a suspected person could be made at the consent of the local community only. The representative of a community (dyak) participated in judicial office-work. According to the Sudebnik the town and rural communities had rights of the self-government and the distribution of taxes.

He asked forgiveness, both from God and from the people, for the past sins he had committed, something that European rulers generally eschewed.

Ivan IV was one of the most learned men of his time, had a phenomenal memory, theological erudition, was a good speaker. With the view to procuring literacy, the Tsar helped to organize printing, established free primary education at religious schools, created trade schools. He lavishly donated to monasteries, was interested in the life of great kings of the past, zealously collected a huge library.

The boyars had been a most difficult group to control, since they had inherited large amounts of land and felt that they had no responsibilities to the tsar and the state beyond paying taxes. Many of them had private armies and dispensed justice within their own territories, making their lands virtually independent states within the state. Ivan required the boyars to supply officers and men for his military campaigns, used arbitrary confiscations and an occasional murder on those who disobeyed. Since the boyars were not trustworthy even when they complied, Ivan created a new nobility that was: the service gentry (“oprichniks”). Those who made up the service gentry were officers, given small to medium-sized estates as a reward for their service. Since the tsar could give or take away their lands any time, the service gentry remained loyal to him, and he used them as a check against the hereditary nobility. ⁱⁱⁱ It is in his rule that the formation of the framework of Russia as a country (in geographical terms) was basically completed, and the centralized Russian state emerged in the form and concept of the Great Eurasian Land, as we know it today.

The gruesome medical effects of mercury on the mental condition of a human are depression, insomnia, delusions of persecution, hallucinations, violent attacks of insanity, all of which Ivan the Terrible manifested in excess in the latter half of his life. The probable plan of the poisoners was to undermine the faith of the people in the Anointed Tsar of God, break the strength of the country at a time when the bonds between the autocrat and the people were so much needed, foster in the subjects a delusional idea that all power was criminal, nurture and cultivate treason as a mere opposition to the madness of power and emblazon this "madness" for centuries ahead. On a larger scale, they probably sought to discredit the very name of the Russian state.^{iv}

The poisoners also knew about the catastrophic consequences of mercury poisoning in the offspring and hoped to undermine the reigning dynasty of Rurik, thereby clearing the space for their puppets. This dastardly plan was actually executed, and only owing to a miracle, the deep intuition of the people who found the strength and courage to repel the deadly ill, Rus barely withstood the time of the so-called Great Troubles.

Perhaps, it is no coincidence that the Muscovy Company was engaged in unprecedentedly brisk activity during the Great Troubles – from the times of Tsar Boris's (Boris was closely associated with Jerome Horsey, head of the Muscovy Company, and exempted English merchants from duties) - to all the False Dmitrys. The agents of this company - John Merrick and William Russell - tried to impose British protectorate at the height of the Troubles in Russia, and

in 1612 this company planned to arrange a military expedition to Russia, under the guise of assistance to Moscow, hoping to capture the Russian North - then the only Russia's way to the sea. This project was strongly rejected by Minin and Pozharsky.

The very "tradition" of meanness towards Russia, of the realization of insidious plans by means of secret services lingered on and passed through the ages. Mikhail Romanov, newly elected to reign, was looked after by another English "healer", astrologer, magician, but above all, hereditary spy - Arthur Dee.^v He was sent to Russia in 1623, appointed through the recommendation of James I. At the same time with the ascension of Mikhail Fedorovich to the throne, Russia was drawn into the infamous Thirty Years' War, based on the confrontation between the two currents in Christianity: Catholicism, gradually weakening, but still powerful enough, and Protestantism, day by day gaining strength. The war was waged for the control of the world. And Russia, in spite of all her national interests, which demanded to remain neutral, entered into this long fierce bloody conflict on the anti-Habsburg side, that is, in coalition with the Protestant states, against the Holy Roman Empire of the German nation (the Habsburg Empire). It all ended rather pitifully for Russia: after thirty years of this pan-European conflict, the Peace of Westphalia was concluded in 1648, in the text of which the name of the Moscow Tsar was on the penultimate place – only the Transylvanian prince was listed below him. And it is no surprise that in just two years before the birth of Peter I there appeared the first pan-European geopolitical plan for the colonization and enslavement of Russia.^{vi} Assessing the state of pre-Petrine Russia, a Russian historian, Academician E.V. Tarle pointed out that in the late 17th – early 18th c. the position of Russia revealed a "threat to its national security and even its national self-preservation in the broadest sense of the word."^{vii}

ⁱReferences and comments:

ⁱIn 1963, when the USSR Ministry of Culture Commission opened the tombs of Ivan the Terrible and his family and made the autopsy of their bodies, they found excessively high concentration of mercury in the bodies of Tsar Ivan IV, his wife Anastasia and his second son Ivan Ivanovich. Besides, there was a considerable excess of arsenic in Ivan and his son's bodies, and of lead – in the tsarevich's body. It was evident, that young Ivan Ivanovich had been virtually at death's door for quite a while. The Commission came to the conclusion that Ivan IV and his family had been deliberately poisoned. Later speculations have been made on the Tsar and his son suffering from diseases and treated with mercury, but they were not confirmed by the anthropological research. M.M. Gerasimov, a renowned anthropologist, in one of his articles strongly dismissed such a speculation: there were no signs of the implied disease on the bones of the skeletons, including the skull of Ivan IV, and in the twenty years they would have been undoubtedly formed and be quite manifest, if the disease had really occurred. (Gerasimov M.M. A documentary portrait of Ivan the Terrible // Brief reports of the Archaeological Institute of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR. 1965. No. 100. S. 139-142; Panova, T.D. Ivan the Terrible's Wives: Life and Death of the First Russian Tzarinas. <http://rosvesty.ru/1897/culture/4017-zheni-ivana-groznogo-zhizni-i-smerti-pervih-russkih-zariz>).

ⁱⁱ In 1579 Bomelius decided to abscond with the amassed riches, but was seized, tortured and put to death.

ⁱⁱⁱ Kimball, Ch. S. Medieval Russia. URL: <http://xenohistorian.faithweb.com/russia/ru01.html#Ivan4>

^{iv}As the great Russian poet and diplomat, F.I. Tyutchev wrote:

So long ago in specious Europe,
where falsehood grew so rife and rank,
so long ago by Pharisee learning,
a double standard was upheld:
they praise themselves for law and justice,
the call us violent, ignoble,
and since the ancient times they chafe at
the proud heirloom of the Slavs.

^v Arthur Dee was the son of John Dee, Elizabeth I's advisor, theorist of English imperialism.

^{vi} Martirosyan, A.B. Ivan Vasilyevich Changes Politics.

^{vii}Tarle, E.V. The Great Northern War before the invasion of the Swedish army in Russia. 1700-1708.