

IVAN IV: A MACHIAVELLIAN TSAR

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Dating back to Riurik,¹ Russia has always had strong leaders who stopped at nothing to ensure the success of the throne. With a couple of noted exceptions, the rulers had the luxury of growing up witnessing the rule of their fathers. Ivan IV had no role model, no mentor, and no one to instruct him on how to be a leader. Before assuming the throne, he looked elsewhere for information on how to be a proper sovereign. Beginning with the Primary Chronicle,² he would have looked back at previous rulers and what methodologies made them successful. At this time of growing contact with the West, he may have also looked outside of Russia, perhaps to Machiavelli's *The Prince*. Also influencing Ivan's reign were the bitter feelings he had for the boyars during his childhood. Historians have traditionally divided Ivan's regime into two periods, the good half and the bad half. This essay will center on the "good-half," when Ivan focused on reform, land conquest, and reshaping the monarchy. Ivan wanted something that was unlike anything that had preceded it; he reformed and changed Russia in an attempt to unite it under the supreme sovereignty of an absolute Machiavellian ruler—the Tsar.

To understand Ivan's state of mind when he became the sovereign, it is important to look at his childhood. Ivan's father, Prince Basil III, died when Ivan was three years old. Five years later his mother died, which Ivan attributed to poisoning. Ivan recounted the years that followed in his "Own Account of His Early Life." Ivan's account asserted that the boyars usurped the power of Tsar and left Ivan and his younger brother without proper care.³ The ruling boyars

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¹ Riurik was the first recognized prince of Russia. He was part of the Varangians (Vikings) who arrived in the area around Novgorod around 862 AD. He and his two brothers divided the area between them. After the death of the brothers, Riurik became the sole authority.

² The Primary Chronicle is a collection of records and narratives kept by the Russian people (early on was typically kept by clergy). Obvious bias exists within the chronicle, but its importance lies in its solitary existence, that is it is the only records for the period. Additionally, the Russian people used the concepts presented in the Primary Chronicle to create an identity for themselves.

³ Basil Dmytryshyn, *Medieval Russia, A Source Book 900-1700*, 2nd ed. (Hinsdale, Illinois: Dryden Press, 1973), 211.

ignored the young Ivan, left him ill fed, improperly clothed, and failed to instruct him educationally.⁴ In short, Ivan was not prepared in any way to assume the role of ruler. In 1557, however, Ivan asserted himself, and upon claiming the throne at age fifteen, he literally "put [his] kingdom in order"⁵ and crowned himself 'Tsar.' This title was deliberate; it transcended 'Grand Prince,' which, in Ivan's opinion, insinuated that he was only the first among equals. Ivan was determined to unite Russia under something more than just a prince.

As mentioned, Ivan had no real tutelage in the ways of being a ruler, and therefore, formulated his rule through a combination of trial by fire, wit, and perhaps Machiavellian influence. While there remains no written evidence that Ivan studied Machiavelli, his actions, reforms, and style of reign are definitely Machiavellian in style. It is also possible to follow some of those linked with *The Prince*, to establish the distribution of the manuscript, and its possible arrival in Muscovy. Machiavelli first wrote *The Prince* in 1513, in an effort to help then ruler Lorenzo De' Medici stay in power and unify Italy. Machiavelli did not live to see *The Prince* distributed, as it remained unpublished until 1532, five years after his death.⁶ From this point, the circulation of the manuscript is sketchy, but one can follow the lives of those connected with it.

The Medici family fell from power in 1494 and fled Italy. Their daughter, Catherine, eventually reached France and their son, Giovanni, Rome. Catherine later became the Queen Regent of France, and Giovanni ascended to the papacy as Pope Leo X. Catherine was reportedly a disciple of Machiavelli, and both Leo X and his successor, Clement VII, sought advice from the Italian philosopher.⁷ In 1559, however, Pope Paul IV added Machiavelli's work to the list of prohibited books.⁸ As does anything prohibited, the manuscript spread quickly.

The arrival of Machiavelli's *Prince* to Russia during Ivan's reign is difficult to substantiate. The arrival of other manuscripts, however, is not. Ivan kept a large library, containing several hundred books in various languages.⁹ He also sent emissaries to Western Europe to

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 213.

⁶ Nicolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 1513, Chapter XIX, Internet History Sourcebooks Project, ed. Paul Halsall; available from <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/machiavelli-prince.html>; Internet; Accessed 22 March 2005.

⁷ *New Advent Catholic Encyclopedia*; available from <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09501a.htm>; Internet; Accessed 20 April 2005.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Daniel Clarke Waugh, "The Unsolved Problem of Tsar Ivan IV's Library," *Russian History* 14 (1987), 395.

persuade specialists, including teachers and artists, to come to Russia.¹⁰ Those who did venture to Russia brought with them many manuscripts, among those, possibly, *The Prince*. By pure observation of Ivan's method of rule and reforms, one could reasonably argue that it so characterized Machiavellian theories it deserves further attention.

Ivan aimed the majority of his early reforms at restoring a kingdom, which, in his opinion, laid waste through years of boyar misrule. He resented the boyars for their mistreatment of him as a youth as well as their mismanagement of his inheritance, and he grew more suspicious of them as the years passed. From the earliest accounts, Ivan, plagued with conspiracies, felt it was necessary to be strongly proactive in his own best interest, perhaps following the template of Machiavelli. Machiavelli wrote that a prince is highly esteemed and "not easily conspired against"¹¹ and further stated that in order to secure oneself from such conspiracy he should avoid "being hated and despised...by keeping the people satisfied with him."¹² In Machiavellian manner, Ivan sought to reach the people and keep them satisfied. Out of this need, he created the *zemskii sobor*.¹³ The first gathering of the *zemskii sobor*, in 1549, allowed Ivan's subjects the opportunity to voice complaints and present opinions concerning matters of the kingdom, although notably no townspeople were present at this first gathering.¹⁴ Some historians, reflecting on the lack of townspeople, instead prefer to identify this meeting as the 'Council of Reconciliation.'¹⁵ At the meeting, Ivan spoke of the cruelty and mistreatment he had suffered at the hands of the boyars during his youth, but agreed to forgive them and called for them to be reconciled.¹⁶ Despite Ivan's grace, the boyar disloyalty would again resurface. Ivan tactically chose to defer his resentment of the boyars and move on to more pressing issues, such as reform.

Ivan's early reforms also addressed the organization and distribution of power, something he wanted to change early in his administration. A new Royal Law Code, the *Subednik*, introduced in 1550, was among Ivan's firsts. The new Code circumscribed many of the powers of the boyars. It promoted rights of elected local

¹⁰ Riasanovsky, Nicholas V. *A History of Russia*, 6th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 148.

¹¹ Machiavelli, Chapter XIX.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ The *zemskii sobor* were a council of enlightened advisors, much like the Estates General of France, but Ivan's motive was to have a group of mentors outside of the boyars that he could rely on for advice and support.

¹⁴ Andrei Pavlov and Maureen Perrie, *Ivan the Terrible*, (London: Pearson Education Limited, 2003), 65.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

representatives, while decreasing the powers of the *namestniki*.¹⁷ The Law Code also established a means of punishment for officials who were guilty of abusing their powers. Other articles contained within the Code dealt with rights concerning the various classes of Russian society. Historians Andrei Pavlov and Maureen Perrie consider the Code Ivan's attempt to achieve "political consensus amongst the various social groups in the country, in order to overcome the consequences of the social and political crisis, which had been provoked by 'boyar rule.'"¹⁸

Ivan sensed the need for unity in all aspects of Russian life, including Orthodoxy, one of the pillars of Russian society. Again, one can look at Machiavelli and determine that Ivan's motives here were not spiritual in nature but served to further his hold on power. Machiavelli's instructions in this area encouraged princely intellect over faith, which he assumed would result in the prince being able to "overcome those who have relied on their word."¹⁹ In 1551, a church council convened to hear inquiries presented by the Tsar concerning church abuses and difficulties in standardization. The Tsar called certain rituals into question, such as the practice of crossing oneself with three fingers, as was practiced in Novgorod, or two as was common among the Muscovites. To avoid a split in the church, or more likely because it was the practice of the Tsar, the council accepted the two-finger crossing as standard. Several other discrepancies were resolved in favor of the Muscovite way, despite the alternative being canonically more correct.²⁰ One could argue that had the decision been in favor of preserving the Novgorodian way, the Great Schism of 1666 might have been averted.

Ivan transformed the military, in Machiavellian style, during this period as well. Machiavelli stated that a wise prince should "never in peaceful times stand idle, but increase his resources with industry in such a way that they may be available to him in adversity, so that if fortune chances it may find him prepared to resist her blows."²¹ Ivan enlarged the military by allowing sons to inherit rank and nobles to assume certain levels based on station. Prestige would be associated with service, encouraging young nobles to pursue a military career. Ivan hoped the favor placed on nobility would result in their loyalty. The system had difficulties; boyar families frequently squabbled over rank, causing problems within the military, most notably during times

¹⁷ The *namestniki* were servicemen who had governed the provinces.

¹⁸ Ibid., 67.

¹⁹ Machiavelli, Chapter XVIII.

²⁰ Pavlov and Perrie, *Ivan the Terrible*, 68.

²¹ Machiavelli, Chapter XIV.

of battle.²² Russian autocrats would spend the next three centuries undoing this particular reform.

The age of Russian reform and relative peace between Ivan and the boyars came to end because of the events of 1553. Ivan became seriously ill and asked the boyars to swear allegiance to his son, Dmitrii. Quarrels arose among the boyars, which infuriated the Tsar, after which he demanded they “kiss the cross to the heir,”²³ who was then only five months old. Pavlov and Perrie have expanded upon the incident with added information, which lessens the disparaging picture historians have painted of the boyars. They state that the Tsar had become so gravely ill during the early months of 1553 that he was unable to recognize many of the people around him. Considering this, he most likely was unable to ask for the boyars to pledge loyalty to the Tsarevich. Furthermore, he would have been unable to make the speech of demand for loyalty. Several of the boyars, however, did swear allegiance to Dmitrii while still others refused; concerned that because of his young age the power of Russia would fall into the hands of the Tsaritsa’s family.²⁴ Whether the boyars refused Ivan directly or not, the result was the same. When the Tsar recovered, he questioned the loyalty of his boyars, setting up the crises, which would continue until the end of his reign.

The dishonesty of those within Ivan’s realm reached beyond the boyars and did not go without notice to outsiders. Later in the same year as the Tsar’s illness, Captain Richard Chancellor appeared in Ivan’s court. He had left England earlier that year in search of a northern passage to China. Chancellor describes the conditions in Moscow as well as the treatment he received, but most notably, he is aware of the deceitfulness of those within Ivan’s court. He writes, “The Duke [Ivan] gives sentence himself upon all matters in the law. Which is very commendable, that such a Prince will take pains to see ministration of justice. Yet notwithstanding it is wonderfully abused: and thereby the Duke is much deceived.”²⁵ One must consider however, that the Captain was writing in order to make a case for the invasion of Russia. Undoubtedly, he would have presented the ruler as unwise and ignorant about the activities of his kingdom.

The mistrust that Ivan held for his boyars finally manifested itself in 1564. Ivan left Moscow in December of that year with a large entourage and upon arriving in Aleksandrova Sloboda, he sent back word that he had abdicated the throne. He listed his reasons as deceit

and disloyalty on behalf of the boyars. This date traditionally marks the beginning of the bad half of Ivan’s reign and one could argue that a separate sovereign (at least in behavior) conducted the second half in that it was markedly different from Ivan’s early years as the autocrat. He began a reign of terror that even Machiavelli would have questioned.

During the good half of Ivan’s reign, however, he managed to hold his emotions in check and unify Russia. His self-control, desire to please the people, and reconcile with the boyars demonstrated the diplomatic elements of Machiavellian thought. Later, considering the poor treatment they afforded him as a youth, the mismanagement of his kingdom during his minority and the lack of support they showed during his early years as sovereign, Ivan pivoted, as a Machiavellian prince would do when backed into the corner. Acting as Machiavelli recommended, “it is necessary for him to have a mind ready to turn itself accordingly as the winds and variations of fortune force it, yet, as I have said above, not to diverge from the good if he can avoid doing so, but, if compelled, then to know how to set about it.”²⁶

Ivan IV redesigned the Russian monarchy, leaving a heritage that later Russian leaders followed. Devoid of proper royal instruction, Ivan looked to the past to find that many of his predecessors struggled with the same problems he faced upon his ascension. Russia was not alone in her troubles; other kingdoms were suffering difficulties as well, such as a divided Italy, for whom Machiavelli originally intended *The Prince*. Trade routes and increasing contact with the west opened up new resources for Ivan, including the possibility of acquiring Machiavelli’s manuscript as well as his political philosophies. His lack of training proved to be the foundation for his quest for the establishment of an entirely new style of sovereign. To the Russian people, Ivan’s name, ‘Grozny,’ invokes exactly what Ivan intended—complete reverence for awesome power. Machiavelli would have been impressed.

²² Pavlov and Perrie, *Ivan the Terrible*, 70.

²³ *Ibid.*, 80.

²⁴ The Tsaritsa (Ivan’s wife, Anastasia) was a member of the Romanov family who were a powerful boyar family. Ironically, after a period of years without a Tsar, Michael Romanov was selected to become Tsar. *Ibid.*

²⁵ Dmytryshyn, *Medieval Russia, A Source Book 900-1700*, 2nd ed., 222.

²⁶ Machiavelli, Chapter XVIII.