CONTEMPORARY RUSSIAN POLITICS AND HISTORY:

On Use of the Images of Peter the Great and Ivan the Terrible in Russian Political Life

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Summary:

Public life in Russia has in recent years turned much attention to heroic figures drawn from Russian national history. In particular, Peter the Great and (to a lesser extent) Ivan the Terrible have gained a new prominence in Russian political rhetoric and cultural life. These two figures have long been considered founding figures of the Russian political tradition, yet it is unclear precisely what current references to them signify. Do they represent a benign and even beneficial return to native political and historical traditions and a resurgence of patriotic interest in the past? Perhaps Peter, who is seen as a reformist and Western-oriented ruler, may be seen as a historical precedent for the present uneven turn towards the West. Perhaps, however, the celebration of these tsars, who rank among Russia’s most despotic and harsh rulers, reflects a rise in nationalist sentiment and autocratic, anti-democratic political tendencies.

The key to comprehension of the use of these figures in current Russian public life is to be found in the long tradition of symbolically charged reference to these rulers in past Russian public life under Nicholas I, Stalin, and other leaders who have raised the banner of Peter or Ivan for their own political ends.

Part 1: Posing the Problem and Some Initial Data:

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union at the beginning of this decade, Russians have been intensively seeking to build both new personal identities and a new national identity. Ten years ago being a Russian meant being a citizen of a multinational state which was (in theory if not in practice) committed to the dogmas of Soviet communist ideology. Russia itself was the dominant and privileged player in this multinational entity (which some are now calling an empire). Clearly, these concepts of self and nation are totally unsuited to the post-Soviet world, where being a Russian is no longer synonymous with being a communist, where Russia is a single nationally heterogeneous state among other such states. In the search for new, more viable concepts of self and nation, Russian cultural and political actors have turned to their national history as a resource which can provide a renovated conception of personal and group identity. Discovering “who we were” is seen as a means to learn “who we are and should be.” Contemporary Russian political and social institutions are seeking a foundation for their own authority in the authority of the “mythic” institutions and figures of Russia’s past.

In the NCEEER reports, I seek to illuminate the present significance of two specific Russian historical figures, Ivan IV, or the Terrible (1547–1584) and Peter I, or the Great (1682–1725), who are central to the Russian conception of the origin and nature of the Russian state. My investigation is based,
however, not primarily on examination of current Russian cultural and political life, but rather on an
examination of the significance that these historical figures held in the political and cultural life of
previous eras: during the rise of historiography in the nineteenth century; and during the Stalinist era.

Comprehension of the range of significance pertinent to these figures, of the “uses to which they have
been put” in the past makes possible a full understanding of their meaning for Russians at present and of
the political uses which they are now serving in Russian public life. In many ways, the contemporary
deployment of these figures in Russian political life is symptomatic of broader currents in contemporary
Russian political life, and an ability to “read” these symptoms may aid in diagnosis of the health or illness
of the Russian body politic in general.

I will begin with a few representative examples of reference to Peter the Great and Ivan the Terrible
taken from contemporary Russia. Consider the widespread, semi-serious practice of referring to Russian
President Yeltsin as Boris the First — a practice common both among the president’s political supporters
and among various opposition groups. The epithet “the First,” while clearly clothing Yeltsin in
“monarchist” language, certainly does not unequivocally equate Yeltsin with Peter I, for there are also
Alexander I and Nicholas I to be considered.

Yet, for various reasons, Peter I is the most salient and “felt” reference of this practice. Peter I was the
only Russian ruler to bear that epithet during his lifetime — a conscious departure from tradition, for one
generally becomes identified as “First” only in reference to a “Second.” For Peter, the epithet
symbolically conveyed not only and not primarily his place in the dynastic order, but rather his self-
proclaimed role as creator of the Russian Empire and founder of a new political epoch — first ruler of a
new era. This latter significance, clearly, lies at the base of the application of this epithet to Yeltsin, who
also has assumed the role of initiator of a new epoch of social and political life.

A second “prominent” example of the present resonance of Peter the Great in Russia is to be found in
the monument to him, designed by Zurab Tseretelli, which was erected at the end of 1996 and the start of
1997 on the banks of the Moscow River, not far from the Kremlin. The monument rises to a height of 90
meters (approaching the size of the Statue of Liberty) and thus, looms over the central regions of the city.
It depicts Peter standing at the helm of a ship, facing the West — a transparent symbolic representation
of his pursuit of technological and cultural contact with the West by means of the conquest of coastal
regions and the establishment of seaports (including his new capital St. Petersburg), and also of Russia’s
first navy and merchant marine. The erection of this monument provoked extensive criticism and debate
in the Moscow press concerning the meaning of the heritage of Peter the Great for contemporary Russia,
to which I will return in the last of this set of three reports. For now, one may simply note that the
monument, like Yeltsin’s monarchist “nickname” Boris I, evokes the reforms and foreign-policy initiative
of the era of Peter the Great as a precedent and model for Russia’s current period of transformation and reintegration with the Western world.

For a third example of contemporary reference to Russian history, consider the recent history of Russia’s symbols of state. In the early 1990s, Russian governing bodies approved a new set of symbols which reflect rather heterogeneous historical precedents. The new flag is a tricolor, in the tradition of republican symbolism to which belong, among others, the American and French flags. The new seal, on the other hand, is a two-headed eagle, in the tradition of the Russian Empire, and in its exact particulars harking back to the seal of Imperial Russia of Peter the Great.

In April 1997, the Communist faction of the lower house of the Russian parliament, the Duma, proposed to change these symbols again: now to a simple red flag and a hammer-and-sickle seal. In the debates of the Duma concerning this proposal (which was rejected) its Communist authors explained not only the importance of the reclaiming of a part of the symbolism of the Soviet Union, but also that the red flag is a traditional Russian banner, dating back to the red banners which, ostensibly, Ivan the Terrible bore in his battles against Russia’s medieval foes.

Once again, in the establishment of new state symbols and in the debates surrounding them we see the relevance of Imperial Russian models, in this case including both Peter the Great and Ivan the Terrible, for the framing of current Russian political life. To these examples may be added a list of other references to Ivan and Peter in contemporary Russia, including new literary works, films and works of historiography, republication of classic literary and historiographical works, uses in advertising (a Vodka has been named after Ivan, while two brands of cigarettes bear the name Peter the Great), commemorative postage stamps, a new high-tech battleship “Peter the Great.”

As should be clear from these examples, these figures, especially Peter the Great, carry a great deal of significance in the current Russian consciousness of national history: they are currently among the most prominent and recognizable images of the Russian past. But what is the exact significance of the elevation of these figures from Imperial Russian history as models for current political and public life and as the bearers of symbolic authority for the present Russian state? What does it mean when Yeltsin compares himself to Peter the Great? What does it mean when the Communists, somewhat counter to our expectations for ostensibly leftist politicians, select the autocrat Ivan the Terrible as a glorious figure worthy of present emulation? Should we applaud Russia’s return to the authentic roots of its national political tradition, and in particular the celebration of Peter the Great, a Western-minded reformer? Might such a mythical figure provide a secure symbolic foundation for the current still relatively pro-Western and reform-minded Russian government? Should we be concerned that Russians, after a brief period of orientation toward the Western political tradition for models of current political life, have returned to their autocratic native tradition, celebrating figures such as Peter the Great and Ivan the Terrible, who rank
among Russia’s most heavy-handed and despotic rulers? Does the celebration of these figures signals a resurgence of nationalistic sentiment in Russia?

There are no simple answers to these questions. Peter the Great, in particular, is a complicated historical figure who may be used to signify openness to the West, but who may also represent autocratic might and bloody suppression of dissent as surely as does Ivan the Terrible. In order to “read” current uses of these figures, one must study the complex range of possible significances that they evoke, and their complex history in Russian political rhetoric. The function of these figures in the present can only be understood properly in the context of their function in Russian public life during the reign of Stalin, who celebrated both Peter the Great and Ivan the Terrible as “glorious predecessors.” To this historical precedent, which is still within living memory, one may add as well the representations of Ivan and Peter in classical historical texts and literature, which carry tremendous authority in Russian cultural life.

These past evocations of Peter and Ivan in Russian public life, I would argue, cast their shadow on the current elevation of these figures as national heroes. In the rest of this report, I will concisely review the history of representations of the two rulers in Russian public life. In a subsequent and final report, “Contemporary Heroes or Contemporary Despots?,” I will return to consideration of the uses to which these images of Russia’s great and despotic rulers are being put in the current era and to analysis of the present state of Russian political discourse.
The Legacy of Peter the Great and Ivan the Terrible in Russian Politics and Culture:

Overview:

In order to comprehend the significance of the current fascination with Peter the Great and to a lesser extent, Ivan the Terrible in Russian public life, the current report is devoted to investigation of the history of representation of Peter the Great and Ivan the Terrible in Russian politics and culture. During the past three centuries these two Russian rulers have been seen sometimes as bloody and cruel despots and sometimes as heroic reformers and military leaders of great genius. This odd dual tradition in interpretation is due to the function of these figures in Russian history as founders of the modern Russian political tradition. Those inclined to disparage this tradition have represented one or both of these leaders as a despot, those inclined to celebrate it have elevated one or both as a hero.

Their position at the mythical origins of the Russian political tradition has granted them longstanding prominence in political rhetoric. As founding figures, they have frequently been taken as positive or negative models for later political figures; subsequent Russian leaders who have been publicly compared to Ivan or Peter include: Catherine II (the Great), Nicholas I, Stalin, and finally, Yeltsin. In political discourse, these figures have acquired a relatively stable set of possible associative meanings. In nationalistic and chauvinistic Russian political rhetoric, Peter and Ivan serve as glorious illustrations of Russia’s claims to Great Power status in world politics, and in particular, in European politics. In progressive political rhetoric, Peter (but not Ivan) serves as an example for pro-Western and reformist initiatives in Russian social and economic life. Comprehension of these multiple uses of these historical figures in Russian political rhetoric enables observers of current Russian political life to analyze the significance of the contemporary references to these two rulers, which is the task of my NCEEER research reports.

Looking Closer:

As I have indicated previously, the figure of Peter the Great and, to a lesser extent, that of Ivan the Terrible have recently assumed a certain prominence in Russian political and cultural life. Yet to understand the use of the figures in present Russian public life, it is essential to understand the uses to which they have been put in past periods in Russia. The study of this “prehistory” of current Russian political rhetoric is the topic of the present report.

To begin, it must be remarked that interpretations of Ivan the Terrible and Peter the Great have been remarkably fluid during recent centuries in Russia. On the one hand, many have celebrated one or both of
them as the glorious founder(s) of Modern Russian political and social life. One may recall the Hegelian Konstantin Kavelin’s declaration in the 1840s concerning the period he saw stretching from the middle of the sixteenth century to the beginning of the eighteenth: “This transitional epoch of our history — the dawn of the new and the sunset of the old, . . . is set off from what preceded it and what followed it by the two greatest figures of Russian history, Ivan IV and Peter I.”¹ On the other hand, many have denounced these same two figures as despots, or even anathematized them as evil incarnate. Here one may cite the father of Russian historiography, Nikolai Karamzin, who condemned Ivan as the “baneful Angel of Darkness for Russians, red with the sacred blood of the innocent,”² and who also (less colorfully) remarked that Peter’s “passion for foreign customs surely exceeded the bounds of reason. . . . By uprooting ancient customs . . . the sovereign of the Russians humbled Russian hearts. Does humiliation predispose a man to great deeds?”³ From the frequency and prominence of these two figures in Russian investigations of the national past (the list of treatments of the two is simply endless) it is clear that they have always been integral to the Russian conception of national history. Yet what is their precise significance for this collective self-conception, given their oddly indeterminate and contested nature?

The vision of Ivan IV most familiar to the Western reader falls into what I will term the despotic interpretive tradition. According to this tradition Ivan was a bloodthirsty and murderous ruler — as many would have it, a psychotic. In order to break his subjects to his exaggerated (perhaps even irrational) notion of the absolute power of the autocrat, he resorted to cruel measures and political terror which resulted in mass suffering and a great loss of life. While many of his policies were innovative and had long-term historical significance for later Russian political institutions, his historical legacy is largely negative in nature, contributing to the enduring tendency in Russia towards extreme concentrations of power and diminished respect for individual autonomy. By this interpretation Ivan, who was the first Moscow prince to have himself crowned as “tsar” (from the lat. “Caesar”) epitomizes the dangers inherent in the late medieval Russian system of absolute autocracy, which recognized no means of curbing the excesses of corrupt rulers.

To place this historical vision into its own historical perspective, the “raw material” of this notion of the first Russian tsar appears to date to the late sixteenth or early seventeenth centuries, possibly to the era of Ivan himself, when the image of Ivan as a bloodthirsty despot seems to have been generated by Ivan’s political opponents and victims. It found its expression in the (likely apocryphal) correspondence of Ivan the Terrible and Andrei Kurbsky, in chronicle accounts and other religious texts, the accounts of foreign travelers, as well in the folkloric tradition. In the late seventeenth century this view of Ivan circulated among the aristocratic elite, who were interested in somehow bridling the growing absolute power of the Russian autocracy.⁴
The notion of Ivan as a despot and example of the negative potential of Russia’s political system found expression in historiography only much later in the work of Karamzin, considered Russia’s first “official historian,” who based his judgments on these same materials. Karamzin conceptualized world history as the unfolding of divine providence, and he placed the mature Ivan in the camp of unholy historical forces. Karamzin describes Ivan’s political terrors as an “alien storm, somehow sent from the depths of hell to plague and torment Russia.” Such an interpretation of Ivan was followed in its evaluative position by a series of subsequent historians, and by some twentieth-century commentators as well. Of course, later historians have relied on non-providential concepts of history, providing instead psychological or developmental explanations of his bloody policies as the result of psychosis or the conditions of his upbringing.

The currently most familiar representation of Peter I presents a marked contrast to this despotic conception of Ivan. I will refer to this common vision of Peter as the heroic tradition of historical interpretation. In this tradition, Peter is seen as the motive force in a redemptive and well-nigh revolutionary recreation of the Russian state, military, society, cultural life, etc. in the image of the most advanced Western nations of his era. (Chancellor G. Golovkin, in a celebrated speech of 1721, proclaimed that Peter had brought the Russian people “from non-existence to existence.”)

According to this interpretative scheme, although Peter’s political and domestic initiatives were often predicated on extreme measures which caused much suffering, they were justified by the progressive significance of the overall project of the Petrine era, which brought Russia forward into a new and more enlightened epoch. Extreme versions of this vision of Peter credit him with the introduction of Russia to modernity, a feat which is seen as legitimating the human costs and coercive means of governance during Peter’s reign.

The conception of Peter as a hero has its initiation in the official rhetoric of the first emperor’s reign. Later, it formed the core of the historical rhetoric of the Official Nationality of Nicholas I (1825–1855) (Count E. Krankin, Nicholas’s minister of finance, is supposed to have suggested that “if [they] consider[ed] the matter thoroughly, then, in justice, [they] must be called not Russians, but Petrovians”).

One may also mention as illustrative of nineteenth-century views of Peter, the Romantic philosophical works of Chaadaev, who wrote that: “All that Peter the Great found at home was a sheet of white paper and, in his powerful handwriting, he wrote on it the words ‘Europe’ and ‘The West.’”

The Westernizers celebrated Peter’s “transformation” of Russia as the salvation of a “backwards” nation. “Scientific” historians of mid-nineteenth century, such as the Hegelians Kavelin and Solov’ev continued to celebrate the genius of the tsar-reformer as a champion of progress who fought to modernize Russia. Following a brief eclipse after the October revolution, this view again came into vogue during the
“Soviet imperial” 1930s and 1940s, during which Peter was promoted to the rank of forerunner to Stalin in the latter’s struggle for technical progress and in his military genius.9

At this point I raise a question which has likely already occurred to the reader. Given the considerable contrast between these accepted interpretations of Peter the Great and Ivan the Terrible, why analyze them together at all? The answer: they have not appeared so considerably distinct from one another to all observers. In fact, Russian visions of these two rulers during the last two centuries have been connected by an odd similitude. On one hand, a competing tradition in the treatment of Ivan relies on something very similar to the heroic model of interpretation I have outlined in connection with Peter. By this scheme, Ivan is comprehended as an illustrious predecessor to Peter, motivated by similar goals of social and political modernization, increased commerce with the West, the conquest of seaports and the fostering of technological advance and general enlightenment.10 The bloodshed and excesses of his reign are seen as the unavoidable byproducts of a heated political struggle with reactionary forces, resistant to change and determined to hold back the march of progress.

Like the notion of Peter’s role as transformer, the earliest account of Ivan’s reign appears to date to Peter’s reign, when it arose out of the first Emperor’s search for predecessors. This view of Ivan may be found in a weak form, lacking the claim of continuity between Ivan and Peter, in the works of eighteenth-century historians who viewed Ivan’s policies as necessary measures to strengthen the autocracy.

“Statist” historians of the nineteenth century, such as K. D. Kavelin and S. M. Solov’ev, viewed the terrible tsar’s excesses as reflections of the “rational” and “progressive” struggle of the state against the conservative boyar caste and formulated the correspondence between Ivan and Peter explicitly.

Kavelin, for instance, pronounced in 1846 that “in fact, the reign of Peter was a continuation of the reign of Ivan.”11 This view further evolved in the early twentieth century, when Soviet historians cast Ivan IV’s policies as motivated by the transition from feudal to imperial political structures or, in the version of the dean of early Soviet historiography M. N. Pokrovskii, from an agrarian to a merchant-capital economy. This approach reached its apogee in the work of official historians of the 1930s and 1940s, most notably R. Iu. Wipper, who saw a “great predecessor” to Stalin in Ivan IV — a far-sighted military genius devoted to the creation and defense of a strong state who used terror as a calculated response to treasonous conspiracies.12

In an analogous, yet converse, interconnection of the two figures and the interpretive stances associated with them, a competing tradition in the historical comprehension of Peter the Great has relied on something very much akin to the despotic model I have described in connection with Ivan the Terrible.
Here, one must first mention the well-known and very long-lived sectant and Old Believer view that Peter was the antichrist, a view which fed on Peter’s radical institutional innovations and coercive policies, and on official rhetoric which elevated the first Emperor to the status of earthly god. (One may recall the declaration of Lomonosov, a prominent eighteenth-century man of letters, that “if you must find a man like unto God, according to our understanding, you will find none but Peter the Great.”) This extreme, sectant vision of Peter, which insists on the apocalyptic finality of his destruction of the Russian faith and the world that it sustained, corresponds in general contours, if not in hyperbolic degree, to the vision of Peter that may be found in the historical works of M. M. Shcherbatov and Karamzin, the latter of which I have cited in my introductory remarks above. These historians, although recognizing the great importance of Peter’s reforms for the creation of Modern Russia, condemned him for his despotic methods and radical innovations, which they saw as a damaging break in the transmission of cultural values.

Amplifying and modifying this view, Slavophile thinkers, like Konstantin Aksakov, in their search for the mythical past of the Russian nation, viewed the Petrine reforms as a demolition of a virtuous Old Russia and as the wellspring of the modern vices of bureaucratic rule and the associated alienation of “the people” from the gentry. The historiography of the early Soviet period also tended to see Peter as an “asiatic” despot whose grandiose projects presented huge costs in loss of life and livelihood for Russians, although the enlightenment sympathies of Marxist thought also tended to stress the important “progressive” development of Russia under Peter. (According to Lenin, Peter did not refrain “from using barbaric means to fight barbarism”).

Based on this balance in the Russian tradition between despotic and heroic interpretative stances towards Ivan and Peter one may further identify a third tendency, which offers a synthetic combination of the twin interpretive possibilities offered by Peter or Ivan — a composite view in which progressive reforms are seen as tempered or rendered partially illegitimate by the despotic methods which achieved them. Such a view is to be found in the pragmatic historian V.O. Kliuchevsky’s treatment of Peter or in the mature pre-revolutionary writings of Kliuchevsky’s student Pavel Miliukov. The great poet A. S. Pushkin’s views on Peter, expressed most famously in his narrative poem The Bronze Horseman, but apparent in the notes and drafts of his unfinished history of Peter, also appear to correspond to this synthetic position.

Some less conformist historians of the Stalinist vogue for Ivan, such as S. V. Bakhrushin, attempted to offer a correspondingly nuanced view of Ivan in contrast to the out-and-out celebratory works which epitomize the official late Stalinist versions of history. With regard to Ivan this nuanced position is most well-known in Sergei Eisenstein’s uncompleted film trilogy, Ivan the Terrible, which, arguably, exploded the Stalinist rehabilitation of the premodern autocrat.
Now, how do we account for this interconnection of the interpretive strategies that have been adopted in Russian historiography with regard to Ivan the Terrible and Peter the Great? From the above review of Russian historiographical traditions, it is clear that one constant factor in all interpretations of Ivan and Peter is the notion that they occupy a middle space between the medieval or premodern epoch and the modern era. They are both transitional figures in the narrative of Russian history as a whole. This, I propose, accounts for the basic similarities in the interpretive schemes that have been applied to them. In short, the congruence in historical visions of Peter and Ivan suggests that historical reflection regarding them has drawn on a common set of approaches which are viewed by interpreters of Russian history as appropriate to this sort of transitional figure.

While the concept of a progressive ruler whose excesses are legitimated by the necessity of instituting change is commonly applied to Peter, for instance, it is also available for the interpretation of Ivan, as Solov’yev’s application of the progressive model to both rulers demonstrates. Similarly, while Ivan’s tyrannical nature is commonly seen as a holdover of the medieval past, which ironically undercut his political initiatives, this same stance may be applied as well to Peter, as Karamzin shows by the congruence of his analyses of the two figures. Finally, the synthetic position of historians like Miliukov or cultural figures like Pushkin and Eisenstein may project the dual nature of Peter and Ivan, who must destroy in order to create, and who are both heirs to the past and creators of the future, as the fundamental material of an ironical and complex vision of modernity.16

A further consequence of Ivan’s and Peter’s transitional roles is their great importance in later Russian political ideologies, and the resulting political significance of historical interpretations of their reigns. Most theorists of historiography recognize that present political circumstances are always implicated in historical interpretation, despite stock gestures towards objective detachment. However, I would propose that in the cases of Peter and Ivan this connection is operative to a greater extent than in the general case. These two figures presided over the mythic end of Old Russia and inception of Modern Russia. They stand in the Russian historical imagination as markers dividing past reality from present reality. The historian’s assessment of the present cannot but influence the assessment of these figures, who are so intimately connected to its creation.

For some, Peter and his policies, and to a lesser extent Ivan and his undertakings, may be seen to represent the modern era which they are thought to have brought into being, whether that era is evaluated positively, negatively, or in complex, synthetic manner. For others, the despotic impulses and autocratic legacy attributed to Ivan, and to a lesser extent to Peter, may be seen as last representatives of the premodern past which formally disappeared in their epochs, yet the traces of which may still be seen (or recalled in a nostalgic key) in Modern Russia — once again, with varying emphases corresponding to different evaluations of the transition to modernity.
The most telling evidence of the multiple metaphorical significance of these two figures is to be observed in the frequency with which later political leaders and epochs have been identified with them, both positively and negatively. Catherine the Great, who conceived of herself as an heir to Peter’s legacy and who is compared to Peter in countless odes, is a notable early example. Nicholas I similarly conceived of himself as a latter-day Peter and encouraged this conception among his flatterers. (While working on his History of Peter the Great, the journalist N. A. Polevoi wrote in a letter: “I will tell you here of my most private idea: the history of the last ten years has revealed to us the secret of Peter’s great, great grandson — of Him, Who ascended the throne exactly one hundred years later [1725-1825]. We know Who is reincarnate in Him” — that is, in Nicholas I).17

However, in contrast, the late nineteenth-century critic N. K. Mikhailkov hinted at a critical identification of the same Nicholas I with Ivan. In the twentieth century, Stalin has been compared in celebratory terms with both Peter and Ivan (R. Iu. Vipper described the era of Ivan IV as the “prototype of the great multinational state of the USSR,”18). Yet others have made these same comparisons in order to demonstrate Stalin’s archaic cruelty and absolutist tendencies. Finally, one may mention the contemporary fashion of identifying Boris Yeltsin with Peter the Great. In the mode of political eulogy, the comparison of Nicholas or Stalin with Peter, or less frequently with Ivan, serves to connect the present with its glorious origins. In the mode of denunciation, the comparison with Ivan, and more rarely with Peter, serves to vilify the legacy of the hated past. And once again, more complex works may take advantage of both possibilities, as, for instance, Pushkin’s Stanzas of 1826 to Nicholas I, in which he encourages Nicholas, fresh from the bloody suppression of the Decembrist revolt, to emulate Peter who also began his reign with executions, yet who grew into a great enlightener:

In hope of glory and of bliss
I glance ahead without misgiving:
The start of Peter’s glorious days
Was dark with riot and execution.

By truth, though, he attracted hearts,
By learning, though, he gentled manners,

... Be proud, then, of the kinship resemblance;
In all be like unto the forebear:
Like him unfa1tering and firm,
And in memory, like him, unspiteful.19
Thus, because of their crucial position in narratives of Russian history, the interpretation of Peter and Ivan has for centuries stood in a clear and close relationship with Russian political life and of Russian conceptions of nationhood. Treatments of Ivan and Peter by successive generations of Russians reveal the contours of a longstanding debate about the nature of historical progress, political authority and the Russian national character. This debate has been most intense during periods characterized by autocratic modes of governance, such as the reign of Catherine II in the eighteenth century, of Nicholas I in the nineteenth and the Stalinist period in the twentieth. During these periods those inclined to celebrate the Russian state have relied on what I have termed the heroic interpretive tradition to elevate Peter, and sometimes Ivan, as emblems of the Russian national character and evidence that strong and centralized power is the key to national prosperity and historical progress.

Of course, slightly different aspects of the historical mythology of Peter and Ivan have received emphasis in different periods, in consonance with current political needs. Thus, during the fundamentally conservative reign of Nicholas I, these figures were seen more as foundational leaders responsible for shaping an ideal Modern Russia to be perpetuated and defended by his heirs. On the other hand, during the Stalinist rehabilitations of Ivan and Peter the two have assumed the character of revolutionaries who destroyed in order to create and who are to be emulated precisely in their fearless and ruthless pursuit of innovation. The degree to which the martial exploits of the two are emphasized is subject to similar variation. Military might is undeniably present in Nicholas I’s myth of Peter I, yet it reaches an undeniable apogee in the Stalinist vision of both Peter and Ivan as champions of Russian international power in the face of the onslaught of Western forces, determined to “keep Russia down.” In these official celebrations of Peter and Ivan, the two function as illustrations of Russia’s claim to great power status in Europe and the world. However, the same orientation towards the West has also been claimed in a less martial key by some nineteenth-century interpreters of Peter, who saw in his “admiration for Europe” and desire for increased commerce and economic parity a lesson concerning the commonality of Russia’s fate with that of Western Europe.

Simultaneously with this use of Ivan and Peter to broadcast official attitudes toward national character and political authority, those seeking to dispute successive autocratic regimes in Russia have been able to rely on the same figures to communicate their views. In contrast to the official view, however, this latter group has been able to rely on the despotic interpretive tradition or on the nuanced view of the synthetic position to present their views on Russia’s national and political character, on the abuses of autocratic authority and on the need to seek some alternative course for national political life. Once again, this oppositional view of these figures has varied with political circumstances. For some the denunciation of Peter or Ivan’s innovations serves to illustrate the need for a return to an even earlier national tradition, which has been imagined variously as an idyllic era of just and religiously
circumscribed monarchy (in the works of the nineteenth-century Slavophiles) or as a somehow pre-democratic society which would have persisted and developed had it not been for the excesses of its rulers.

**Conclusion:**

In general, one may conclude that images of Peter I and Ivan IV have been key tools for the communication of Russian political culture in official propaganda and in oppositional discourse. And for that reason, for the historian and the political analyst the study of these images can serve to illuminate the contours and development of that political culture. As nationalistic and autocratic political movements have risen over the course of the last three centuries in Russia, they have regularly raised the banner of the great national hero Peter the Great. In cases of extreme national chauvinism, such as the late Stalinist period, they have elevated Ivan the Terrible as well. It is with this long perspective on the significance of these figures in Russian political rhetoric that one must turn to analysis of the present vogue for these historical figures. This interpretation of current public life in light of Russia’s past experience is the topic of my next and final research report, “Contemporary Heroes or Contemporary Despots?”

**Endnotes:**

1. K. D. Kavelin, “Vzgliad na iuridicheskii byt drevnei Rossii,” in his Sobranie sochinenii, 4 vols. (St. Petersburg, n.d.), 1: 9–66, cited on p. 46. All translations in this report are mine, unless otherwise noted.


9. Stalin, in one of his few public statements on Peter the Great, denied the validity of this historical parallel in particular and of historical analogies in general. Yet the widespread elevation of Peter in the thirties and forties as ideal leader could not but be viewed as related to the elevation of Stalin himself. See I. V. Stalin, “Beseda s nemetskim pisatelem Emilem Luidvigom,” in his *Sochineniia*, 13 vols. (Moscow, 1949–1953), 13: 104–23, esp. 104–5.


15. For a fuller account of this reading of Eisenstein’s films, see Platt and Brandenberger, “Terribly Romantic.”

16. For interpretation of Pushkin’s *Bronze Horseman* as just such a complex representation of modernity, see Iu. M. Lotman, “Zamysel stikhotvoreniia o poslednom dne Pompei,” in *Pushkin: Biografiia pisatel’ia; Stat’i i zametki*; “Evgenii Onegin” — *kommentarii* (St. Petersburg, 1995), 293–99, esp. 295. For an early vision of the Petrine era as just such an awakening to the complexity of modernity, see my *History in a Grotesque Key: Russian Literature and the Idea of Revolution* (Stanford, 1997), 30–65.

17. The letter was addressed to the head of the Third Division (Nicholas’s Security and Intelligence Service) A. Kh. Benkendorf. Polevoi’s rhetorically obtuse and rather mystically inspired idea is that the enthronement of Nicholas I one hundred years after the death of Peter I serves as evidence of the close identification of the two emperors. The emphases are in the original. Cited in M. K. Lemke, *Nikolaevskie zhandarmy i literatura 1826–1855: Po podlinnym delam Tret’ego otdeleniia Sobstv. E.I. Velichestva kantseliarii*, 2d ed. (St. Petersburg, 1909), 102.
