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# Allegory's Half-Life: The Specter of a Stalinist Ivan the Terrible in Russia Today

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# ALLEGORY'S HALF-LIFE

THE SPECTER OF A STALINIST IVAN THE TERRIBLE IN RUSSIA TODAY

*Kevin M. F. Platt*

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*OUR COUNTRY IS DIVIDED BETWEEN STATE AND SUBJECTS, WHICH IS TO SAY THAT THE PEOPLE IS NOT IDENTIFIED WITH THE STATE. THE STATE IS A SEPARATE MACHINE, A SORT OF IDOL, TO WHICH ONE MUST PRAY AND IN THE NAME OF WHICH ONE MUST SACRIFICE ONESELF. IT SEEMS TO ME THAT IT WAS PRECISELY THE OPRICHNINA THAT PLAYED THE LEADING ROLE IN THE FORMATION OF SUCH A STATE STRUCTURE IN THE NATIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS. THE OPRICHNINA WAS A VERY FATEFUL AND VERY RUSSIAN PHENOMENON.*

VLADIMIR SOROKIN, 2007

#### *4.4 WHO STANDS AT THE HEAD OF THE RUSSIAN STATE?*

*STUDENTS ARE ASKED TO LOOK AT THE PORTRAITS OF HEADS OF STATE AND THINK ABOUT THEIR CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE STATE. (IVAN IV, PETER I, V.V. PUTIN)*

*STUDENTS OFFER THEIR RESPONSES. (IVAN IV WAS THE FIRST RUSSIAN TSAR; PETER I WAS THE FIRST RUSSIAN EMPEROR; V. V. PUTIN IS THE CURRENT PRESIDENT OF RUSSIA.)*

A. E. KAMBULOVA, EXCERPT FROM A LESSON PLAN FOR RUSSIAN FOURTH GRADERS, 2004<sup>1</sup>

*—IN YOUR VIEW, THE SPECTER OF IVAN THE TERRIBLE IS GROWING MORE DISTANT FROM US. BUT MANY, IN CONTRAST, ARE DREAMING OF THE RISE TO POWER OF A CONTEMPORARY ANALOGUE WHO COULD GATHER TOGETHER AGAIN EVERYTHING THAT FELL APART OR WAS DESTROYED IN THE YEARS OF REFORM. FOR, AS HISTORIANS CONFIRM, IT WAS PRECISELY IN THE TERRIBLE TSAR'S DAY THAT THE PRINCIPALITY OF MOSCOW WAS TRANSFORMED IN*

## THE STATE OF MUSCOVY.

—THIS IS ONE OF THE SECRETS OF RUS. ALL OF THEM—ALL OF THE DICTATORS, EACH ONE WHO IS TIED IN ONE WAY OR ANOTHER WITH VIOLENCE AND WHO Poured OUT A SEA OF HIS OWN PEOPLE'S BLOOD—ARE FOR RUSSIA THE OBJECTS OF A STRANGE, SOMEWHAT MASOCHISTIC LOVE.

INTERVIEW WITH PAVEL LUNGINE ABOUT HIS 2009 FILM *TSAR*<sup>2</sup>

In 1998 a curious little soft-cover volume was published in Moscow, bearing two separate titles and the names of two authors. The titles, however, were identical: *Ivan the Terrible*. This was a joint reprint edition of two monographs on the terrible tsar, both of them written in the 1920s, by the historians Robert Iu. Vipper and Sergei F. Platonov, respectively.<sup>3</sup> Both books were originally published many years before the Stalinist transformation of Soviet historiography in the 1930s reestablished many “traditional” heroes of Russian history—such as Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great and Alexander Nevsky—as part of a “new” pantheon of celebrated historical figures that could serve as positive models of patriotism for Soviet men and women.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, this odd little book’s appearance in the 1990s serves as an apt illustration of the continuing dynamism up to the present day of Stalinist historical mythology. Let us briefly retrace the history of Vipper’s book.<sup>5</sup> Published in 1922, this work was perhaps the most effusively celebratory history of Ivan ever written. An amplified and enhanced version of the view of Ivan as a heroic, yet merciless and bloody author of Russian statehood that was first formulated by the historians of the “State School” of the nineteenth century (chiefly K. D. Kavelin and S. M. Solovev), Vipper’s monograph depicted the Terrible tsar as a subtle diplomat, military superman and populist leader who served the interests of the common people, carrying out brilliant and historically necessary social and political reforms in order to create a glorious and durable state. The key features of Ivan’s triumph were “the growth of the Muscovite state, her great tasks of conquest, Ivan’s broad conceptions, his military innovations, and his diplomatic genius.”<sup>6</sup>

At its first publication, Vipper’s monograph elicited an impossibly

broad range of responses. Some interpreters, such as the religious thinker G. P. Fedotov, read Vipper's elevation of Ivan as an expression of nostalgia for the autocracy—as an enraged reaction against the weak tsars and liberal reformers who had paved the way for Russia's revolutionary downfall.<sup>7</sup> Certain commentators from the opposite end of the political spectrum concurred, such as the historian M. V. Nechkina, a student of the leading Bolshevik historian M. N. Pokrovskii, who in a historiographic digression appended to her 1933 article on Ivan IV for the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* inventively explained that Ivan had been the darling of many pre-revolutionary historians for his cruel anti-revolutionary élan, and that Vipper's views continued in this tradition. Vipper, in Nechkina's view, had set Ivan up as “a counter-revolutionary apotheosis of [...] the autocratic dictator, concealing in the ‘historicity’ of his topic a direct call to struggle against Bolshevism.”<sup>8</sup> Yet other readers saw things differently. The historian I. I. Polosin, for instance, could write in the introduction to his 1925 translation of Heinrich Von Staden's account of Muscovy during Ivan's reign that Vipper, like many others who had been drawn to study of the “social revolution” of the sixteenth century by virtue of its resonance with the present epoch, had authored a “brilliant sketch” charged with the “stirring atmosphere of the last decade.” For Polosin, Vipper's “general assessments of the military-autocratic communism of the Muscovite tsar reflects the mighty influence of contemporary reality.”<sup>9</sup> In short, the first edition of Vipper's book could not have been clearer in its apologetic intent, and cried out to be interpreted as a projection of present historical experience into the past. Yet for the volume's readers, the valence of these allegorical projections was radically undetermined.

As I have argued elsewhere, the difficulty of reading Vipper's allegory resulted from the hermeneutic “open season” on Russian national historical myth that was the Soviet 1920s.<sup>10</sup> The mythic identification of the revolutionary epoch of the twentieth century with the era of Ivan the Terrible, as interlinked expressions of Russia's persistent historical fate, was a common place during this period. Certainly, it is hardly surprising that Russians, who had for decades alternately warned against or called for a revolution through



*Ivan the Terrible and His Son Ivan. Ilya Repin. The Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. 1885*

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the projection into present experience of Ivan's grand renovation of Russia, continued in this mode once the revolution had come to pass. That being said, in the wild profusion of early Soviet cultural life, no specific formulation of the interconnection of the Soviet present with the Russian past achieved anything like common acceptance. Instead, Russian thought in the key of historical allegory ranged from the one extreme to another—from critiques of the archaic nature of the revolution to celebration of the historical roots of the Russian people's violent expressions of progressive energy. This diversity of historical vision was made possible not only by the relatively unrestricted conditions for public expression of the 1920s, but also by the surprising lack of interest in such mythically-minded historical thinking on the part of official representatives of Soviet power, who themselves offered no specific view on the significance of allegorical readings of the Russian national past. In this, the post-revolutionary decade constituted a unique moment in modern Russian history—perhaps the only period prior to the 1990s during which political life offered no authoritative center to which the historical myth of Ivan (whether as a hero or a villain) was interpretatively anchored. Whereas views of history with state backing, such as the materialist historiography of Pokrovskii, were uninterested in great men and long-dead tsars, all other views lacked political authority. Political institutions had surrendered their command over Ivan, as it were, opening him up for exploitation by “private interests.”

Let's return to the story of Vipper and his book. The historian was himself no Bolshevik insider, and he emigrated to Riga in independent Latvia in the 1920s. During the 1930s, however, he came to view the Soviet state as a legitimate successor to the tsarist empire. So that when Soviet troops annexed Latvia in 1940, Vipper was morally prepared to be drafted into state service, inducted into the Academy of Sciences and set to work as a leading authority on the Russian past. In a startling reversal of interpretive fortune, his monograph had now come to seem monumentally solid in its allegorical projection of Ivan and his deeds as mythic proto-images of the leaders of Stalinist society and their triumphs. Vipper's book, in new editions, as well as his lectures and articles, became centerpieces of the

campaign to rehabilitate the terrible tsar as a great predecessor of the Soviet leadership. As the historian proclaimed in a 1943 lecture in the Kremlin's Hall of Columns, which was broadcast to a mass audience via radio, Ivan's Muscovy had been "the prototype of the great multinational state of the USSR."<sup>11</sup>

Vipper died in 1954, a year after the death of his patron, Stalin. In subsequent decades, his work on Ivan was first debunked and then largely forgotten, referenced only in dissident circles and in the West as an example of Stalinist distortions of history.<sup>12</sup> Now fast-forward to the post-Soviet era, and to the resurfacing of Vipper's monograph alongside the work of his almost exact contemporary, Platonov. Produced by the house press of the University of the Russian Academy of Education, the publisher's blurb advertised it as material suitable, "for undergraduates and advanced elementary-school students, as well as for all those interested in the history of the fatherland."<sup>13</sup> In his introduction, historian Dmitrii Volodikhin, the volume's editor, described the two monographs as divergent, yet equally valid interpretations. Vipper's monograph was reprinted from its first edition, and Volodikhin gave almost no hint of the Stalinist history of the book and its author, informing readers that both Vipper and Platonov were Russian patriots opposed to the Soviet regime. Vipper, the reader learns, was forced to flee the country in 1924 and Platonov perished after his arrest and exile to Samara at the end of the 1920s. These few details are already enough to make this publication's peculiarity plain. From what vantage point, one wonders, did this foundational text of the Stalinist Ivan campaign appear "suitable" for schoolchildren in 1998? And anyhow, the notion that the two works wield equivalent authority is preposterous. Platonov's interpretation of Ivan IV was founded on a long career of research in late pre-modern Russian history. Although some specialists dispute his fundamental claim that Ivan should be seen as a rational (albeit cruel) political actor, Platonov's work undoubtedly contributed to the contemporary historiographic consensus on this figure. Vipper, on the other hand, was writing outside of his area of specialization and in a tradition of historical interpretation that after the Stalin era was completely discredited. Platonov himself, comparing his own mono-

graph to Vipper's in 1928, more or less panned his contemporary's work: "Vipper's book is not only an apology for the Terrible tsar, but his apotheosis. In contrast, I take Ivan in his local, national significance and strive to establish the true and actual features of his personality and activity, in as much as they are revealed by the sum of reliable sources."<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, in 1998, for some, all of these historical and professional contexts could be overlooked or forgotten in order to grant Vipper's work a lease on interpretive authority for a new reading public. In sum, as the century-long story of the interpretation and reinterpretation of Vipper's monograph illustrates: one good rehabilitation sometimes demands another.

The post-Soviet republication of Vipper's *Ivan the Terrible* demonstrates the complex imbrication of history, trauma, memory and forgetting in modern Russia. Volodikhin and his publishers likely comprehended their undertaking as an effort to correct the abuses of Stalinism—an attempt to overcome the trauma of twentieth-century history. Certainly, Vipper's monograph, in its original edition, can be exonerated of complicity in the evils of the Bolshevik regime—quite plausibly, the historian was writing against this very regime. If, twenty years later, Stalin and his henchmen abused a defenseless and aged academic by transforming him into their spokesman, this cannot compromise the original value of his works. Here, the situation regarding Vipper's entanglement in Stalinism mirrors the more familiar cases of other nineteenth- and twentieth-century cultural figures who were either adopted or co-opted by the Stalinist and Nazi regimes—Nietzsche, Wagner, Heidegger, Gorky, De Man, etc. Yet the interpretive challenges presented by such figures are magnified in the case of Vipper's recent republication, in which an effort to promulgate a purportedly valid representation of the past is itself predicated on a non-trivial falsification of history, and in which an attempt to overcome historical trauma involves forgetting rather than memory. In fact, this latest refashioning of Vipper from a Stalinist historian back into an imperial Russian one in many ways retraces the path marked out by his first, Stalinist retrofitting. Both episodes were, in essence, efforts to redeploy a vision of Russian history while effacing the history of that very historical



vision. Both recover a triumphal version of the national past by burying a traumatic one. In the case of Vipper's latest rehabilitation, the basic irony of this dependence of memory on forgetting, of recovery on forgetting (rather than memory and reconciliation), is doubled, for Vipper's most recent handlers not only erased a given portion of the historian's biography, but they also erased previous and different episodes of erasure. And ultimately, one must not forget that this ironic double erasure of history was in the service of the multiple rehabilitations of another heroic/traumatic figure, that of Ivan the Terrible—a process that is pulled out into a sea of irony by a parallel undertow of fabrications in the service of "truth." One recalls Renan's oft-cited remark: "For the essence of the nation is that all its members hold many things in common, but also that they have all forgotten many things."<sup>15</sup> In the Russian case, one may add: several times over. Yet of course, these acts of erasure also vividly exemplify how each time a "given" representation of the past comes to the fore in public discourse, it is substantially new, by virtue not only of its novel ideological context, but also by virtue of its peculiar encrustation with prior contextual meaning, its own past, that grows thicker each time the book is cited, read, circulated from the library.

In his novel *The History of the Siege of Lisbon*, Jose Saramago remarks that the norms of historical truth are "founded on consensus and authority, although it is obvious that any change in authority is reflected in a corresponding change in consensus."<sup>16</sup> Of course, the tricky bit here is the relationship—"reflection," Saramago calls it—which ties together authority and historiographical consensus, and the further linkage of this dyad to the constitution of historical truth. As Vipper's case reveals, there is perhaps no better natural laboratory for work on these problems than the history of representation and interpretation of Ivan the Terrible in Russia, where a complex history of changing authorities and consensuses has driven the representation of this figure, its "truth," from one extreme to another, as schools of historiography, political generations and regimes have risen and fallen. The "reflective" relationship linking successive representations—historiographic, allegorical or mythic—to the consensuses and purposes that they have been made to serve has been



*Ivan the Terrible, still from Sergey Eisenstein's movie, 1944*

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mediated its own history of becoming—a history of genres, of political generations and of institutional development. In short, the representation of history is embedded in the history of representation, so that each “new” vision of Ivan has contributed to a growing, unstable system of meaning accreted around this figure—a growing history of voice and clamor—of debate, competition, dialogue, and miscommunication across time.

It is perhaps an obvious truth that every successive generation, every historian, political leader and artist adopts some stance towards history—even if it is one of rejection or inattention. Perhaps more subtle is the insight that they also necessarily stand in some definite relation to history’s own history—ranging from self-conscious inheritance and redeployment of past historiographical traditions; to quixotic efforts to break free from history’s own history or step outside of its stream; to sophisticated attempts to model or manage the ironic dependence of historical knowledge on the passage of time. It may be that this last, the attempt to manage the imbrication of history in its own historical becoming, is the best one can hope for. For recognition of the “low” place of historical knowledge, mired in its own history, cannot arrest the unending accumulation of signification around historical figures, poses and events. As Vipper’s case illustrates, this process of accumulation can grant a given vision of the past unforeseen roles in future cultural and political contexts. Alternately, the dependence of historical “truths” on the accrual or management of past “truths” can sometimes grant long-term cultural significance to works that deflate historical meaning in general by means of a critique of their overburdened, overdetermined historical objects—Eisenstein’s masterful uncompleted film trilogy *Ivan the Terrible* presents a good example of this contrasting effect. Finally, one may observe that this highly inflected, unpredictable feedback loop between the representation of the past and the history of the representation of the past has left its mark on the core of significances associated with Ivan the Terrible. Viewed from at least the beginning of the nineteenth century as a figure symbolic of epochal and institutional transformation of one version of Russia into another, and therefore susceptible to interpretations ranging from the

traumatic to the heroic, the convoluted history of use and reuse of this figure, of attempts to erase or supercede trauma with a story of heroic greatness, has embedded the psychic urgency of trauma into the civic celebration of heroic patriotism, and the luster of greatness into submission to an inscrutable victimhood. The resulting complex of meanings culminated in the Stalinist vision of Ivan, in which patriotic identity and state greatness was predicated on the acceptance of mass violence and on the infliction of a violent discipline on the self. Ultimately, the inscription and reinscription of Ivan has rendered his myth supremely versatile, an indispensable symbolic reserve for every occasion and political initiative, yet also supremely unstable, with the potential to signal precisely the opposite of what those who attempt to deploy it intend.

As the case of Vipper's many afterlives indicates, the significance of the Stalinist myth of Ivan the Terrible does not come to an end following Stalin's death in 1953 and the renunciation of the "idealization" of Ivan. Although a thoroughgoing account of these figures' significance in later Soviet epochs lies beyond my scope, let us note some subsequent episodes. Despite the fading of the Stalinist Ivan from cultic prominence, the historical mythmaking of the 1930s and 1940s left the first tsar's significance radically altered for later Soviet generations: both in cases such as the recent revival of Vipper's vision of Ivan, that enact a forgetfulness of the Stalinist legacy, and in contrasting cases that accept and investigate this legacy, the allegorical linkage of the events and figures of the Russian national past to those of the twentieth century remains a looming interpretive context. In short, the linkage of Ivan's name to Stalin's has become nearly proverbial in accounts of despotic rulers of Russia. How, indeed, could one invoke Ivan in any context in the decades following Stalin's death without raising the spectre of the latter, twentieth-century tyrant? Yet it should also be said that the cultural life and historiography of the late Soviet period largely attempted to do just this, in a reflection of the late Soviet imperative to repress the Stalinist past. Professional historical scholarship, free of the overt weight of the mobilizational campaigns of the 1930s and 1940s, conducted forays into the history of Ivan that limited engagement of his mythic

potential to restrained gestures towards linkages uniting past and present revolutionaries and revolutions, terror and greatness.<sup>17</sup> Occasionally, the public discourse and cultural life of the late Soviet self-consciously exploited Ivan's allegorical potential as a vehicle for Aesopean critique of Stalinism. The exception to the general rule of silence regarding the interpretive elephant in the room was émigré and Western writing of this period, which insistently reminded audiences that Stalin was a "self-conscious" heir to the mayhem and terror of Ivan. This stock "irony" of Stalinist history appears in sources from Aleksandr Yanov, who wrote that "given all his ignorance of Russian history, Stalin nevertheless, intuitively yet completely correctly identified among the multitude of Russian tsars his historical doubles,"<sup>18</sup> to Robert Tucker, who wrote that the "terrible tsar" had served Stalin as a "role model" in the Great Purge.<sup>19</sup>

During the *perestroika* reforms of the late 1980s and first post-Soviet years the eminent historian R. G. Skrynnikov brought this tradition of "inverting" the Stalinist myth of Ivan home to Russia, as in his 1992 *Kingdom of Terror (Tsarstvo terrora)*, which ensured that readers would not miss the allegorical resonance of its title with its first line: "In the history of Russia, profound social crisis and unsuccessful reforms have many times been followed by periods of bloody terror. Ivan IV, called 'the Terrible,' was the first Russian leader to use terror as a method of rule."<sup>20</sup> Yet ultimately, this late burst of Stalinist historical myth, ironically reversed, did not prove to be definitive or post-Soviet historical imagination. Skrynnikov's efforts to support a new liberal consensus with a critical anti-myth of Ivan and Stalin ultimately had no real success in Russian political discourse or public life. The dominant metaphors governing the historical consciousness of the early to middle 1990s cast the Soviet years as a disastrous renunciation of tsarist politics, society and culture, and saw the post-Soviet era as the scene of the "undoing" or "reversal" of the distortions and anomalies of the preceding seventy years. In this light, quite apart from Ivan's historical legacy, it is perhaps unsurprising that the political establishment of the Russian Federation was from the start inclined to view the tsars in general, and especially Peter the Great, as one of their primary symbolic re-

sources, capable of granting to the new state the legitimacy and gravitas that only a glorious history can endow. In this vein, just to mention a few examples, Yeltsin was regularly granted the moniker “Boris the First” in the press; Moscow Mayor Yurii Luzhkov backed the erection of a monstrous, celebratory maritime monument to Peter I on the banks of the Moscow River in 1996; and Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin addressed the Parliament of the Netherlands on the tercentennial of Peter the Great’s diplomatic mission to Europe in 1997, announcing that he strove to “learn from Peter” whose reforms were clearly justified, for they allowed Russia to “overcome autarky” and “to establish her geopolitical priorities from the Baltic to the Black Sea, to engage as an active and equal participant in all of Europe’s affairs.”<sup>21</sup> Yet this general aspiration to erase or reach past the Soviet era, to return like a prodigal son to a tsarist fold, led to a different fate in political discourse for Ivan, who largely dropped from view—as unwelcome in Russia’s first generation of post-Soviet reformers’ genealogy of power as he had been in the Romanovs’. The few exceptions to this rule include examples of a continuing attachment to Ivan among Communist politicians—for instance, their evocation of the tsar’s supposedly red battle standards as part of their rationale for the re-adoption of a red flag during a 1997 Duma debate over state symbols.<sup>22</sup>

Yet it should be said as well that the official political establishment was rather incoherent and halting in its mobilization of history during the first post-Soviet decade. Furthermore, political discourse far from the most productive site of historical representation in Russia during the 1990s. As the weight of state oversight lifted from a rapidly privatizing publishing industry and from research and educational institutions, a flood of publications on iconic eras and names of the Russian past, including Ivan and Peter, swept over Russian readers. Reminiscent of the historiographical climate of the 1920s described above, the political and institutional conditions of the 1990s initiated a new “open season” on Ivan that allowed for a proliferation of competing images, myths and allegorical deployments, but also enormous interpretational looseness. In distinction from that earlier period, however, the most prominent representations of the



Russian national past of the 1990s consisted of republications of the classics of historiography and historical fiction. This is the proper context in which to view the 1998 reprint edition of Vipper's and Platonov's monographs—conflicting interpretations of the terrible tsar that together signal precisely the combination of mythic, allegorical potential and hermeneutic incoherence that characterized reception of Vipper's book in the 1920s. In the early post-Soviet years, Russian publishers, in a rush to derive profit from the tsarist past's renewed lustre, printed anything they could lay their hands on in cheap, stripped down editions, often lacking in even the most elementary commentary or critique. As a result, shoppers could find A. N. Tolstoi's Stalinist dramatic diptych *Ivan the Terrible* (1942-44) along with his Imperial predecessor A. K. Tolstoi's verse tragedy *The Death of Ivan the Terrible* (1866) side by side on the shelves of bookstores or bound into a single volume, suspended, as it were, in an informational vacuum and a collapse of chronology. Beyond the bookstores, the Ivan's iconic significance cropped up in other novel discursive arenas in the early 1990s as well, as, for instance, on the label of "Tsar Ivan" vodka (advertisements asked: "Why not lose your head?"). Most surprisingly, in the late 1990s provincial Russia saw the appearance of a religious revival calling for the canonization of Ivan the Terrible as an Orthodox saint. If, as I have proposed, the history of history unfolds as an accumulation of competing and interrelated images, representations and interpretations, the 1990s magnified the resulting interpretational complexity to the point of a white noise or incoherence, in which the iconic figures of Russia's past could and did mean everything to everybody, or perhaps nothing definite at all.

In spite of the continuing potential for significance demonstrated in these many appearances of Ivan on the cultural scene, the extraordinary profusion of divergent redactions of his historical myth leads one to wonder whether the capacity for symbolic meaning of such touchstone figures of the politically charged historical imagination may be simply overcome by their own history of use and reuse—buried under an excess of conflicting significances or worn away like a coin that has passed through too many hands. The an-

swer, I think, is no. Quite to the contrary, the cacophony of diverse and contradictory historical visions of the 1990s illustrates the extent to which the representation of national pasts is a conservative process that preserves long-dead voices, seemingly defunct interpretive positions and obsolete formulations of collective identity alongside novel and innovative stances. Historians are used to considering the development of historical knowledge as a linear process, in which better information and more refined techniques lead towards ever more precise and interpretively sound comprehensions of the past. Yet outside of the institutional practices of historiography, modern cultural life and its institutions—libraries, literary canons, performance repertoires, museums, and commercial trademarks—are like time capsules, or perhaps repositories of a collective unconsciousness, that allow for the reanimation and reappearance of past visions when least expected.

The most recent events in the history of Russian history efficiently demonstrate this point, and show the undiminished capacity for political and cultural significance remaining in the mechanisms of historical memory and collective identity which are epitomized by the fate of Vipper's "versatile" monograph. For the chaotic state of Russian political life and historical consciousness characteristic of the immediate post-Soviet years began to fade with the turn of the new century. Beginning in 2003, the Putin administration made concerted efforts to bring history education in the Russian Federation under tighter political control, with the stated goal of reducing the interpretational flux of preceding years in order to render Russian and Soviet history a basis for patriotic sentiment. As Putin explained at a meeting with history educators: "Contemporary textbooks for schools and institutions of higher education must not become a stage for new political and ideological battles. The facts of history should be related in these textbooks. They should foster a sense of pride in one's history, in one's country."<sup>23</sup> In particular, the history of the twentieth century and of the very recent past has been at the center of official attention—one of the first scandalous outcomes of the Kremlin's renewed interest in active management of history was the removal of the official approvals needed for educational use from a



textbook of twentieth century history that referenced Putin's political opponents' characterizations of Russia under his administration as a "police state."<sup>24</sup> Yet beyond such straightforward *ad hominem* political infighting, Putin's statements on history have called for a more "uplifting" interpretation of Russian and Soviet history as a whole: "At a certain point, historians were emphasizing the negative, in keeping with the task of destroying the previous system. But now we have a different, constructive task."<sup>25</sup> In short, the historical allegorical confusion of the 1990s was to be replaced by a renewed investment of state authority in particular allegorical readings, comprehensible to all, that would reconstruct the genealogy of power of the national past.

Since 2003, the Ministry of Education has repeatedly called for textbooks that fulfill this "new task" and has urged teachers to "emphasize the positive" in the national past. As the second epigraph to this article illustrates, some teachers have responded with lessons that return not only to Peter the Great, but to Ivan the Terrible as well the status of heroic leadership and lofty precedent for contemporary leaders that they have not enjoyed together for fifty years. One sample lesson plan submitted to a teachers' conference in Moscow in 2007 creatively calls for a child to dress up as Ivan and recite the following doggerel (of the teacher's own composition):

Правил я Россией долго.  
 Воевал с врагами я упорно.  
 Я провел реформы Избранной рады  
 Чему не все простолюдины были рады  
 Но независимость России я отстаивал всегда  
 И вот поэтому в ваших сердцах я навсегда.

*I ruled Russia for a long time.  
 And obstinately fought with enemies.  
 I carried out the reforms of the Select Council  
 Which did not please all of the common people.  
 But I always defended Russia's independence.  
 Which is why I will remain forever in your hearts.*

Following this performance, other children dressed as Peter the Great, Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin offer similarly inspiring readings.<sup>26</sup> In a similar vein, at a 2007 conference on education in the humanities at which the president once again made an appearance, a teacher's handbook offering what has been interpreted as a new official line on Russian history was presented. *Modern Russian History, 1945-2006 (Noveishaia istoriia Rossii, 1945-2006)* was authored by A. V. Filippov, the assistant director of the National Laboratory of External Politics, and is rumored to have been composed to meet specific demands articulated at the highest level of the Kremlin hierarchy.<sup>27</sup> Among other things, the handbook suggests that emphasis in teaching the Stalin era should be divided between matter-of-fact discussion of repressions and purges, on the one hand, and attention to the successes of the USSR in modernization and military conflict. Placing Stalin in historical context, the work explains:

Among the most prominent assessments of the historical role of Stalin is that of [...] Winston Churchill, who cannot easily be described as one of Stalin's supporters: "He took over a Russia still using the wooden plow, and left it equipped with atomic weapons." [...] The authority of the ruler of the state in Russia has traditionally been omnipotent, uniting all resources and subordinating all political forces to itself. The difficult circumstances of the evolution of the Russian state demanded a concentration of resources, including political resources, in a single center and their centralized allocation in key areas. [...] In this connection, one must note the anomalies that have regularly accompanied this centralization. Chief among these is the transformation of the actual necessity for a strong state power into an exaggerated preference far in excess of any need. Such an analysis is equally applicable to the rule of Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great and Joseph Stalin. [...] Stalin considered himself the heir of his predecessors on the Russian throne. He knew Russian history well and respected the historical figures mentioned above, considering them to be his teachers.<sup>28</sup>

Fillipov's book evoked heated debate in the Russian press and in

internet discussions, including a great deal of consternation at its minimization of Stalinist abuses. Yet it has also found a great many supporters. The official Kremlin position appears to be that while the Soviet past was the scene of lamentable bloodshed, Russians should by and large avert their eyes from these aspects of the historical record and attend instead to Russia's great triumphs, past and present. Meanwhile, celebrity author Vladimir Sorokin recently published his *A Day in the Life of an Oprichnik (Den' oprichnika)*, a novella set in 2027 in a Russia where a new *oprichnina* (Ivan's merciless personal army) has been founded that surpasses the violence and iniquity of the original. As Sorokin makes plain in the interview cited above, the work constituted an allegorically keyed warning against the resurgence of "ancient cycles of violence" centered on Ivan, Peter and Stalin in the neo-authoritarian course plotted by current Russian elites.

Finally, leading Russian director Pavel Lungine created a historical film set in the day of Ivan the Terrible that was a major blockbuster of 2009. "Tsar" centers on the relationship between Ivan and Fedor Kolychev, one-time ally of the tsar who, having been raised by him to the office of Metropolitan of Moscow, publicly condemned the actions of Ivan's *oprichnina*. In interviews, Lungine positioned the present-oriented allegorical thrust of his film in a manner evoking the full ambivalence of Ivan's historical myth. Lungine stated that the amorality and present-minded anarchy of the contemporary scene is a resurgence of the apocalyptic sensibility of Ivan's era "this sense of the end of the world, of the end of time, this feeling that in anticipation of the Last Judgement all is permitted—this is in some strange way very close to us." On the other hand, although Lungine seemed to aim precisely at a portrait of the excessive, even psychotic violence of the tsar, he also noted that "the theme of the Terrible tsar is foundational for our country, for it was precisely he who transformed Russian history." He rounded out his interview by intentionally crossing the allegorical wires: "His specter hovers over us to the present day, sometimes growing closer, sometimes further away. Now, thank god, it is growing more distant. But it has at times come very close to us. Ivan the Terrible is the eternal temptation of

Russia.” In answer to the question, “who was Ivan the Terrible” he answers: “He was a sinner, a saint, a hangman... but most of all, an artist!”<sup>29</sup> Lungine’s project, unlike both the bold, celebratory historical allegories of the school curricula posted above, on the one hand, and the bald critical allegory of Sorokin’s novella, on the other, was calculated to draw attention to an allegorical tie between the era of Ivan and that of the present, while not pinning down this allegorical resonance to any one valence. Yet in this, Lungine’s film is rather obviously reminiscent of a certain unavoidable precedent for his project: Sergei Eisenstein’s unfinished trilogy on the terrible tsar of 1942-45, *Ivan the Terrible*, parts one and two. Eisenstein’s work, as readers may recall, was commissioned as part of the state-sponsored rehabilitation of Ivan, and presented so baffling a combination of allegorical implications that the first installment in the trilogy was honored with the Stalin prize, while the second was banned. Since that time, the film has been subject alternately to critique as a celebration of violence and tyranny and to celebration as an Aesopean subversion of Stalinist excesses. Lungine, one imagines, created not merely an ambivalent allegorical view of the present through Ivan’s day, but an overt allegorical reference to Eisenstein’s own famously ambivalent historical allegory. The implications of Lungine’s allegory of allegories remains uncertain—did he mean to tie the present to the Stalinist past through the short-circuit of reference to Eisenstein; or merely to tie his own reputation to that of his canonical predecessor? The film itself, which paints an unequivocally dark portrait of Ivan, yet also suggests that the heights of spirituality may be reached precisely in such dark times, provides no firm answer to this question.<sup>30</sup>

This moment of eerie resurgence, albeit on a more modest scale, of the sort of state management of historical knowledge familiar from the Soviet 1930s, accompanied by the rise of ominous allegorical rumblings in the cultural arena, is where the story ends, for now. As recent developments illustrate, forms of collective identity based on the repression of historical trauma linked to figures of despotic power—figures who continue to accumulate in an allegorically interlinked series—persist in Russian political and cultural life



*Ivan the Terrible, still from Ivan Lungine's movie, 2009.*

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to the present with seemingly undiminished potential to support the rise of new candidates for inclusion in the lists of Russia's great and bloody dictators. There is no telling where the contemporary revival of Ivan will lead. Certainly, the political conditions of the present are not really comparable to those of the Stalin era, and no Modern society can return now to the condition of total state management of public discourse and cultural life of the early Soviet period in an age of internet and desktop publishing. Yet just as certainly, these developments can only lead to innovation and unpredictable new turns in the representation and significance of Ivan the Terrible in Russia, rather than to its obsolescence. How, indeed may one imagine an exit from the traditions in political culture, historical interpretation, and collective identity represented by this figures when each attempt at reinterpretation is already encoded in the supremely capacious semiotic potential of this figure, so that forgetting or transcendence immediately reveals itself to be repression and repetition? One may expect, in this vein, a new edition of Vipper's book on Ivan to appear within the next few years: a reprint of the Stalinist version of the work, in which the introduction will celebrate the work's significance as a part of the wartime mobilizational campaigns of the 1940s, and its important contributions to Russian patriotic identity. The work's original critical potential with regard to the Bolshevik state will be, of course, repressed until it once again becomes useful.

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<sup>1</sup> Vladimir Sorokin, "Oprichnina—ochen' russkoe iavlenie," [www.grani.ru](http://www.grani.ru) (accessed October 4, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> A. E. Kambulova, "Konspekt uroka; Predmet: 'Okruzhaiushchii mir.' 4-i class. Tema: 'My zhivem v Rossiiskom gosudarstve; Gosudarstvennaia simvolika Rossii,'" materials presented at the 2004-2005 teachers conference "Open Lesson" ["Otkrytyi urok"], [festival.1september.ru](http://festival.1september.ru) (accessed October 4, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Pavel Lungin, "Ivan Groznyi—vechnoe iskushenie Rossii," *Argumenty i fakty* 16 (April 16, 2008), [www.aif.ru](http://www.aif.ru) (accessed April 18, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> Some of the material I treat here I discussed in a different manner in my article:

“History, Inertia and the Unexpected: Recycling Russia’s Despots,” *Common Knowledge* 10, no. 1 (2004): 130-50.

<sup>5</sup> Recent studies of the historical myths of this period include: David Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism: Stalinist Mass Culture and the Formation of Modern Russian National Identity, 1931-1956* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002); Kevin M. F. Platt and David Brandenberger, eds, *Epic Revisionism: Russian History and Literature as Stalinist Propaganda* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006); A. M. Dubrovskii, *Istoriik i vlast’: istoricheskaiia nauka v SSSR i kontsepsiia istorii feudal’noi Rossii v kontekste politiki i ideologii (1930-1950-ee gg.)* (Briansk: Izdatel’stvo Brianskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta im. Akad. I. G. Petrovskogo, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> Regarding Vipper’s career and works, see: B. G. Safronov, *Istoricheskoe mirovovzrenie R. Iu. Vipper i ego vremia* (Moscow: Moscow University Press, 1976); Hugh Graham, “R. Iu. Vipper: A Russian Historian in Three Worlds,” *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 28, no. 1 (1986): 22–35; Maureen Perrie, *The Cult of Ivan the Terrible in Stalin’s Russia* (Palgrave: Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, UK, 2001), 12-19, 92-99; Dubrovskii, *Istoriik i vlast’*, 763-70.

<sup>7</sup> R. Iu. Vipper, “Ivan Groznyi,” in *Ivan Groznyi, 1530-1584/ Ivan Groznyi*, ed. D. M. Volodikhin, (Moscow: Universitet Rossiiskoi akademii obrazovaniia, 1998), 101-211, cit. on 206.

<sup>8</sup> Fedotov wrote: “Vipper in his patriotic anguish sought a tyrant, consoling himself retrospectively by taking refuge from the Moscow of 1917 in that of the Terrible Tsar.” G. P. Fedotov, *Sviatoi Filipp Mitropolit Moskovskii* (Paris: YMCA Press, 1928), 106–7. For other reviews and responses to the first edition of Vipper’s *Ivan the Terrible*, see: S. F. Platonov, *Ivan Groznyi, 1530–1584* (Petersburg: Brokgauz-Efron, 1923); Iu. V. Got’e, review of *Ivan Groznyi* by R. Iu. Vipper, *Russkii istoricheskii zhurnal* 1922, no. 8, 295–97.

<sup>9</sup> Nechkina, M. V. “Ivan IV,” *Bol’shaia sovetskaia entsiklopediia*, 27: 326-29, cited on 329.

<sup>10</sup> I. I. Polosin, “Zapadnaia Evropa i Moskoviiia v xvi veke,” in *O Moskve Ivana Groznogo: zapiski nemtsa oprichnika*, by Genrikh Staden (Heinrich von Staden) (Leningrad: M. i S. Sabashnikov, 1925), 9-53, cit. on 10.

<sup>11</sup> Kevin M. F. Platt, “Reproduksiia travmy: tsenarii russkoi natsional’noi istorii v 1930-e gody,” *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 90 (2008): 62-113.

Such positions were common among émigré Russian intellectuals, and characteristic of members of the “Change-of-Landmarks” and “Eurasianism” move-



ments. See Marc Raeff, *Russia Abroad: A Cultural History of the Russian Emigration, 1919–1939* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 84–85; Hilde Hardemann, *Coming to Terms with the Soviet Regime: The “Changing Signposts” Movement among Russian Emigres in the Early 1920s* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1994).

<sup>12</sup> *Stenogramma publichnoi leksii akademika Vipper R. Iu., prochitannoi 17 sentiabria 1943 goda v Kolonnom zale Doma Soiuzov v Moskve* (Moscow: Lektсионное биуро, 1943), 8–9.

<sup>13</sup> For the “dethroning” of the Stalinist Ivan the Terrible: S. M. Dubrovskii, “Protiv idealizatsii deiatel’nosti Ivana IV” *Voprosy istorii*, 1956, no. 8: 121–29; M. D. Kurmacheva, “Ob otsenke deiatel’nosti Ivana Groznogo,” *Voprosy istorii*, 1956, no. 9: 195–203; V. N. Sheviakov, “K voprosu ob oprichnine pri Ivane IV,” *Voprosy istorii*, 1956, no. 9: 71–77.

<sup>14</sup> Vipper, “Ivan Groznyi,” in *Ivan Groznyi: 1530–1584/Ivan Groznyi*, 2.

<sup>15</sup> Platonov, one imagines, would hardly consent to a joint publication of the two works. S. F. Platonov, “Aftobiograficheskaia zapiska,” in *Akademicheskoe delo 1929–31 gg.: Dokumenty i materialy sledstvennogo dela, sfabrikovannogo OGPU*, ed. V. P. Zakharov, M. P. Lepekhin and E. A. Fomina, two pts. in three vols. (Saint Petersburg: Biblioteka Rossiiskoi akademii nauk, 1993), 1: 256–88, cit. on 285–86.

<sup>16</sup> Ernest Renan, “Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?” in *Oeuvres Completes*, 10 vols. (Paris: Calmann-Lovy, 1947–61), 1: 887–906 (cited on 892).

<sup>17</sup> José Saramago, *The History of the Siege of Lisbon*, trans. Giovanni Pontiero (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1996), 267.

<sup>18</sup> In the 1960s, for instance, the Soviet historian A. A. Zimin granted that Ivan and his *oprichnina* served the progressive aim of “centralizing the Russian lands under the aegis of the Muscovite state.” However, Zimin also makes it clear that this centralized state “was built on the bones of many thousands of laborers, who paid dearly for the triumph of autocracy.” A. A. Zimin, *Oprichnina Ivana Groznogo* (Moscow: Mysl’, 1964), 479.

<sup>19</sup> Aleksandr Ianov, *Ten’ groznogo tsaria: zagadki russkoi istorii* (Moscow: Kruk, 1997), 174.

<sup>20</sup> Robert C. Tucker, *Stalin in Power: The Revolution from Above, 1928–1941* (New York: Norton, 1990), 7, 52, 319–22, 481–86, 557.

<sup>21</sup> R. G. Skrynnikov, *Tsarstvo terrora* (St. Petersburg: Nauka, 1992), 5. In the same vein, the first line of chapter one uses a term commonly applied to the Stalinist pe-



- riod with reference to Ivan's instead: the "Great Terror of the sixteenth century."
- <sup>22</sup> Vladimir Abarinov, "Sud'by zapadnichestva v Rosii skladyvaetsia neprosto," *Russkii telegraf*, October 4, 1997, 3.
- <sup>23</sup> See: Petr Zhuravlev, "Khochu nazad serpok i molotok," *Itogi* April 8, 1997, 17-18.
- <sup>24</sup> "Putin: shkol'nye uchebniki—ne ploshchadka dlia politicheskoi bor'by, s istorii 'nada sniat' vse shelukhu i penu," newsru.com (originally published November 27, 2003; accessed August 24, 2007).
- <sup>25</sup> The textbook in question was: I. I. Dolutskii, *Otechestvennaia istoriia, xx vek, uchebnik dlia 10-11 klassov*, 2 vols. (Moscow: Mnemozina, 2001-2002). The textbook was first published in 1994 in a single volume—this edition was an expanded, two-volume version that brought the narrative up to the present.
- <sup>26</sup> "Putin: shkol'nye uchebniki—ne ploshchadka."
- <sup>27</sup> V. V. Milovanova, "Razrabotka klassnogo chasa iz predpolagaemoi sistemy klassnykh chasov na temu: 'Patriotizm segodnia,' priurochennyi k 12 dekabria," materials presented at the 2007-2008 teachers conference "Open Lesson" ["Otkrytyi urok"], festival.1september.ru (accessed October 4, 2007).
- <sup>28</sup> A. V. Filippov, *Noveishaia istoriia Rossii, 1945-2006 gg.: kniga dlia uchitelia* (Moscow: Prosveshchenie, 2007). On the involvement of the Putin administration in this work's composition: Anna Kachurovskaia, "Istoricheskii pripadok," *Vlast' 27 (731)* (July 16, 2007), www.kommersant.ru (accessed August 24, 2007).
- <sup>29</sup> Cited at Shamil' Idiatullin, "Po obrazu i posobiuu," *Vlast' 27 (731)* (July 16, 2007), www.kommersant.ru (accessed August 24, 2007).
- <sup>30</sup> Iuliia Shigareva, "Pavel Lungin: 'Ivan Groznyi—vechnoe iskushenie Rossii,'" *Argumenty i fakty* 16 (April 16, 2008), www.aif.ru (accessed April 19, 2008).
- <sup>31</sup> See my review of the film, as well as one by historian Stephen Norris, in the online journal *KinoKultura* 28 (April, 2010), <http://www.kinokultura.com/2010/28r-tsar-kp.shtml>.