

Eisenstein's Autocrats or "Why Do the People Love the Tsar?"

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Broad reconsiderations of Russian history encourage us to examine our comfortable, but fraying categories of analysis, to resolve the contradictions that have surfaced with new research, new questions, new conceptualizations. I want to recommend preserving the contradictions, the half-truths, and the compromises on the grounds that Russian culture is best understood in terms of its unresolvable conflicts and impossible moral positions. This perspective is not (or not entirely) an artifact of post-modern theory, but rather emerges from a document at the heart of the Stalinist era: Sergei Eisenstein's misunderstood and underappreciated masterpiece, his film *Ivan the Terrible* (Parts I and II, completed 1944, 1946, respectively). Through a combination of extensive historical research and ruthless autobiographical self-interrogation, under the influence of theories both Freudian and anthropological, Eisenstein constructed a view of Russian history that foregrounded irony, compromise, and contradiction. His Ivan -- with intentional and obvious analogs in the twentieth century -- is good *and* evil, progressive *and* destructive, naïve *and* manipulative, powerful *and* vulnerable and the revolution he set in motion was rooted equally in politics and personal vengeance, motivated by abstract ideals *and* petty greed, by a hunger for power and a fear of powerlessness. This portrait of power-- simultaneously repellent and attractive--is mirrored by Eisenstein's portraits of the Russian people and argues, in broader perspective, for an understanding of the Russia people's attitudes towards powerful rulers as deeply and enduringly ambivalent.

None of this would matter much if *Ivan the Terrible* were no more than Stalinist agitprop or the realization of an official Kremlin commission. But Eisenstein (contrary to his various reputations) was an unusually thoughtful observer of Russian history and politics. His portrait of Ivan the Terrible drew on his own diverse experiences of Soviet power -- his early revolutionary idealism, his ties to the international film community, his own careerist ambitions and his vulnerability during the tumultuous and dangerous 1930s and 40s -- and he was determined to make *Ivan the Terrible* a serious study of political power. We know this now, not because we choose to reinterpret the film in some post-soviet light, but because Eisenstein filled more than 50 notebooks while he was preparing the screenplay and the production with his thoughts on the film's political and historical meanings, and because those notes make explicit both his conceptualization of Russian history and his determination to bring his paradoxical portrait of power to the screen.

As a result, *Ivan the Terrible*, however orthodox it might have appeared to some viewers, constitutes a rare contemporary portrait of Russian autocracy and of the cycles of Russian history that allowed the hypertrophy of centralized power to repeat itself, if one can paraphrase Marx yet once more, the first time as tragedy and the second time as tragedy. The project became an opportunity for him to examine the will to power, popular support for deeply anti-populist leaders, and the degradation of revolutionary idealism. Throughout the following very brief survey of some extraordinarily rich and complex ideas, one should keep in mind that *Ivan* was always expected to contain a metaphor for Stalin and at times for Eisenstein himself, but the film maker at times made careful distinctions between the 16th and the 20th centuries, and at times allowed images to overlap; the relationships here are slippery, and the images change shape frequently.

Eisenstein began the project with a clear but still undeveloped notion of Ivan as deeply divided. "Everything he sees from two angles," Eisenstein noted in English as early as February 1941. "Essential, by the way, in the ironic attitude,"¹ But he rejected a number of well-known dualistic and other models for understanding Ivan's character found in the historical sources and secondary works he read, such as those by Vipper, Platonov, and Kliuchevsky (retaining bits and pieces as he went) -- until he found what he was looking for in an obscure review by literary critic Vissarion Belinsky, who captured Eisenstein's conception of Ivan as a man whose divided, dual nature was fused into a single "organic unity":

We understand this madness, this bestial bloodthirstiness, these unheard-of crimes, this pride, and along with all this, these scalding tears, this tormenting despair, and this humiliation in which all of Ivan's life manifested itself; we also understand that only angels can turn from spirit of light into the spirit of darkness...Ivan is didactic in his madness; this was a fallen angel who, in his falling, reveals...the strength of an iron character, and the strength of a high mind.²

This "entirely different pattern of thought," the starting point for Eisenstein's conception of his character, was a tormented Dostoevskian dualism, the fusion of opposites into a single, if warring, personality. Rereading *The Brothers Karamazov* and *The Idiot* while shooting the film in Alma Ata, Eisenstein's Dostoevskian conception of Ivan was reaffirmed: "the combination of a similar duality in the unity of one and the same nature of an extraordinary person fascinated me personally....I have in mind the image of Tsar Ivan the Terrible, contact with whom brought me so much joy and so much sorrow, as if the work on him was fated to carry the imprint of his unique disposition."⁹⁰

The dualism rending Ivan's soul had, of course, a political component. Here the historians were more useful. Eisenstein believed that Ivan was a genuinely progressive leader, primarily for destroying the power of the "reactionary," or "feudal" boyar elite and for his role in establishing

the Great Russian State. This aspect of the film has almost always been seen as support for the concentration of soviet power in Stalin's hands, but Eisenstein makes clear distinctions here between Ivan and Stalin and between means and ends. He clearly took to heart the liberal historian Kavelin's characterization of Ivan as the "poet of the state idea,"⁹⁷ but Eisenstein's support for Ivan's state building can be seen as wartime patriotism or nineteenth-century romantic imperialism. It can also be seen as a medieval history lesson well-learned from the works of the most respected nineteenth-century historians, all of whom applauded the building of a strong central state as a worthy medieval goal and many of which are still read as standard sources today.⁹⁶ After all, a centralized state and a centrally controlled army were the prerequisite for international power in medieval and early modern Europe and the foundation for the modern European state. For Russia to join the European state system, it was necessary first to form a state. It is worth pointing out at this point, though, that despite Ivan's insistent references to his Great Cause, the building of the Great Russian State throughout the film, Eisenstein's Ivan, like the historical tsar, left Russia far more divided than he found it. However worthy the purpose, in Eisenstein's account Ivan destroyed much more than he accomplished, a fact that we see enacted rather than discussed. It is also worth noting that while Eisenstein approved the unification of the state his references to autocracy (*edinoderzhaviiia*) and to absolute power (*edinovlastie*), are always associated with negatives (demagoguery, deception, trickery, vengeance, murder, to name a few). In approving the state but repudiating the autocracy, Eisenstein followed conceptions of Ivan's reign promoted by the classics of pre-revolutionary liberal historiography. He also left himself some room for approving revolutionary ideals and deploring revolutionary outcomes.

Eisenstein explores the corruption of revolutionary ideas in two ways: first psychologically. During the three years that passed between starting the project in January 1941 and shooting in 1943, Eisenstein continued a lifelong habit of voracious reading and note taking. As he read historical documents, novels, ethnography and international film journals, as he observed the bloody war from his Moscow bomb shelter and from evacuation in Alma Ata, he recorded an astonishing range of new associations. He moved beyond the screenplay, which had received the Stalinist stamp of approval and began to explore the links between his own life and Ivan's. Eisenstein's work on Ivan stirred up memories of his own childhood and he began writing the sketches that would become his autobiography while in production on the *Ivan*. The film's "self-portrait" as he called it, depicts Ivan's life in a way that closely follows the story Eisenstein composed about himself. When his autobiography was published in the 1960s and 70s, it revealed an Eisenstein who identified with Ivan as an ambitious, divided man, --as a man with a potential for greatness who became mired in a political tragedy at least partly of his own making. The connections can be hard to follow, though, because at times Eisenstein identifies with Ivan the powerless child, at times with Ivan the tyrannical adult, but he also identifies Ivan the despot with his own father.

The autobiography showed that the great drama in Eisenstein's life was his difficult relationship with his father -- a successful architect in Riga and a cold, domineering man, -- and the absence of his mother, who left the two for the brighter lights of St. Petersburg when Eisenstein was ten. He experienced his father as a distant and unremitting tyrant "a typical bully about the house."¹⁴² He repeatedly identified his father with Ivan, twice catching himself writing "father" in place of "tsar,"¹⁴³ in his production notebooks and he specifically linked his father's tyranny with Ivan's: "my father was a beast, as Tsar Ivan is a beast."¹⁴⁴

As the child of a powerful father, Eisenstein was excessively obedient, as an adolescent he rebelled, and as an adult, he ironically viewed the experiences of defying his tyrannical father as the origin of his participation in the political and artistic revolutions of his time:

It was not social injustice nor material deprivation, nor the ups and downs of my struggle for existence that prepared the ground for my social protest, but, purely and simply, the prototype of all social tyranny, like the tyranny of a father in his family: a relic from primitive society when the head of a tribe was a tyrant.¹⁴⁶

The process of overthrowing the tyrant was a liberating one initially, but a tragic one ultimately as the child in each case replicated the tyranny of their fathers. Both Eisenstein and his Ivan reinvented themselves as the same kind of powerful adults that they had worked so hard to overthrow. And they both did this, *because* they had felt powerless, “defenseless, and very timid,” as boys.¹⁵² *Ivan the Terrible*, Part I, which takes us up to the founding of the *oprichnina* and Ivan's retreat from Moscow, shows the tsar to be a man who decides to trick his people into submission if they won't choose him to rule over them and a man who creates his own army of inhuman sons without mothers or fathers to terrorize his political enemies. And he does so, not for some Machiavellian “justifiable end,” or solely because his boyar enemies are obstructionist, but because of his vulnerability and humiliation as a child. Powerless as a child to protect his mother, his own body, and his country from its ravishing enemies, Ivan becomes a man hungry for power and revenge. The child became the father; the rebel became a tyrant.¹⁵³

Once in power, the new father/tsar becomes even more terrible than the tyrant he displaced. Explaining this historical cycle, which seemed fundamental to understanding Russian history in both the 16th and the 20th centuries was central to Eisenstein's project.² He found confirmation of these ideas about revenge and the corruption of revolutionary ideals and he found a way to expand them beyond the individual hunger for power in his reading of ancient

mythology, cultural evolutionary theory, and studies of "primitive" cultures. There is no time here for a lengthy discussion of this literature and Eisenstein's reading of it. Briefly, he was fascinated by the resonance he found in myths about fathers devouring their children followed by the terrible vengeance of subsequent generations. These included well-known Greek myths (Saturn, Oedipus, Dionysus, figure heavily here and drawings of Saturn eating his children appear repeatedly in his work since the 1920s), stories about the sins of the fathers visited upon their children (in 1936-37 he had reconstituted the Pavlik Morozov legend as an Abraham/Isaac story and nearly perished as a result), and finally in speculation about the habits of "primitive cultures" and early stages of human development. All of these explore in one form or another the relationship between the powerful and the powerless, the hunter and the hunted, and the dangerous transition that occurs when the prey acquires the power to become a predator. In the film, we see elements of this dynamic in Ivan's evolution from powerless child to bloodthirsty tyrant, we see it among the boyars and the priests, reduced to childlike dependence on Ivan, but we most of all see it played out in representations of the Russian people.

The "people" appear in several guises in *Ivan the Terrible*: as the masses (rebels, soldiers, the population as a whole coming to beg Ivan to rule over them) and as the vanguard of the people: the *oprichniki*. In Eisenstein's notes the people appear as the most important puzzle to be solved next to the character of Ivan himself. While writing the screenplay and reading the historical sources, Eisenstein repeatedly scrawled his own bewilderment – “why do the people love Ivan?” His answer ultimately had little to do with love and much to do with his own growing disappointment in the popular will to resist tyranny. “Despite all the “idealism,” [despite] the divine judgment of the people, Ivan is ... a demagogue,” Eisenstein wrote, and he

uses everything at this disposal to achieve his goals even if he needs to “trick” the people “to win [them] over to his side.”³ The “trick” he wrote, “grows into tragic pathos.”

Ultimately Eisenstein came to believe that the people loved the tsar when he was devouring *their* enemies, the boyar elite, but when he turned on them with deception and demagoguery, when he reduced them to powerless children, he became both their father and a predator who needed to be outgrown and overthrown. The people as a whole, as the masses, were incapable of subversion having been progressively demoralized --defanged and declawed -- during the course of *Ivan the Terrible*, Part I. Only the vanguard, the *oprichniki*, would have that kind of power, but they too had been corrupted by power and manipulated by the tsar's cunning efforts to play them off against each other. The *oprichniki*, in fact, were no improvement over the old elite. They proved equally greedy and violent and instead of selflessly and loyally supporting the new state they became a new feudal elite, hungry for their own portion of power.

Eisenstein's *oprichniki* originated in the film with a scene known as "the Oath," that was so deeply derogatory to the ruler and so obviously referring to the current Stalinist regime, that it was cut from all released versions of the film and subsequently lost. The surviving production stills and dramatic storyboard drawings and even the (tamer) screenplay show it to be a desolate, terrifying sequence. With “the dark oath” as Eisenstein called it, the *oprichniki* pledged absolute obedience to the tsar, promising their loyalty to Ivan and to the Great Russian State above all other bonds --above even their own fathers and mothers. Eisenstein described the oath as the origin of all the "sins of the *oprichniki*." And in his notes he described the *oprichniki* as a gang with no bonds of loyal friendship, where “man is wolf to man." But the *oprichniki* were much more than evil lackeys of the tsar. They are the revolutionary army, formed to carry out the Great Cause. Their descent into violence and brutality is the historical equivalent of Ivan’s (and

Eisenstein's) path from child to man as their revolution also turns to "tragic pathos." Eisenstein makes it clear in his notes that *oprichnik* violence was never justified by their cause--the glorious founding of the Russian State --but that on the contrary, it diverted progressive political aims onto a path of degeneration and brutality. In the winter of 1942, while Eisenstein was waiting impatiently in Alma Ata for production to begin, he realized that the history of his *oprichniki* ran parallel to the tumultuous events of the twentieth century that E had witnessed. Once in power, the *oprichniki* were incapable of creating a new and better world. In fact they became exactly "what [they] were called forth to destroy—the rebirth of an elite...the creation of a new feudal class," fragmented and self-interested, undermining the original revolutionary ideal -- a unified Great Russian State.

It is hard to imagine a better metaphor for the Bolsheviks' failed revolution, its inability to destroy class distinctions in the Soviet Union and its creation of a new bureaucratic elite, more violent and authoritarian than its tsarist predecessor. Here we reach the larger political meaning of Eisenstein's twentieth-century metaphor. *Ivan the Terrible* is more than a simple critique of Stalinist dictatorship—it offers a historical explanation for the failure of the Russian revolution to fulfill its illustrious promise. Neither Ivan nor the *oprichniki* were essentially evil nor were the Russian revolutionaries of the 20th century including Eisenstein himself, inherently evil. But the hunger for power and revenge that arose from their powerlessness, their denial of their bonds to the past, and their elevation of an abstraction -- the State -- above the human bonds between father and son, deformed them. When authority proved to be elusive and could only be sustained by trickery and demagoguery, the original justice of their goals became empty abstractions and doomed them to reproduce the evil they sought to destroy.

In a final contradiction, while Ivan is the predatory mastermind behind all this, he manages to remain detached and aloof from the blood he causes to spill; he has other people do his dirty work, which allows him to retain a kind of purity, even innocence, though of course a false innocence. Yet it is just this whiff of innocence, this connection with his childhood memories of powerlessness and with the boy who had yet to order a boyar's execution, that gives Ivan his enduring, inescapable appeal. It is also this lingering hope for a connection with his people that points Ivan towards the doubts and despair that Stalin personally found so troubling in the film and led him to ban Part II.⁴

Does *Ivan the Terrible* make Eisenstein a dissident hero? No, it manifestly does not. The film did no harm to Stalin during his lifetime and it certainly did not help bring down the Stalinist regime. It was framed in a way that made it sufficiently acceptable to be released (although it nearly wasn't) and to be praised by Stalinist arbiters of culture (half-hearted though that praise was). But as a work of art, *Ivan* offers us a genuinely complex vision of history as interplay between national and individual possibilities and a multi-layered and moving interpretation of the tragedies of Russian history. Even more remarkable, *Ivan the Terrible* stands as a bequest that no other Soviet artist -- hero, victim, or villain -- has managed to leave us. It survives as a moving and unforgettable indictment of tyranny in every form, and as a reminder of the harm we do when we allow utopian ideas to distract us from their everyday consequences. Most important, Eisenstein's personal investment in *Ivan* draws us into his own moral universe. It is easy to blame Stalin for the debasement of the Russian revolution, but Eisenstein forces us to walk the tightrope that separates victim from villain, predator from prey; to confront the contradictions that were inescapable in what cultural historian Neia Zorkaia called, "a world of permanent moral compromise."

¹ All archival references are to Eisenstein's personal papers, fond 1923, held at RGALI: f. 1923, op. 1, d. 553, l. 103.

² *Nonindifferent Nature*, p. 104.

⁹⁷ 1923/1/570, l. 28.

⁹⁶ R. Iu. Vipper, *Ivan Groznyi* (Moscow, 1942, first edition, 1922), V. O. Kliuchevsky, *Moskovskoe gosudarstvo v XVI v*; Eisenstein's notes on Kliuchevsky's characterizations of autocratic power under Ivan are numerous; see RGALI, 1923/1/561, ll. 6-7, 24-26, 74-6, 117, 147; 1923/2/124, l. 110.

¹⁴² *Beyond the Stars*, pp. 126, 433.

¹⁴³ The transpositions occurred on Feb. 21 and 22, 1942; 1923/1/554, l. 31 [21.II.42].

¹⁴⁴ 1923/2/1172, l. 9ob. [7.I.44]. On the Freudian/Oedipal nature of this relationship and its social analogs, see also V.V. Ivanov, *Ocherki po istorii semiotiki v SSSR* (Moscow, 1976); though Ivanov believes that Eisenstein used the psychological origins of Ivan's pathology, "a surrogate for morality" to "exonerate his hero," pp. 98 & ff.

¹⁴⁶ *BtS*, p. 434.

¹⁵² *BtS*, p. 18, *Memuary*, vol. 1, p. 32.

¹⁵³ Alexander Zholkovsky linked many of the same elements found in E's notes that are discussed here, but he mistakenly assumes that Eisenstein's identification with Ivan made him "pro-Ivan" signifying approval for Ivan's murderous actions. See "The Terrible...

² 1923/1/561 [undated, August? 1942]; 1923/1/569 [February 1942] on feudal elements in Basmanov and Ivan.

³ 1923/2/125, l. 9.

⁴ "In spite of the fact that Ivan is a progressive man of the sixteenth century, looking far ahead, he is still a man tied to...the superstitions accompanying the religious fanaticism of the epoch....And therefore Ivan's despair creates doubt – and the *theme of despair* grows into the *theme of doubt*: am I right in what I am doing?" *Nonindifferent Nature*, p. 310.