

Kevin M. F. Platt. *Terror and Greatness: Ivan and Peter as Russian Myths.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011. Illustrations. xi + 294 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-4813-3.



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The Cultural History of Historical Myths

Ivan the Terrible and Peter the Great are icons of Russian history, and there is certainly no dearth of studies of their reigns or historiography. Kevin M. F. Platt's *Terror and Greatness* is not about their history or historiography. Rather, applying the methodologies of cultural history, it analyzes their mythology. Platt examines how the evolving historical myths of Ivan and Peter illustrate and illuminate the unresolved and unresolvable tension in Russian culture created by the use of terror to achieve greatness. Platt shows that neither ruler had a monopoly on the quality usually attributed to him: Ivan the Terrible was also seen as great, Peter the Great was also seen as employing terror. Studying Ivan and Peter in tandem sheds unexpected light on the perception of Ivan and Peter in modern Russia. This superbly written book is ambitious, challenging, imaginative, original, erudite, and multidisciplinary.

Platt, professor of Slavic Languages and Literatures and chair of the Program in Comparative Literature and Literary Theory at the University of Pennsylvania, is the author of *History in a Grotesque Key: Russian Literature*

and the Idea of Revolution (1997); author or coauthor of nine articles on the historical myths of Ivan and Peter, often incorporated verbatim into this monograph; and coeditor (with the coauthor of two essays, David Brandenberger) of *Epic Revisionism: Russian History and Literature as Stalinist Propaganda* (2006). The present monograph surveys nineteenth- and twentieth-century Russian culture through the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953 but with a brief encapsulation of post-1953 developments, employing publications by professional historians, novels, plays, operas, paintings, sculptures, and films. After a methodological and conceptual introduction, Platt devotes two chapters each to the first half of the nineteenth century, the second half of the nineteenth century, and Soviet history to 1953. His conclusion outlines developments through the first decade of the twenty-first century. Rather than attempt the impossible task of discussing all relevant cultural works, Platt presents a chronologically organized series of close analyses or thick descriptions of key texts, although he mentions many more works in passing (p. 3). The twenty-five

black-and-white and two color illustrations (of Nikolai Ge's 1871 painting *Peter I Interrogates Tsarevich Aleksei Petrovich at Peterhof* and Il'ia Repin's 1885 painting *Ivan the Terrible and His Son Ivan, 16 November 1581*) are essential to Platt's exposition. The book has very few typographical or factual errors, but Platt should have explained to the reader that the only possible reference for Nikolai Rimskii-Korsakov's *Vengeance* would be the second act of his *Antar* (composed in 1868, first performed in 1869) called *The Pleasure of Vengeance*.^[1]

In his introduction, Platt notes that by and large Ivan is associated with terror, Peter with greatness, but in history as well as historical mythology each ruler shares both qualities. Platt is interested in how national identity is established on the basis of selective collective memory of events of national trauma which foreground greatness and avoid dealing with terror.

Chapter 1 explores the *standard* contrast of these two liminal Russian rulers in the first half of the nineteenth century. Peter was exalted for his greatness and Ivan was nearly invisible because of his despotism. Platt focuses on Nikolai Karamzin's classic 1821 portrait of Ivan in his *History of the Russian State* and on historian Nikolai Ustrialov's treatment of Peter in his two-volume university textbook *Russian History* (1855).^[2]

Chapter 2 on the same period examines the *unlikely* pair of Aleksandr Pushkin, paying most attention, of course, to his immortal *The Bronze Horseman* (1837), and historian Konstantin Kavelin (p. 52). Pushkin's Peter is more idol than god, as much satanic as divine. Kavelin, like other Westernizers and state school adherents, justified Ivan by subsuming his personal shortcomings under the impersonal progress of the state concept. *Pushkin discovered terror submerged in greatness, whereas Kavelin discovered greatness inherent in terror* (p. 76). These authors contradicted the facile contrast of Ivan and Peter of Karamzin and Ustrialov.

Turning in chapter 3 to the second half of the nineteenth century, Platt notes that the ban on representation of Romanov rulers on the stage confined Peter to the printed page, whereas the drama of Ivan's life was perfectly suited to the stage, in which *Ivan dominated his own theatrical fiefdom* (p. 86). The major theme of this chapter is filicide, Ivan's accidental killing of his son Tsarevich Ivan, and Peter's role in the death of his son Tsarevich Aleksei. Platt pays most attention to the views of historians Mikhail Pogodin and Nikolai Kostomarov who saw Aleksei's death as unnecessary while the dominant discourse, exemplified by historian Sergei Soloviev,

justified it. Aleksei K. Tolstoi's sometimes banned play *The Death of Ivan the Terrible* (1866) blamed Ivan for his son's death, paralleling Ivan's fictional *killing* of his illegitimate daughter in Lev Mei's verse play and Rimskii-Korsakov's opera *The Maid of Pskov* (1868-72). Interpretations of Ge's painting vary but Platt points out that the very choice of subject was odd as part of a *birthday* celebration of Peter. Repin's painting can be considered a theatrical, emotional response to Ge's historical, rational canvas. Platt highlights the Christian symbolism of Repin's composition by placing it within the context of the image of Michelangelo's *Pietà* (1499-1500).

Chapter 4 is devoted to the Silver Age, examining Dmitrii Merezhkovskii's apocalyptic historical novel *Antichrist (Peter and Alexei)* (1905) and historian Pavel Miliukov's *Outlines of Russian Cultural History* (1896-1903), which viewed Ivan and Peter in terms of an ironic dialectic in which both rulers' actions produced unexpected results. Platt sees a commonality between Merezhkovskii and Miliukov in their prophesy of the imminent collapse of the Russian social order. Then Platt returns to the later history of Repin's painting; Abram Balashov's vandalism in 1913 and the ensuing scandal; and the painting's later influence on stage and film representations of Ivan, for example, by Fedor Chaliapin.

Chapter 5 traces the evolution of the Stalinist cults of Ivan centering on Andrei Shestakov's 1937 textbook *A Short Course of the History of the USSR*. Platt has contributed to and follows recent scholarship emphasizing the contested process of the development of Stalinist historiography, which was far from a monolithic centrally directed phenomenon.^[3] The identification of Stalin with Peter or Ivan could never be complete, lest it impugn the novelty of the Soviet experiment.

Chapter 6 deals with Soviet cultural expressions of the historical myths of Ivan and Peter in Count Aleksei N. Tolstoi's novel *Peter I* (1929-34) and Sergei Eisenstein's film masterpiece *Ivan the Terrible* (1944-46). Platt argues that Tolstoi could hardly just have trimmed his sails to match the party line, when that line was so unclear. Tolstoi was not a craven opportunist but as a risk taker, always ahead of the curve, who managed the indeterminacy of Soviet official views of Peter via skillful negotiation in order to *preserve the integrity of his poetical imagination* (p. 230). Platt interprets Eisenstein's movie neither as a criticism nor endorsement of Stalinism but a critique of the very essence of Stalinist historical revisionism, a rejection of historical myths whether imperial or Soviet. In his conclusion, Platt demonstrates

the continuing vitality of the historical myths of Ivan and Peter in later Soviet and post-Soviet culture, alluding to the attempted canonization of Ivan and to the most recent film about Ivan, director Pavel Lungin's *Tsar* (2009).[4]

Platt's elegant prose requires and repays rereading. When discussing the intellectual baggage of historical myths, there is a certain risk of reifying them. Platt, however, never forgets human agency and his lucid prose carries the reader along masterfully.

Platt has dealt with the myth of Ivan in native and foreign sources from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries previously and does not summarize that material here.[5] In that essay, he did not observe that while the nineteenth-century Romanovs preferred not to speak of Ivan, who was a "shameful family outcast," excluded even from the statue in honor of the millennium of "Russia" in 1862, their seventeenth-century ancestors exaggerated, not to say invented, a kinship with Ivan, even though Ivan was already a negative role model for tsars (no Romanov tsar recreated the *oprichnina*) (p. 17). Because eighteenth-century negative views of Ivan did not form the basis of a "productive modern historical tradition" prior to Karamzin, Platt begins here with Karamzin (p. 22n24). As a result, he elides the metamorphosis of the epithet "Groznyi" from positive to pejorative by the eighteenth century; Karamzin's unacknowledged dependence on Mikhail Shcherbatov; and the ambiguity, even in Karamzin, as to whether Ivan III as well as Ivan IV was "Terrible." Ivan IV's monopoly of that dubious distinction was solidified only in Sergei Solov'ev's history in mid-century.[6] Platt does not always correct historical errors in the works he cites, and he deals exclusively with cultural expressions in Russia; Georges Bizet's opera *Ivan the Terrible* (first performed in 1951) goes unmentioned.

Platt foregrounds the "orientalizing" of Ivan by Karamzin, Ustrialov, Aleksei K. Tolstoi, and Repin, which resonates with recent research on the image of the Orient in Russia. Platt writes that "in the popular pastime of divining Russia's future, Ivan, and especially Peter, proved useful tarot cards," a word to the wise prognosticator of whither Russia (p. 132). Platt's cultural analysis complements the usual historical conception of Russian historiography as politicized.

History in a Grotesque Key addressed a longer period than *Terror and Greatness*, from the eighteenth century to the present. There Platt confined himself to literary texts,

although his research was already multidisciplinary. In *Terror and Greatness*, Platt expands his sources to art and film as well as cultural analysis of historiography. There are thematic parallels between the two books on the perils of unintended consequences. In the first Russian authors noted that social transformation ironically often reproduced the same social conditions it was intended to replace. In the second Soviet attempts to employ imperial Russian historical myths in furtherance of Soviet ideals ironically undermined the certainty of Soviet thought. Even in imperial Russia aesthetic violence to protest violence ironically incited further aesthetic and real violence.

Platt's *Terror and Greatness* should be read by all specialists in Russian history, literature, theater, and art. It is an outstanding contribution to the study of Russian culture with implications for all disciplines of Russian studies, only a few of those implications have been indicated in this review.

Notes

[1]. Kevin Platt, personal communication with reviewer, October 10, 2011.

[2]. Against Paul Bushkovitch's argument that Ustrialov falsified history, Platt's reply that Ustrialov was only expressing "his loyalty to a pre-scripted notion of the matter" is unconvincing (p. 92n29). Ustrialov's motive cannot invalidate Bushkovitch's judgment of Ustrialov's actions.

[3]. Andrei L'âvovich Iurganov, *Russkoe natsionalnoe gosudarstvo: Zhiznennyi mir istorikov epokhi stalinizma* (Moscow: Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi gumanitarnyi universitet, 2011), which no doubt appeared too late for even passing reference in Platt's *Terror and Greatness*, continues this trend.

[4]. See Kevin M. F. Platt, review of *Tsar*, directed by Pavel Lungin, *Kinokultura* 28 (2010).

[5]. Kevin M. F. Platt, "Antichrist Enthroned: Demonic Visions of Russian Rulers," in *Russian Literature and Its Demons*, ed. Pamela Davidson (New York and Oxford: Berghan Books, 2000), 87-125, esp. 88-95.

[6]. Charles J. Halperin, "The Metamorphosis of Ivan IV into Ivan the Terrible," in *Miscellanea Slavica: Sbornik statei k 70-letiiu Borisa Andreevicha Uspenskogo*, ed. F. B. Uspenskii (Moscow: Indrik, 2008), 379-397.

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