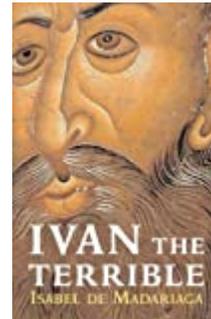




**Isabel de Madariaga.** *Ivan the Terrible: First Tsar of Russia.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005. xxii + 428 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-09757-3; \$20.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-300-11973-2.



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## Grozny and All That

Why post a biography of a Russian Tsar here? To bring the new definitive biography of an important historical figure to the attention of non-Russianists is a worthy goal. The prospective reader can take for granted an acute psychological profile, engagement with the literature, insight into domestic and foreign policy, a lively style, and much slaying of the romantic distortions of the nineteenth century and Soviet era. I might dilate further on knouting, autocracy, primitive Slavic democracy, and the like, but I would likely only do a disservice to the work. This will be a review for military historians, not Russianists.

So what special interest does a military historian take from this work? There is no doubt about the strategic importance of the man who presided over the conquest of Kazan', Astrakhan, and Siberia. Unfortunately, most of these events occur off stage in Isabel de Madariaga's study of the great Tsar. The fight for Livonia was longer and more important, and is considered in detail, but in de Madariaga's skeptical and convincing portrait, we lose the grand strategist driving toward the sea and gain a contemporary monarch fighting for the legacy of the Ri-

urkin. Internal affairs, dominated by the episode of the Oprichnina, have also been read in political terms, even less usefully. The Oprichnina's origins are not to be found in the Gulag Archipelago.

What are we left with besides the frisson of horror? Far more, and it begins with precisely the horrifying fascination Ivan IV exercises. That, I take it, does not include his long list of political murders. They are hardly unique to the Russian court, and Ivan's regime was even less robust than other sixteenth-century monarchies, which is saying a lot. As de Madariaga points out, throughout his murderous career, Ivan had to live with the survival of an adult male heir of the rival Staritsa branch of his house (pp. 245, 318). That would have brought out the worst in any sixteenth-century monarch, much less Ivan Groznii, "the Terrible." We remember Ivan for the 1570 episodes at Novgorod the Great and on Moscow's Pogaia Meadow, which, by design, take a great deal of forgetting. The ritual demonstration of kingship through mass murder before thousands of witnesses is meant to be remembered and searched for meaning. Ivan himself offers a reading guide at one point (pp. 247, 361, 365).

De Madariaga does one of her historiographic services by pointing out that “Grozni” did not mean “Terrible” in 1570, nor do we know what it means, apart from telling clues that it might describe the charisma proper to a good king (pp. 90, 365). At this point, de Madariaga draws back, giving us the pieces of the puzzle (which we can by no means put together yet), but not exactly sketching the final solution. This is, I suspect, a measure of highly atypical caution, the insecurity of the Russian specialist who fears the dismissal of the whole study if the mirror of “Asia” is held up instead of Europe. Here is what seems to me to be going on, the lesson that Ivan intends us to read. We cannot deny the role of Tatar families in his court, or that the prestige of the Golden Kin competed with that of the Riurkin. We are shown Ivan as patron of shamans from the beginning of his realm, and the close reader finds Inner Eurasia’s fourth great religion subtly present in Russian renderings of the story of Barlaam and Josephat. We are invited to read Ivan’s court as a steppe court, competing as much with Ottoman, Zung-har and Qing for prestige as with Poland-Lithuania and Sweden, a point already argued by Peter Perdue.[1] If we are drawn back to a symbolic landscape pointing south

and west by such gestures as Ivan’s adoption of the imperial title of Tsar, we know that the Qing embraced this Roman antecedent too.[2] Reading the events of 1570 suggests not that horror is the common attribute of steppe states, but a conscious effort to craft a syncretic image of kingship that would bring his royal charisma within reach of all his enormously diverse subjects and neighbors. The “Inner Asian” elements, which hardly exhaust Ivan’s symbolic language of murder, teases the strategic historian’s appetite for more information about Russia’s early role in Asia. Novgorod and Poganai Meadow are probably signposts towards a better understanding of it.

#### Notes

[1]. Peter C. Perdue, *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Inner Eurasia* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 2005). [2]. On Ivan’s adoption of the imperial title, see the literature review in Isabelle de Madariaga’s review of S. Bogatyrev, *The Sovereign and His Counsellors: Ritualised Consultations in Muscovite Political Culture, 1350s–1750s* in the *Journal of Early Modern History* 6, 1 (January 2002): 81-84.

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