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**THE FICTIONAL IVAN:
IVAN THE TERRIBLE IN ENGLISH-LANGUAGE FICTION¹**

Ivan the Terrible's image in English derives from sixteenth-century English accounts of travelers to Muscovy, some parts of which remain unchanged in the five novels written in English dating from 1896 to 2015 discussed in this article. Creative license, of course, triumphs over historical veracity; the novels abound in factual errors. The enormous increase in knowledge about Muscovy that has become available to novelists from historical research during this period had little or no impact on authors of historical fiction. The novelists' interpretations of Ivan vary. Ivan is presented as a failure or a success as a ruler, as a man both rational and insane, disparities that reproduce the lack of consensus among historians. The novels disagree on whether his executions were justified by treason or no more than excrescences of his volatility. What is most interesting in these novels is not their all too predictable Eurocentric bias, sensationalism, or anachronisms, but their unanimous invocation of one element of Ivan's personality. Even when Ivan is doing the right thing, even when he is successful, he remains first, last and always a monster. This aspect of his life and rule dominates all five novels.

Keywords: Ivan the Terrible, Frederick Whishaw, Gardner F. Fox, Dorothy Dunnett, William Napier, Larry Townsend

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To understand Ivan the Terrible's image in Russia it is necessary to address non-fiction historical works by both professional and amateur authors.² There has never been any question that both sets of writers could not avoid being influenced by images of Ivan in other cultural media, including painting and sculpture, fiction, opera and drama, and of course film. Sergei Eisenstein's film *Ivan the Terrible*, Parts 1 and II, is and will always remain the most influential cultural work about Ivan produced in Russia; indeed it has had worldwide impact. Aleksei Konstantinovich Tolstoi's *Kniaz' Serebriannyi* probably constitutes the most famous novel about Ivan written in Russia.

In the English-speaking world Ivan's image was created in the sixteenth century by the authors of ethnographies who had actually been to Muscovy, although not necessarily while Ivan was alive. Plays and poetry during the Elizabethan era disseminated that image.³

To my knowledge there is no study of Ivan's presentation in modern English-language novels. I have found five historical novels, whose dates of publication range from 1896 to 2015. The quantity and quality of information available in English increased phenomenally during this period, but it must be said that this information explosion did not much affect novelistic images of Ivan. Ivan's persona had already become fixed in English-speaking minds before scholarly expertise about him even began to impact historical studies of Ivan in the English-speaking world. This article examines how these novels present Ivan and sixteenth-century Muscovy.⁴

In the name of the genre "historical fiction" by far the second word, "fiction," dominates. History serves only as a backdrop, a milieu that must convey enough historical realia to be credible but in which any "adaptation" of history can be justified as artistic license which is true to the "spirit" of the times. Novels in English about Russia almost inevitably vaunt their exotic locale. Depending upon the prevailing censorship or lack thereof, one would expect novels about Ivan to contain ample amounts of graphic

2 CHARLES J. HALPERIN, *Ivan the Terrible in Russian Historical Memory since 1991* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2021). <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781644695883>

3 LLOYD E. BERRY AND ROBERT O. CRUMMEY, ed., *Rude & Barbarous Kingdom: Russia in the Accounts of Sixteenth-Century English Voyages* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1968) remains a classic; KARL HEINZ RUFFMANN, *Das Rußlandbild im England Shakespeares* (Göttingen: "Musterschmidt" Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, 1952) retains its value.

4 Given this material, I forego page references. I have also standardized the spelling of Russian names and terms. Given five authors, it hardly seems significant that three come from England (and Scotland) and only two from the US.

sex and violence, if only to keep up with what I call tabloid biographies, which purport to be non-fiction. The degree of sensationalism of each novel, however, may amplify but does not shape Ivan's image and will not be explored here. I will first present a synopsis of the plot and presentation of Ivan in each novel together with a preliminary fact-check. Then I will explore some common varieties of historical fallacies that pervade Ivan's English-language fiction.⁵

FREDERICK WHISHAW, *A Boyar of the Tsar: A Romance of the Court of Ivan the Cruel, First Tsar of Russia*. Illustrations by H. G. Massey (London, New York, and Bombay: Longmans, Green and Co., 1896)⁶

Frederick Whishaw (1854-1937) was born in Russia to English parents whose family had lived in Russia since the eighteenth century but which relocated to England upon his birth. He returned to Russia in 1870 to work as a clerk but upon his marriage moved back to England in 1880. Eventually he became a well-known novelist, poet, travel writer, and author of children's books. He also did some translation work on Dostoevsky. Many of his works were set in Tsarist Russia, about which one would expect him to have developed a certain level of expertise.

The novel presents itself as a first-person narrative of Alexander Stroganov, a count and boyar of the Holy Russian Empire (the author refers to Holy Russia) whose uncle was a boyar, supposedly written down concerning Ivan's death. Like any good nineteenth-century Russian opera, it projects romantic love onto sixteenth-century Russia. Ivan is a "double man" because of his mistreatment as a child, vengeful, capricious, violent, volatile, arbitrary and pious, a savage tyrant and bully, but a great man, whose "greatness of mind and breadth of vision" enabled him to foresee the value of acquiring Siberia, who became a great tsar because of Alexei Adashev and the priest Sylvester but who after quarreling with them "indulged his passions to the point of insanity" and perpetrated unspeakable atrocities (the *oprichnina* is not mentioned by name). Ivan remained religious even "in his most savage and implacable fits of passion

5 It is entirely possible that I missed other English-language novels about Ivan; whether they would change the picture of Ivan available from these five remains of course impossible to determine.

6 FREDERICK WHISHAW, *A Boyar of the Tsar: A Romance of the Court of Ivan the Cruel, First Tsar of Russia*. Illustrations by H. G. Massey (London, New York, and Bombay: Longmans, Green and Co., 1896).

and cruelty,” eventually praying for the souls of his victims. The personal as opposed to historical plot evolves around Ivan’s relationship to two women, Anastasia, who he loves as a saint and marries, and Vera, whom he loves as a woman. Ivan met Vera, from a princely family, when she went hunting alone, riding bareback. Learning that Ivan wanted to marry, prospective brides (only of the boyar class, since only they were eligible) knew of and feared Ivan’s “savagery of disposition”; he was already known as the “little tyrant.” Anastasia is the exception; she refers to Ivan as “this godlike young tsar.” For all Ivan’s violence and cruelty, he lives out his life peacefully, succeeded by his only surviving son of his two sons by Anastasia, Fedor.

Two of Stroganov’s characterizations embody the problem endemic in reading any work of fiction by a fictional person, distinguishing between the narrator’s voice and the author’s. According to Stroganov, the Russian peasant (*muzhik*) is the “greatest liar in the world,” with the “face of a fool and the brain of a fox.” After the embassy of Ivan’s first ambassador to England, Nepea, is shipwrecked, it is victimized by the “savage natives” of the unnamed northern region of the dominion of the English ruler, i.e. Scotland. Alexander also expresses disgust at the “shocking massacre” of Tatars in Kazan’.

Fact check: the Stroganovs did not become “counts” until the eighteenth century and in the sixteenth century never became boyars, although they were honored elite merchants. Not only boyar but also gentry women (but not women of the lower classes) participated in the bride show to find Ivan a wife. Some protective fathers were reluctant to let their daughters join the contest, but we have only retrospective evidence to suggest that he was already volatile. For simplicity, Whishaw omits Anastasia’s first son by Ivan, the first Tsarevich Dmitrii, who died in infancy. He almost elides how the unnamed Tsarevich Ivan met his death, usually seen as at his father’s hand. Ivan’s other wives do not appear. Although Ivan’s tragic life left many dead, there is no hint, as in the historian Karamzin’s influential presentation of the “double” Ivan, that Ivan’s reign was catastrophic for his country. Ivan recognized the merit of acquiring Siberia only after the fact, and he had very little to do with it. The most contrived, i.e., anachronistic, personality in the novel is of course Vera, liberated way ahead of her time for Muscovy; Victorian elite women went hunting, but not sixteenth-century Russian women. If elite women rode on horses they did so sidesaddle and certainly would never have gone out riding alone.

GARDNER F. FOX, *Ivan the Terrible* (New York: Avon, 1961)⁷

It might be no more than an accident that the second novel discussed here appeared 65 years after the first, or it might reflect declining interest in Muscovy (and perhaps Imperial Russia) in the interim period as a result of the establishment of Communist power. 1961 was on the cusp of the spike in US study of Russia that would be generously funded by the federal government.

Gardner Fox (1911–1986) was a prolific writer best known for contributing to Marvel Comics, but also the author of fantasy novels and dozens of historical novels on topics ranging from the Queen of Sheba to Stonehenge to the Borgias. The cover illustration and inscription of this novel sets the tone: the cover color illustration shows a young Ivan, with goatee and mustache, smiling devilishly, sword in hand, watching drunk Cossacks and a scantily clad dancing girl at an orgy. The caption reads: “A story told in thunder of the wild young giant who drowned mighty Russia in a torrent of blood and lust.” The back cover epitomizes Ivan as a “tempestuous savage, a devoted husband and debauchee who sought wisdom and destroyed an entire town [Novgorod] to quash resistance, a saint, a madman, a lover, and a tyrant who wrote the greatest chapter in Russia’s history in letters of fire.”

Ivan’s personal life is driven by his sex drive. We first meet him riding alone after the woman he had been chasing was kidnaped as a joke by his two companions, who locked a chastity belt around her to deter Ivan’s passion. Ivan kills several peasants who get in his way. He single-handedly rescues Anastasia, her mother and a servant traveling through the forest who are attacked by a pack of wolves. In Moscow he goes walking with her alone and they make out; later they go skinny-dipping. Apparently at this time, before he married Anastasia, he already called himself Ivan *Groznyi*. His bride show included pretty girls from Kiev. At Kazan’ at a Cossack pre-battle orgy he meets a topless dancing girl, Maria Temriukovna, a pagan and Circassian, with whom he has sex and eventually marries. At one point Ivan, tired of his current wife, offers to spare the father of a young man if the young man seduces Ivan’s current wife, so Ivan will have an excuse to ship her off to a convent.

Ivan’s political life, although cruel and savage, in which he personally participates in slaughter, and even gets wounded in the process, is nevertheless completely justified. The boyars poisoned his mother and eventually three of his wives, including Anastasia; Kurbskii hired the assassin.

7 GARDNER F. FOX, *Ivan the Terrible* (New York: Avon, 1961).

They repeatedly plan to assassinate him. Anastasia advises Ivan to gain the popularity among the people he needs to confront the boyars by conquering Kazan', a strategy that works. In Kazan' Ivan leads a cavalry charge, he and he alone makes smart military decisions despite the boyars, and he decides to spare some men from massacre because he needs workers in Kazan' for trade and wants to make Russians of Tatars. The boyars hate Ivan, but their retainers constitute the only army in Russia; the promise of booty from Kazan' induces them to open their coffers to pay for a war. The boyars controlled the soldiers of Russia because they were their retainers. The boyars, who were Ivan's vassal lords, owned the men who used the cannon and matchlocks Ivan controlled, so Ivan hired them. In 1559 Ivan defeats the Crimean Tatars for good, incorporating them into his army. Later, Novgorod boyars pay Polish mercenaries to lead a revolt, joined by other cities.

From Alexandrov, Ivan wrote letters to a thousand young men, mostly misfits and ne'er-do-wells, youngest sons of boyars unlikely ever to inherit, inviting them to join the *oprichnina* and oppose the boyars. The common people all spied for Ivan, who ordered the *oprichniki* not to touch them, only boyars. Having united Russia via necessary cruelty, Ivan no longer needs the *oprichnina* and abolishes it. Ivan defeats Poland, and Kurbskii commits suicide rather than be captured by Ivan's Cossacks.

Fact check: Fox's Ivan is both more terrible and greater than Whishaw's Ivan, even if once again a Stroganov is a boyar during Ivan's reign. Fox has no conception of how a single Muscovite elite woman would travel, let alone comport herself with a boyfriend. His sexually aggressive Maria Temriukovna fits stereotyped slander about her that did circulate at the time, a reflection of orientalism applied to Circassians, but she was of noble birth and never associated with Cossacks. No archeologist has ever found a chastity belt in Muscovy, nor would the teenage ruler Ivan have been permitted to take off alone on horseback for any purpose. Kiev was not acquired by Russia until the seventeenth century. There is a perverse consistency to Fox's Ivan. A goatee and a mustache, which Ivan never sported, better fit a lusty hunk than a full beard would. Ivan strides across Russia carrying a sword and a pistol; he carried neither.

Ivan wrote two letters to Moscow from Alexandrov, one to the elite, expressing hostility, the other to the commoners, expressing affection. Fox shares the misconception that the *oprichniki* came from the lower and less reputable classes; such a view fed Western social snobbery in the sixteenth century but in fact the social profile of the *oprichniki* matched that of the traditional Muscovite elite. In the sense Fox uses the term, there were no

“younger” sons in Muscovy; without primogeniture, all sons shared in the family property. The evidence shows definitively that the *oprichniki* did not spare the commoners. Muscovy had an army, precisely the gentry mounted archers, most living off conditional landed estates from the government. The musketeers and artillery men were not boyar retainers, but free men hired for military service.

Despite his basically evil character, Fox’s Ivan only kills real enemies who poisoned his mother and several of his wives, repeatedly tried to assassinate him and betrayed Russia to foreign enemies, but these events, Ivan’s critics insist, occurred only in Ivan’s propaganda. However, Ivan was far less successful in history than in the novel. He may have made good military decisions at Kazan’ but the Crimean Tatars burned Moscow in 1571 before they were defeated the following year, and Crimean Tatars were not incorporated into Ivan’s armies. Poland eventually defeated Muscovy in the Livonian War. Ivan never captured Kurbskii and Kurbskii did not commit suicide. Fox’s Ivan ends his reign not in disaster but in success in uniting Russia, although Russia in fact had already been unified by Ivan’s grandfather and father.

Fox makes no attempt to reconcile Ivan’s atrocities with his seemingly rational, perspicacious and successful domestic and foreign policies. Fox’s Ivan bears a more than passing similarity to Eisenstein’s; Part II of Eisenstein’s *Ivan Groznyi*, showing a terrifying Ivan destroying his and Russia’s enemies, was first viewed publicly in 1958, three years before Fox published his novel.

DOROTHY DUNNETT, *The Ringed Castle* (New York: Vintage Books, 2019).⁸

I date our third novel to its copyright date, 1971, not the date of the reprint at my disposal. Even compared to 1961, certain basic features of sixteenth-century Muscovite history had become much more widely disseminated in Anglophone publications. To be sure, the historical accuracy of subsequent novels did not necessarily reflect the increase in historical knowledge.

Dorothy Dunnett OBE (1923–2001, Order of the British Empire), a novelist (and also a painter and sculptor) from Scotland, is best known for historical fiction.⁹ *The Ringed Castle* belongs to a series of six novels set in the

8 Dorothy Dunnett, *The Ringed Castle* (New York: Vintage Books, 2019).

9 One wonders how she would have reacted to reading Stroganov’s depiction of the Scots in Whishaw’s novel.

sixteenth century focusing on the adventurer Francis Crawford of Lymond. In this novel, Lymond, with eight companions, current or former members of the Knights of the Order of St John of Jerusalem, a.k.a. the Knights of Malta or Hospitallers, seeks employment in Russia from Ivan. If paid exorbitantly and given virtually full control of the government, they will build a Russian army which will erase the effects of 200 years of backward Mongol rule, enabling Ivan to lord it over the boyars and to conquer the Crimea. Ivan tests the ability of Lymond's associates by having his musketeers storm the compound which they occupy to see how well they do; in fact they do far too well. Lymond's negotiating tactic to get his proposal taken seriously is to draw a knife and threaten to cut Adashev's throat if Ivan does not call off his minions, a tactic that succeeds. Much later Ivan and Lymond use knives against each other to liven up a chess match.

Ivan and Russia are seen through the eyes of Lymond and his associates. To them, Russia is a barbarian, unknown, ignorant and backward country, especially retarded in military affairs. The English call Ivan's diplomatic banquets, the organization of the government, the seclusion of women in the "women's quarters" (*terem*), curved swords, and the post-horse oriental. Half the Russian language is Tatar. The Tatars became Moslems before Russians became Christians. To be sure, Lymond observes that English criticisms of the ignorant, immoral Russian Orthodox Church coincide with those Henry VIII applied to the Catholic Church. Ivan is pitiful, tempestuous, and tormented, and mostly if not entirely insane. Ivan carries knives and sleeps with one under his pillow. Ivan's volatility is lethal. Even Ivan knows that he is prone to temper tantrums but consoles himself with the thought that he always recovers. Lymond believes that he can control Ivan. If necessary, should Ivan intend to turn the new army Lymond's crew will construct against Lithuania, Poland, and Livonia, fellow Christians, Lymond will use his control of that army to restrain or remove Ivan. Lymond knows that Ivan wants Baltic access and to recover Orthodox Russian lands lost to the West during the Mongol rule, but Lymond intends to finesse those plans. Of course, it is just as likely, Lymond admits, that Ivan will have him and all his friends executed. In the end, Ivan does intend to use the new army against Europe, which Lymond cannot stop. Lymond himself is luckily tricked into not returning to Russia, where he would have been executed.

Dunnett's Ivan has few characteristics in this novel other than his volatility. He is conscious of his temperamental weaknesses but rationalizes their consequences. He does possess a political program: Baltic access and irrendentism toward lost "Russian" (actually East Slavic) lands. Ivan

is overall little more than a major natural and national disaster waiting to happen. Lymond wants to save Ivan from himself and Russia from the abyss to which Ivan would send it, but in this he fails spectacularly. Ultimately Lymond acknowledges that the Russians are too obstinate and primitive to appreciate the benefits of civilization which Lymond proffers to them. Servility toward the tsar was too powerful to overcome. Ivan is now free to use Lymond's new model army as he chooses.

Fact check: Dunnett's novel personifies the ultimate Eurocentric arrogance. Ivan valued European expertise but maintained strict Russian control of those European artisans he hired.

That this Ivan would let a foreigner command his army or conduct a national cadastre of landowning to mobilize the resources to construct a military-industrial complex exceeds credibility. Russian backwardness eventually sabotages Lymond's plan to overcome Russian backwardness.

That anyone in Ivan's presence could carry a knife disregards centuries of complaints by European nobles at having to remove their swords in order to have an audience with Muscovy's ruler. Ivan did not sleep with a knife under his pillow.

LARRY TOWNSEND, *Czar! A Novel of Ivan the Terrible* (Los Angeles: L. T. Publications, 1998)¹⁰

Larry Townsend (1930–2008) was a prolific novelist, whose homophile works were sometimes published by erotic presses or his own, L.T. Publications (evidently, Larry Townsend Publications). I cannot explain a leather-fetishist sadomasochism novelist writing a novel about Ivan the Terrible but the speculation that another Larry Townsend Doppelgänger published this novel with Townsend's publishing house is not worth considering.

The novel is told after Ivan's death by the fictional Prince Dmitrii Simeonovich Marenskii, illegitimate son of Vasilii III, in his old age. His mother's first husband was Simeon von Marienburg, who had left Lithuania for Moscow with the Glinskiis. She later married Heinrich von Staden, and both converted to Orthodox Christianity. Staden's local commercial representative in Sviiazhsk was Abraham, a Jew from the Western provinces who had been in his service for many years. Only a few of his "race" resided in the western areas of Russia, because Ivan feared that Jews would contaminate Russia.

10 LARRY TOWNSEND, *Czar! A Novel of Ivan the Terrible* (Los Angeles: L. T. Publications, 1998).

Townsend's Ivan is sometimes good and sometimes bad, but even when he is good, he retains bad characteristics. Marenskii admits remorse and guilt for the many sadistic and lethal atrocities he committed (he admits to being a sadist), claiming that he had no choice but to follow the orders of the Anointed of God. Ivan hates the boyars and set up the *oprichnina*, "The Ones Who Serve," to fight them; *oprichniki* wear dogs' heads masks. When his brother's widow, now a nun, refused Ivan's rich gifts, in his rage he ordered her executed. Because of the sack of Novgorod Ivan began to be called *groznyi*. After executing bureaucrat Ivan Viskovatyi, Ivan rapes his widow, while Tsarevich Ivan rapes his older daughter. Ivan agrees with Marenskii that the *oprichnina* was too ambitious; it tried to achieve perfection of life in Muscovy too quickly and failed, as testified to by the burning of Moscow by the Crimean Tatars. Marenskii becomes convinced that Ivan is insane. When a baby he is holding urinated on him Ivan throws the infant out the window to its death. Ivan and Tsarevich Ivan celebrate their simultaneous marriages by switching bridal couches. Still, Ivan's enemies were guilty of the charges against them, so Ivan's hatred of the boyars was well-founded. According to Marenskii, anyway, Vladimir Staritskii told him that Evfrosinia Staritskaia admitted poisoning Anastasia. Ivan killed Tsarevich Ivan after finding his wife wearing only two petticoats while he was fondling and striking her.

Townsend does not hide Marenskii's prejudices. Marenskii seems astonished that Sylvester thought it immoral for a man to own slaves and describes Sylvester's book on household management as pompous and rather stupid. Marenskii declares that he had always found a man in each class worthy of friendship even among vile breeds of people such as Tatars, Livonians, Danes, Jews, and Swedes, but not among "Pollacks," Slavs, or Germans. His putative ethnic tolerance is as unreliable as his ethnographic knowledge.

In Townsend, Ivan neither destroys nor saves Russia. Although he does destroy some real enemies, he obviously also destroys the innocent as well. Ivan's goal of "perfecting" Russia remains inchoate and in any event, by Ivan's own admission, he failed to achieve it.

It is always tricky separating the point of view of a fictional narrator from that of the author, but a man who admits to being a sadist, for which he suffers no punishment, no matter how much he repents, would not seem to be worthy of much sympathy. In this Marenskii is by far a lesser offender than his half-brother.

Fact check: Townsend's translation of the "*oprichnina*" eludes me. No one called Ivan *Groznyi* in his lifetime. Townsend's interpretation of the dogs'

heads of the *oprichniki* as masks lacks source corroboration. Townsend's Ivan's fictional sexual peccadillos exceed those in Fox. Ivan treated his sister-in-law with the utmost respect. That Evfrosinia confessed to killing Anastasia must be attributed to Eisenstein's influence. Ivan never let a Jew cross Muscovy's boundary during his reign; Jews in Polatsk who came under his rule were offered the choice of baptism or death (they chose death). Townsend's creation of Jews in Russia, I would speculate, derives from the need to relate Ivan's anti-Semitism to reality; an anti-Semite with no Jews to persecute might have been considered too artificial to be credible. Townsend's "Glossary" (643-46) is fictional. For example, a *d'iak* is not literally a "servant" but a scribe.

WILLIAM NAPIER, *The Last Crusader: Ivan the Terrible* (London: Orion, 2015)¹¹

William Napier is a pseudonym of author Christopher William Napier Hart (born 1965), English novelist and journalist. As William Napier he has written seven historical novels; only *The Last Crusader* is set in Ivan's Muscovy.

The Crusaders of the title are, as in Dunnett, Knights of St. John of Jerusalem. Napier's Ivan is the bad Ivan without qualification. Ivan is insane, a tyrant who rules cruelly, but in Russia this is usual. Ivan conducts the church choir in the Dormition Cathedral with a spear. Ivan, with his damnable charisma, is the Devil Incarnate. He thinks he has second sight. His supporters are of like kind. The *oprichniki* carry dogs' heads on their horses but one of their leaders also wears an animal mask. Skuratov is an over-promoted thug. The *oprichniki* are as much enemies of Russia as the Tatars; they defend Ivan, not Russia. They kill for recreation and are attacked by the knights and Cossacks. Together they create hell in Moscow in 1571. Ivan thinks the Tatars will purify the city. He starts the celebration by setting fire to the city himself. The *oprichniki* drive the poor Muscovites to the river to drown (in a scene borrowed from Ivan's repression of Novgorod). Ivan personally launches a pogrom against all Jews and Persians, who are to be drowned in the Moscow River. Ivan stages his Moscow executions as the Tatars ride toward the city. Ivan, with the *tsarevichi* and the *oprichniki*, abandon the city as the Tatars arrive. Because all the musketeers (*strel'tsy*) were in Livonia, that left Moscow defenseless. The Tatars let Ivan and his entourage escape, knowing that they could

11 WILLIAM NAPIER, *The Last Crusader: Ivan the Terrible* (London: Orion, 2015).

catch them later. Afterward Ivan disbanded the *oprichnina* and executed the *oprichniki*, including Skuratov, for not fighting the Tatars, although he had not allowed them to fight. Even then, Ivan fantasized more and more about leading a crusade against the Muslim world. Ivan's conquest of Sibir' in western Siberia makes Russia an empire, echoing Wishaw.

Napier opines in a bibliographic note that although he has taken literary liberties and conflated events, "I have certainly not exaggerated Ivan's character." He describes de Madariaga's monograph on Ivan as "one of the most sober and scholarly of recent biographies," the most detailed and up-to-date portrait of Ivan available."¹² De Madariaga should not be held responsible for the use Napier made of her monograph.

Fact check: Ivan may have conducted a church choir, but not with a spear. Like Townsend, Napier introduces Jews into Moscow in order to demonstrate Ivan's anti-Semitism. Townsend demonizes Ivan simply by omitting mention of contradictory or exculpatory evidence. That Ivan set fire to Moscow before the Crimeans arrive at the city turns Ivan into Nero, not the first time those two were associated, but it is of course fantasy. Eurocentrism surfaces in Napier as the myth of Russian servility. Ivan did not repress the *oprichniki* for not fighting the Tatars because they did do so in 1572 at Molodi, but because they exceeded their authority and could no longer be controlled. Ivan invoked the goal of a crusade against Islam only when he wanted assistance from the Pope in ending the Livonian War. A Crusade against Islam meant against the Ottoman Empire, and Ivan scrupulously avoided angering the Sultan at almost all costs.

SEVERAL SHADES OF ERRORS

Above and beyond the historical liberties surveyed above, it is useful to enumerate the several types of historical fallacies found in these novels.

Allowances can be made for literary license if such rewriting of history serves a novelist's purpose. Fox writes that while Ivan was being kept captive by boyars, he studied secretly with the monk Daniel Sylvester, a.k.a. Father Sylvester, who smuggled books to his quarters during his boyhood. Ivan learned swordplay from Alexei Adashev, an officer in his palace guards (*streltsy*, musketeers) who then became Gentleman of the Bedchamber to

¹² ISABEL DE MADARIAGA, *Ivan the Terrible: First Tsar of Russia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

the tsar-prince, according to Dunnett, sleeping outside the door of Ivan's bedroom. In fact, during Ivan's boyhood the musketeers did not yet exist, neither Adashev nor Sylvester were probably in Moscow, no source names Adashev as Gentleman of the Bedchamber, and traditional scholarship attributes Ivan's self-education, albeit without direct documentation, mostly to Metropolitan Makarii. Besides, the Master of the Bedchamber slept at the foot of the bed inside the bedroom. However, in establishing the connections between Ivan's difficult childhood, on the one hand, and his patronage of Adashev and Sylvester and erudition on the other, this creativity can be allowed. Townsend projects onto his narrator the view that in his time reading and writing were considered unmanly. However, for any Orthodox Christian reading Holy Scripture was not "unmanly." However, for the aristocracy writing was beneath them socially.

In Whishaw, the boy Ivan says that Andrei Shuiskii would replace him if he died, as if Ivan's younger brother Iurii, handicaps and all, were not alive, but this heightens Ivan's animosity toward Shuiskii and the boyars and contributes to our understanding of Ivan's paranoia.

In Fox, the bride show was a scam to fool boyars because Ivan had already chosen Anastasia according to the sole criterion in his mind, physical beauty; Ivan wanted a woman to take to bed. This hardly matches Whishaw's presentation of Ivan's motives for selecting Anastasia as a saint. Fox and Whishaw portray Ivan in conformity with their conceptions of his character.

Townsend's Prince Iurii Vasil'evich, Ivan's brother, can hear and speak, which allows him to be full actor in the novel; I have no problem with that at all.

We would expect and would not have trouble finding projections on to Ivan's Muscovy of customs from Western Europe. In Whishaw a prospective future father-in-law of Ivan hopes to become a Minister of State; no such office or concept existed in Muscovy at the time.

According to Fox, during Ivan's 1553 illness, at Anastasia's insistence Ivan's doctors bled him. Townsend omits Anastasia's role but writes that Ivan had been bled twice in 1553. Fox and Townsend raise an intriguing question. We know that Ivan had foreign doctors who might have used bleeding to cure a patient but neither the ex post facto narrative of Ivan's 1553 illness nor any other source for Ivan's reign ever mentions bleeding and I have not seen references to bleeding as a medical practice in sixteenth-century Muscovy or even seventeenth-century Muscovy when the quantity of foreign doctors in the country rose.

In Fox, at Ivan's wedding a priest whispers a short prayer in Latin. As bad, or worse, in Napier the congregation sits in church.

Perhaps the greatest difference between the Muscovite court and all other European courts of the time was its sexual propriety; neither ruler nor boyars engaged in the sexcapades for which other courts were notorious. Not so in fiction, where not only Ivan himself is a player, which we would expect from his reputation as a lecher and sex pervert, but also his elite. In Fox, Ivan murders Melent'eva's husband and then has voluntary sex with her; later he marries her. In Dunnett the boyar Viazemskii dallied with a khan's wives, the boyar Sheremetev has mistresses, and in Scotland and England Muscovite ambassador Nepea sought solace with women. As far as Nepea is concerned, Dunnett also ascribes to him the view that the English were a barbarous nation (reversing the English view of the Russians), because only barbarians would subject themselves to a woman's "ignorant rule." This is an invention but far from far-fetched.

Fox projects medieval Europe onto Muscovy in ignoring the gentry army and restricting soldiers to the retainers of Ivan's vassal lords. Townsend goes late medieval or early modern in ascribing liveries to royal or boyar retinues, which were unknown unless we consider the black clothes of the *oprichniki* as a kind of livery. Napier asserts that the musketeers were often under European commanders of great experience, Swedes, Swiss, and Brandenburgers, another Eurocentric conceit. Europeans commanded captured European mercenary units who accepted the invitation to join Ivan's army; only Muscovite gentry commanded Muscovite musketeer units.

Townsend refers to the famous lawyer Mansurov who had drawn up Vasilii III's will, as if Muscovy had lawyers (Mansurov was a state secretary) or law schools to train them. Ironically European visitors criticized Muscovy precisely for lacking law schools and lawyers. Muscovy's social structure is not Townsend's forte. He categorizes the boyar princely Shuiskii clan as part of the elite merchant "guests" (*gosty*), which would have been a major social scandal. Townsend assumes that all boyars had commercial interests, which may be too explicit but is not entirely unimaginable.

Fox adduces anachronistic concepts into Ivan's Muscovy. Anastasia, a budding populist and democrat, taught Ivan that the people are Russia, not him, not the boyars, and Melent'eva, Ivan's last wife [sic, Nagaia], tells Ivan that he is Mother Russia's servant. Dunnet garbles otherwise contemporary concepts by calling Moscow the Second Rome but also introduces an anachronistic institution, the Kremlin's Bureau of Secret

Affairs, actually from the seventeenth century, which she associates with the nineteenth-century “third” bureau (probably the Third Section).

Simple contradictions also occur, as they do in most monographs by professional historians no matter how scrupulously they have been copyedited. Townsend writes that because of Adashev Muscovy now had the rudiments of a proper coinage system, but also asserts that Muscovy had no coins, only squirrel skins. He also ascribes gold coins to Muscovy, when only silver existed. Dunnett writes that the only armed men in Moscow were the musketeers but that all of Ivan’s advisors were sword-carrying princes, which is wrong about the social composition as well as the armament of Ivan’s advisors.

Gratuitous petty factual and narrative errors, often chronological, derive from simple ignorance and carelessness, for example, of arithmetic. According to Napier, Vasilii III died when Ivan was six (actually three). According to Fox, Ivan’s mother died when he was eleven (actually, eight). When Tsarevich Ivan was seven, his brother Fedor was two (Fedor was three years younger than Ivan). Sophia was the daughter (should be the niece) of the last Byzantine emperor, Constantine.

The holy fool Vasilii “the blessed” (*Blazhennyi*) has a legitimate role to play in any novel or indeed biography of Ivan’s life, even if we disregard the errors in his saint’s life. According to Townsend Ivan feared and disliked Vasilii, although even the *life* notes that Ivan respected Vasilii. But what purpose is served in Wishaw that Vasilii Blazhennyi threw himself into the burning Transfiguration Church (presumably in 1547) “and no man ever saw trace of him again”?

CONCLUSION

No English-language novel attempts to whitewash Ivan’s image, but their images of Ivan are not identical. With some literary license on my part, we may summarize the novelists’ presentation of Ivan as follows. To Wishaw, Ivan was half a monster but a great ruler. To Fox, Ivan was a total monster but a successful ruler. To Dunnett, Ivan was a total monster. To Townsend, Ivan was mostly a monster and by his own criteria a failure. To Napier, Ivan was an insane monster. Arguably whether Ivan succeeded or failed, saved Russia or destroyed Russia, varies among these authors, but the one concept that runs like a red thread through all five novels is that Ivan was a monster. Sometimes he has virtues, sometimes he does not, but he always

has vices, although some argue that his vices enabled him to do good for his country, the ends justifying the means. Clearly English-language novelists are no more consistent in their presentation of Ivan than Russian-language professional and amateur historians. English-language novelists do not distort Russian history much more than Russian ideologists manipulating Ivan's image for partisan purposes, and the English-language novelists have their foreignness and their status as novelists as more of an excuse. It is safe to say that Ivan continues to fascinate all audiences, within Russia and without, non-fiction readers or fiction-adepts. But we already knew that.

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