The limits of Muscovite autocracy

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CORNELIA SOLDAT

THE LIMITS OF MUSCOVITE AUTOCRACY

The relations between the Grand Prince and the boyars in the light of Iosif Volotskii's *Prosvetitel'*

What I want to cover under the issue of “the relations between the Grand Prince and the boyars” is the problem of absolute or autocratic power of Muscovite rulers in the sixteenth century and the powerlessness of their boyars, calling themselves their “slaves.”¹ Since Sigismund Herberstein's sixteenth-century assessment it was a common assumption in European Muscovitica that the Muscovite tsar ruled as a “master,” and by implication “tyrant,” over his subjects who referred to themselves as his slaves (russ. *kholopy*) and were to appear at his court every day in order to prostrate themselves before him. As Marshall Poe has recently shown, no Western book on Muscovy lacks this description of the allegedly patrimonial and cruel relationship between tsar and boyars.² In the eighteenth century, Montesquieu described Muscovite Tsarism as despotism, and in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries the regalian salutation “*kholop*” advanced to a full patrimonial theory of Muscovite society holding that in Early Modern times the rulers imposed seigniorial authority, making themselves masters, “*gosudar'*,” and their subjects

1. The term first appeared in writing in the letter of the namestnik Fedor Khovanskii to Ivan III: “Gosudariu velikomu kniaziu Vasil'eviche vseia Rusi kholop tvoi Fedorets Khovanskoi,” n° 23, p. 81, in Gennadii F. Karpov, “Pamiatniki diplomaticheskikh snoshenii moskovskogo gosudarstva s Krimskoiu i Nagaisoiu ordami s Turtsiei,” *Sbornik imperatorskogo russkogo istoricheskogo obshchestva*, 41 (1885). It is also reported by the German ambassadors to Muscovy, Adam Olearius and Sigismund von Herberstein. See Adam Olearius, *Moskowitzische und Persische Reise* (Berlin, 1959): 102; *Moscovia von Herrn Sigmund Freiherrn zu Herberstein Neypeg und Guettenhag*, aus d. Lat. übertr. v. Wolfram von den Steinen, eingel. u. hrsg. von Hans Kauders (Erlangen, 1926): 100.

2. Marshall Poe, “What Did Russians Mean When They Called Themselves ‘Slaves of the Tsar’?,” *Slavic Review*, 57:3 (1998): 585-608, here 595ff.

“slaves.”³ However, Poe points to a misunderstanding of these terms within Western scholarship. In Muscovy the terms “*gosudar’* and *kholop*” did not mean “master and slave” in a patrimonial sense but “sovereign and humble servant,” and in correlation with foreigners thus stressed — quite successfully — not the humility of the subjects, but the overlordship and power of the sovereign.⁴ I suggest, however, that the meaning was not solely fictional, as Poe wants it understood. I contend that in calling themselves the “slaves” of the sovereign, members of the ruling Muscovite elite underwent a kind of *kenosis* (russ. *podvig*), humiliating themselves in the face of the sovereign/God. In calling themselves “slaves” the Muscovite boyars performed an imitation of Christ, which stressed their position as powerful co-rulers in a complex social system of government. But as the concept of *kenosis* is an Orthodox one, Western onlookers were unlikely to understand it. So the picture of the rulership of the tsar we most commonly find in scholarship is that of an autocratic or absolutist ruler.

In recent scholarship, three terms are used for the power of the ruler, namely “absolute,” “autocratic” or “self-ruling,” *samoderzhavnyi*. Apart from schools and influences, the three terms seem to be used as synonyms, mostly unconsciously, but in the case of Marxist and esp. Soviet historiography consciously.⁵ Terminology usually depends on the scholar’s discourse. The term “autocratic” is used by a Byzantine influenced school who, following Dmitrii Obolenskii, claims that the autocratic power of the Muscovite rulers was modeled after the power of the Byzantine emperor.⁶ Thus, autocracy is defined by Gustave Alef as “authority, unencumbered by constitutional or traditional limitations” and “generally accompanied by a claim of divine sanction.”⁷

The term “absolute” or “absolutism” is used by those who claim that this kind of power is influenced by common Western thought and came to Russia together with Renaissance thought during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.⁸ Hans-Joachim Torke states that absolutism developed in Russia in the seventeenth century and

3. *Ibid.*: 596f. with an account of the secondary sources. On Herberstein’s role in this process see also O. F. Kudriavcev, “‘Ugnetennye chrezvychainym rabstvom.’ Ob odnom stereotipe vospriiatii russkikh evropeitsami pervoi poloviny XVI v.,” *Drevniaia Rus’. Voprosy medievistiki*, 3:9 (2002): 24-29.

4. M. Poe, *art. cit.*: 603.

5. Hans-Joachim Torke, “Die Entwicklung des Absolutismus-Problems in der sowjetischen Historiographie seit 1917,” *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, 21 (1973): 493-508; idem, “Die neuere Sowjethistoriographie zum Problem des russischen Absolutismus,” *Forschungen zur osteuropäischen Geschichte*, 20 (1973): 113-133.

6. This is overestimated by Marc Raeff, “An Early Theorist of Absolutism: Joseph of Volokolamsk,” *American Slavic and East European Review*, 8 (1949): 77-89, who on p. 83 calls the power of Vasilii III “caesaropapist” and compares him directly to Byzantine rulers. But unlike Byzantine rulers, Muscovite rulers did not get the minor orders during their coronation.

7. Gustave Alef, “The Origins of Muscovite Autocracy. The Age of Ivan III,” *Forschungen zur osteuropäischen Geschichte*, 39 (1986): 10.

8. E.g. M. Raeff, *art. cit.*: 77f.

culminated in Peter the Great's "autocratic absolutism."⁹ This is quite specific, and Torke knows how to use his terms. Nonetheless, he does not really help to solve the problem of defining and dividing the terms accurately.

The third term seems to be used by those who wanted to exclude the problem of influence and therefore use a Russian term, *samoderzhavnyi*, self-ruling. Nineteenth-century Russian scholars describe autocracy as "a form of government which concentrates the entire power of the state in the hands of one man — the tsar, king, emperor — in such a manner that no power exists in the state above him or of equal rank."¹⁰ His power was "indivisible, constant, sovereign [*derzhavna*], sacred, inviolate, responsible to nobody, omnipresent, and the source of any state power."¹¹ This is the same definition we find in later scholars' definitions of Russian autocracy of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. By defining autocracy in would-be terms of sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, scholars could claim that there is a continuity between old and new times in the way power is wielded: all Russian rulers ruled *samoderzhavno*, hence there is no need for a constitution. However, if we look at the two quotations from tsarist scholarship we find them not as clear as they could be. In particular, the second quotation makes ample use of adjectives that can be used synonymously, and that cloud the term autocracy more than they define it. The autocrat and his power stay in some diffuse, omnipotent sphere that words cannot describe and scholars cannot define properly. The definition becomes kind of apophatic in talking around the matter.

However, what is particularly interesting about these definitions is that since the nineteenth century, little has changed, and Alef does not differ significantly from Tikhomirov. If we modern scholars try to define the autocratic power of a Muscovite tsar, we still write in a discourse of nineteenth-century state theory and not in our own, contemporary discourse. Instead of following a nineteenth-century agenda by repeating these attempts to define autocracy, we ought to go back to the sources to understand what rulership meant to the Muscovites in Medieval times.

I do not plan to solve the problem of terminology here. I simply use it as a starting point for discussing the issues we face when trying to define the powers of rulers and ruled in Muscovite Russia. The questions are still acute: what kind of power did the rulers possess?

All the terms described above have one thing in common: they are used to define the power of a Muscovite ruler as presented in written sources. This power seems to have been unlimited by definition and by laws. Most scholars agree on the unlimited nature of a Medieval Russian ruler's power. However, Daniel Rowland in his article "Did Muscovite Ideology Place Limits on the Power of the Tsar

9. Hans-Joachim Torke, "Die staatsbedingte Gesellschaft im Moskauer Reich. Zar und zemlja in der altrussischen Herrschaftsverfassung 1613-1689," *Studien zur Geschichte Osteuropas*, 17 (1974): 295.

10. Andrew M. Verner, *The Crisis of Russian Autocracy. Nicholas II and the Russian Revolution of 1905* (Princeton, NJ, 1990): 72, quotes Lazarevskii, *Lektzii* 1, p. 61.

11. *Ibid.*: 72, quotes L. A. Tikhomirov, *Monarkhicheskaia gosudarstvennost'* (Buenos Aires, 1968): 42.

(1540s-1660s)?”¹² points out the image of unlimited power of the ruler in Church literature and official accounts, and the limit that was set by tradition. From his sources, Rowland arrives at a twofold definition of the ruler: A Muscovite ruler was seen as all-powerful, and his autocratic commands were seen as reflecting God’s will.¹³ But he also was obliged to piety, mercy and humility to maintain his and his people’s bond to God.¹⁴

Oddly enough, Rowland arrives at the second definition by looking at descriptions of the reign of Fedor Ivanovich. In spite of his mental illness,¹⁵ Fedor is nonetheless described as a model-tsar in the sources because of his piety, mercy, and humility and his countless attendances of church services that brought him the nickname “the bell-ringer.”¹⁶ In reality, his rule was exercised by Boris Godunov and the boyars. In his powerful and able rule, Boris was quite the opposite of Fedor Ivanovich. But in the sources he is described as an usurper of the rightful tsar’s throne and the one whose rule brought evil on the Muscovite people.¹⁷ To understand how this description could come about, I examine how the power of a tsar is defined and what Church literature suggests to do in the case of an evil tsar.

It was already in the late fifteenth century that Iosif Volotskii, the igumen of the Monastery at Volokolamsk, wrote about the tsar’s power in his book *Prosvetitel’*, the “Enlightener.” This is not a book on state theory and policy. It was written against the heresy of the Novgorodian Judaizers and, among other things, suggested how the ruler should deal with them. In arguing against the heresy of the Judaizers, Iosif compiles in *Prosvetitel’* all canonical assumptions about God and the Holy Scriptures, turning it into a convolute of about 550 printed pages.¹⁸ On some of this pages he writes about the traditional image of the ruler. And as Rowland has shown and my own research has confirmed, the descriptions Iosif gave about 1500 were still valid in the sixteenth century as well as in the Time of Troubles.¹⁹

12. Daniel B. Rowland, “Did Muscovite Ideology Place Limits on the Power of the Tsar (1540s-1660s)?,” *Russian Review*, 49 (1990): 125-155.

13. *Ibid.*: 152.

14. *Ibid.*: 153. This definition is in concordance with the conclusion of the Russian pre-Revolutionary scholar Vladimir Eduardovich Val’denberg: “Drevnerusskiiia ucheniia o predelakh tsarskoi vlasti”, *Ocherki russkoi politicheskoi literatury ot Vladimira Sviatogo do kontsa XVII veka* (Petrograd, 1916): 432.

15. See e.g. Frank Kämpfer’s article “Fedor (I.) Ivanovich,” in: Hans-Joachim Torke, ed., *Die russischen Zaren: 1547-1917* (München, 1999): 51-52 (Beck’sche Reihe; 1305), who deals with him on only 2 pages, making his article the shortest in the whole book, and begins it with the sentence “Zweimal haben Kretins den russischen Zarenthron eingenommen...”

16. D. B. Rowland, *art cit.*: 134f.

17. *Ibid.*: 136f.

18. On *Prosvetitel’* see Iakov S. Lur’e, “Iosif Volotskii,” in: Dmitrii Sergeevich Likhachev, ed., *Slovar’ knizhnikov i knizhnosti Drevnei Rusi*, vyp. 2, 1 (Leningrad, 1988): 434-439, here 435ff.

19. Cornelia Soldat, *Urbild und Abbild. Untersuchungen zu Herrschaft und Weltbild in Altrussland, 11.-16. Jahrhundert* (München, 2001): 224 (Slavistische Beiträge; 402); D. B. Rowland, *art cit.*: 155; see p. 146 for textual evidence.

A close reading of some of the *Prosvetitel's* passages shows the nature as well as the limitations of a tsar's, i.e. a ruler's power.²⁰

At the very end of *Prosvetitel'*, in Slovo 16, Iosif defines the tsar's power and his tasks:

Солнцу оубо свое дѣло есть, еже свѣтити соущихъ на земли: царю же свое дѣло есть, еже свѣтити соущихъ иже подѣ нимъ: скипетръ царствѣя прїимъ отъ Бога, блюди, како угодиши давнему ти того, и истокмо ѿ себѣ ѡтвѣртъ даси къ Богу, волю давъ имъ. Царь оубо естествомъ подобенъ есть всѣмъ человѣкомъ, властію же подобенъ есть вышнему Богу. Но, ѿнакоже Богъ хоцетъ вса человѣки спасти, такоже и царь все подроучное емоу да хранить ѡтъ всакого вреда душевнаго и тѣлеснаго, ѿнако да, Божію волю сотворше, прїимете ѡтъ Бога собесплотными силами происноушное радованіе, ѿнакоже вамъ ѡбщаль вы есть: да идеже Азъ боуду, тоу и слуга мой, и воцаритеса с нимъ и во вѣки срадуется.²¹

Referring to the sixth-century Byzantine author Agapetus, who justified Justinian's power theologically,²² Iosif declares the tsar to be in his entity (*есмество*) — not

20. I have already published this close reading in my book *Urbild und Abbild*: 211–222. V. E. Val'denberg (*op. cit.* 211–222) gives an analysis of the loci of *Prosvetitel'* concerning the power of the ruler. In this analysis it is, however, rather his aim to show how Iosif subdues church affairs under the authority of the ruler.

21. “The sun has its task — to shine on those who are on the earth; the tsar has his task, too — to shine on those who are under him. You, who received the sceptre of tsardom from God, see to it that you satisfy Him who has given it to you, and you are about to answer to God, who gave you power. For in his entity the tsar is like unto all other men, but in power he is like unto God the almighty. But, as God wants to save all people, so the tsar also wants to save all that has been given to him from all spiritual and bodily woes, you, to fulfill God's will, have got utter joy from God through bodiless powers, as has been promised to you: as I will be, and you are my servant, and rule with him and rejoice in eternity.” *Prosvetitel' ili oblichenie eresii zhidovsvuiushchikh. Tvorenie prepodobnago ottsa nashogo Iosifa, igumena Volotskago* (Kazan, 1896): 547 [hereafter *Prosvetitel'*]. This and the following are draft translations made by myself. In the close reading I am, of course, only referring to the Old Russian text.

22. A proper account of this relation and proper text comparisons are given by Ihor Shevchenko. In relation to Iosif the reference to Agapetus — and Shevchenko as well — became a topos in secondary literature. See I. Shevchenko, “Agapetus East and West. The Fate of A Byzantine ‘Mirror of Princes’,” *Revue des Études Sud-Est Européennes*, 16 (1978): 3–44; idem, “A Neglected Byzantine Source of Muscovite Political Ideology,” *Harvard Slavic Studies*, 2 (1952): 141–179; Hans-Dieter Döpmann, *Der Einfluß der Kirche auf die moskowitzische Staatsidee. Staats- und Gesellschaftsdenken bei Josif Volockij, Nil Sorskij und Vassian Patrikeev* (Berlin, 1967): 135f.; Ia. S. Lur'e, “Iosif Volotskii,” *art. cit.* 436; Marc Szeftel, *Ratio und Charisma. Ansätze und Ausbildung eines philosophischen und wissenschaftlichen Weltverständnisses im Moskauer Rußland* (Bonn, 1977): 298f. (Mainzer philosophische Forschungen; 17); Thomas Špidlík, *Joseph de Volokolamsk. Un chapitre de la spiritualité russe* (Orientalia Christiana Analecta; 146); Marc Szeftel, “Joseph Volotsky's Political Ideas in a New Historical Perspective,” *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, 13 (1965): 19–29, here 21f.; Boris A. Uspenskij, *Semiotik der Geschichte* (Wien, 1991): 133–138 (Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, philosophisch-historische Klasse, Sitzungsberichte; 579). K. A. Maksimovich even traced the quotation of Agapet down to Kievan times, see his: “Obraz ideal'nogo pravitelja v drevnerusskoj ‘pchele’ i političeskaia mysl' Vizantii,” *Drevniaia Rus'. Voprosy medievistiki*, 1:7 (2002): 28–42. See also David B. Miller, “Creating Legitimacy. Ritual, Ideology, and Power in Sixteenth-Century Russia,” *Russian History / Histoire Russe*, 21 (1994): 289–325, here 300.

in his body, as Marc Raeff translates²³ — akin to all humans.²⁴ This means that he participates in the human and divine nature of Christ, who like man is an image of God. Even if in his power the tsar is divine, that does not mean that he can act as he likes and rule after his will, *samoderzhavno*. In his power he is like God, and as God wants to save man, the tsar wants to save what was given to him. He is answerable to God about his deeds.²⁵ When Iosif says: as God wants to save all people, the tsar wants to preserve what has been given to him, we might add “for God.” For the tsar this means that he has to maintain the bond between himself and God by piety, mercy and humility through attending Church service, as well as in his decisions on state affairs.²⁶

The bond between tsar and God is described in quotations from the scriptures, a compilation of Old Testament promises of God to Israel and the description of Christ’s rule in the New Jerusalem of the Revelation.²⁷ It also implies what awaits the ruler before God’s judgment: he is the first to be judged, as he is responsible for his deeds and those of his subjects, because he has to be a model for them and make them follow his example. Iosif expands on this in other chapters of *Prosvetitel’*.

Earlier in *Prosvetitel’*, in Slovo 7, Iosif talks about the relations between people of equal and unequal ranks, of ruler and subjects, and gives the same explanation: man as the image of God honors God in his fellow man. But there may be the case that a ruler is not good, merciful and pious but evil, and tortures or even kills his subjects. I quote pp. 286-288 of *Prosvetitel’*:

Сего ради подобаєтъ тѣмъ поклонатиса и служити тѣлеснѣ, а не душевнѣ, и въздавати имъ Царьскую честь, а не Божественую, якоже Господь глаголетъ: въздадите кесарева кесареви, а Божіа Богови (Мф. 22,21). Аще сие покланяєшса и служиши, нѣзъ ти на пагубу души, но паче ѿъ сего научишися боѣтиса Бога: Царь бо Божіи слуга єсть (Рим. 13,4) къ

23. M. Raeff, *art. cit.*: 82.

24. This is not only a reflection of the sixth century’s monophysitic struggles and diophysitic theology in Agapetus, but also the crucial part of John the Damascene’s theology of icons, which is present in Orthodox theology up to now. On Iconoclasm and the monophysitic struggles see Cornelia Soldat, “Die Anfänge des Bilderstreites. Eine semiotische Annäherung,” *Studi sull’Oriente Cristiano*, 3:1 (1999): 179-194. On John Damascene and the theology of icons, see C. Soldat, *Urbild und Abbild*, *op. cit.*: 48-54.

25. See V. E. Val’denberg, *op. cit.*: 210f. on the point that the tsar has to answer for his deeds after death.

26. See D. B. Rowland, *art. cit.*: 148f.

27. The sentence refers to God’s promise to Isaac in Gen. 26,3: “I will be with you and will bless you. For to you and your descendants I will give all these lands and will confirm the oath I swore to your father Abraham.” Then to God’s promise to Israel, the “Shma’ Israel” of the Jews, in Deut. 6,13: “Fear the Lord your God, serve him only and take your oaths in his name,” together with the description of God’s deeds for Israel and the command to obey his command to be righteous (Deut. 6,25). The last part of Iosif’s quotation refers to John the Evangelist’s prophecies in Revelation on how God will dwell and rule in the New Jerusalem among his people in Rev. 20,6: “Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years.”

человѣкомъ мыслитию и казнѣю. Аще ли же естъ царь надъ человѣки царства, надъ своеюже имать царствующа - сквернаа страсти и грѣхи, сверолобіе же и гнѣвъ, лукавство и неправду, гордость и ярость, злѣишиже всѣхъ, невѣріе и хулу, таковыми царь не Божіи слуга, но діаволь, и не царь, но мучитель. Таковаго цара лукавства его ради, не нарече царемъ Господь нашъ Иисусъ Христосъ, но лисомъ: шедше, рече, рцѣте лису тому (Лук. 13,32). И пророкъ глаголетъ: царь ошплавивъ погыбнетъ, путіе бо его темни суть. Трѣ же отроци нѣтокмо не покоришася повелѣнію Навъходоносора цара, но и врага безаконна нарекоша его и мерзкаго оутѣстника, и лукавнѣиша паче вса земліа. И ты убо таковаго цара или княза да не послушаеши, на нечестіе и лукавство приводаша та, аще мучить, аще смѣртію претить. Сему свѣдѣтельствуоють Пророци и Апостоли, и вси Мученици, иже оутъ нечестивыхъ цареи убѣсни быша и повелѣнію ихъ не покоришася. Сиче подобаетъ служити царемъ и княземъ!²⁸

It is good Christian etiquette to bow before the tsar and to serve him, because he is an image of God and God gave him the power to rule. There is a topos in Old Russian literature that refers to a fear inducing tsar who punishes his people. He has been sent by God “because of our sins.”²⁹ This was the case with the Mongol overlordship, as well as with the usurpers of the Time of Troubles.³⁰ But normally one honours the tsar, because as in all men one sees the image of God in him, and one has to serve him only bodily and not with one’s soul. Iosif wants the people to consider and judge whether the tsar fulfills God’s will or not. In the latter case, the tsar is a devil and a tormentor, a *muchitel’*, which one may conclude from his evil and wicked deeds.

The word *muchitel’* is usually translated into English as “tyrant.” I do not agree with this translation for two reasons. Firstly, it connotes all the theories of tyrant murder and civil disobedience in the cultural memory of a Western scholar.³¹

28. “This is why it is proper to bow and serve bodily, but not spiritually, and give them honours due to the tsar, but not to God, as the Lord says: give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s. As you thus bow and serve, you beware from the loss of your soul, but you learn from it the fear of God: for the Tsar is God’s servant, for man [he is] pardon and punishment. But if the tsar, who had to rule the people, begins to rule of his own — there will be evil passions and sins, rapacity and violence, falsehood and deceit, and worst of all, unbelief and blasphemy, in this way the tsar is not God’s servant, but a Devil, not a tsar, but a tormentor. Such a tsar is, because of his wickedness, not called a tsar by our Lord Jesus Christ, but a fox: go, he said, tell that fox. And the prophet says: the tsar who goes wrong from his way will die, and his ways will be dark. The three young men were not obedient to the commands of the tsar Nebuchadnezzar, but called him a lawless enemy and a vile apostate, and the most wicked on all earth. And you will not obey such a tsar or prince and not serve him, who leads you into dishonor and wickedness, even if he tortures and threatens with death. To this testify the prophets and apostles, and all martyrs, for they were killed by dishonoured tsars, but did not fulfill their commands. This is the way in which to serve tsars and princes.” *Prosvetitel’*: 286-288.

29. V. E. Val’denberg, *op. cit.*: 214.

30. See e.g. D. B. Rowland, *art cit.*: 132, on this point. See also V. E. Val’denberg, *op. cit.*: 215ff.

31. As it was done recently by Marshall Poe, who lined the appreciation of “*gosudar’*” or “master” with the definition of despotism that Montesquieu gave after Aristotle. See M. Poe, *art. cit.*: 595f.

Secondly, the translation is not supported by the text itself. The following quotations from the scripture rather suggest that the word *muchitel'* refers to the unnamed opposition *muchenik*, martyr. Here, a *muchitel'* is one who makes martyrs, a tormentor or hangman, the one who executes the verdict.³²

This corresponds to the biblical quotations we read next, Christ's words to the pharisees who warn him that Herod will kill him. "Go," he tells them, "tell that fox, 'I will drive out demons and heal people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal'" (Lk. 13,32). Christ will not flee from King Herod, but fulfil his God-given duties, die and be resurrected as is indicated by the phrase "three days." Christ is the first martyr who will die because of an evil but God-sent king, Herod.³³

There is also an example from the Old Testament in the text, very popular in Christianity from its beginnings: the three youths in the oven, whom Iosif invokes after an invented prophet's quotation about what happens to an unrighteous tsar. The three youths in the oven prefer martyrdom over obedience to the wicked tsar Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 3). Their example points to the consequences of evil rule: Nebuchadnezzar met his end mentally deranged in the deserts (Dan. 4,22-29), judged by God himself, not by men.³⁴ We can be certain that the people who were supposed to read or hear this text would understand the implications of the short quotations from the Scriptures — otherwise Iosif would have told the entire story. But, of course, in a medieval religious society the stories of Nebuchadnezzar and of Christ's attitude towards King Herod were common knowledge.

So, is there a limit to the tsar's power according to *Prosvetitel'*? No, there is not. This is because the power of the tsar is like the power of God Almighty, and God alone is to punish a tsar during his life or afterwards. So we have to disagree with Rowland who takes Iosif Volotskii as witness to the limits of the ruler's power.³⁵ In theory, the Muscovite ruler is almighty like God and responsible for his deeds only to God. Therefore Fedor Ivanovich was a good tsar.

But there is another aspect to the image of the almighty tsar presented by Rowland — the aspect of advice. And here is the intersection of literature and life. If literature suggests that the ruler is almighty and ruling as God would rule, in real life there can be counsellors who give him good advice and even may correct him by their advice.³⁶ Though in the sources the problem of advice to the tsar is somewhat diminished and often reduced to the formula "*gosudar' ukazal, a bojare prigovorili*, the ruler commanded, and the boyars discussed," this is the point where real life and the virtual meet.

Concerning the unlimited power of the Muscovite ruler we mostly have Church sources, who obviously had a crucial interest in depicting the ruler as an image of

32. See C. Soldat, *Urbild und Abbild*, *op. cit.*: 215.

33. V. E. Val'denberg (*op. cit.*: 215) also refers to these terms and quotations but does not interpret them in the context of the text of *Prosvetitel'*. His main concern is how a heathen ruler like Nebuchadnezzar could be an example for Iosif.

34. C. Soldat, *Urbild und Abbild*, *op. cit.*: 215f.

35. D. B. Rowland, *art cit.*: 127.

36. *Ibid.*: 141ff.

Christ. Church and court ceremony supported this image.³⁷ But on the other hand, we have the sociological, structural and cultural studies of the 1990s that contradict or rather undermine this image of Divine power.

In his 1994 study on Muscovite boyars, "Masters and Servants," Hartmut Rüb states that the Tsar or Grand Prince was *primus inter pares*, the first among equals, amongst his boyars.³⁸ Nancy Kollmann, after reviewing the political, hereditary and marital behavior of rulers and boyars, states that the stability of the fragile social and power network among the boyars was their strongest concern.³⁹ Sergei Bogatyrev was able to show that political decisions were made on the basis of full agreement between ruler and advisers, usually boyars, and that no decision was made without consultation.⁴⁰

In the topos of "*gosudar' ukazal, a bojare prigovorili*," the emphasis does not lay on the ukaz of the ruler, but on the consultation, the talks and advice, and last but not least on the consensus of the counseling boyars.⁴¹

What to do now with an evil tsar? Iosif's answer is simple: do not obey him and become a martyr. Let him kill you, but do not fulfill his evil commands. This is the advice of the prophets, the apostles, Christ and the martyrs. It is, of course, a somewhat restricted possibility of resistance. Still, for a medieval man martyrdom might have been a real choice. For Iosif it certainly was. But first — and in fact as a sort of prerequisite to martyrdom — there came the possibility of giving the tsar good advice, and this was the task of his boyars and of the churchmen. In the case of an erring or evil ruler there had to be good advisors to put him back onto the right path, as described in *Prosvetitel'*.⁴² Although an evil ruler may turn his advisors into martyrs, the advisors or boyars set the crucial limit on the ruler's power by their role in the game of power, a role that is bound and sanctioned by custom and tradition.

Exercising divine power means for a tsar to maintain his bond to the Almighty by piety, mercy and humility and by ruling after the advice of his counsellors. His tasks were to judge and to punish. In the case of his mundane counsellors, boyars,

37. *Ibid.*: 152. See also Paul A. Bushkovitch, "The Epiphany Ceremony of the Russian Court in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries," *Russian Review*, 49:1 (1990): 11-17; Michael S. Flier, "Breaking the Code. The Image of the Tsar in the Muscovite Palm Sunday Ritual," in M. S. Flier, Daniel Rowland, eds., *Medieval Russian Culture*, vol. II (Berkeley — Los Angeles — London, 1994): 213-242 (California Slavic Studies; 19); C. Soldat, *Urbild und Abbild*, op. cit.: 191-197.

38. Hartmut Rüb, *Herren und Diener. Die soziale und politische Mentalität des russischen Adels, 9.-17. Jahrhundert* (Köln — Weimar — Wien, 1994), esp.: 470f., 438ff., 338, 328ff. (Beiträge zur Geschichte Osteuropas; 17).

39. Nancy Shields Kollmann, *Kinship and Politics. The Making of the Muscovite Political System, 1345-1547* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1987).

40. Sergei Bogatyrev, *The Sovereign and His Counsellors. Ritualised Consultations in Muscovite Political Culture, 1350s-1570s* (Helsinki, 2000) (*Annales Academiae Scientiarum Fennicae*, ser. Humaniora; 307).

41. C. Soldat, "Herrschaft, Familie und Selbstverständnis in der Moskoviter Rus' des 16. Jahrhunderts und das *Skazanie o knjazjach Vladimirkich*," *Russian History / Histoire Russe. Festschrift in Honor of Thomas Noonan*, 28:1-4 (2001): 341-358, here 351f.

42. See also D. B. Rowland, *art cit.*: 154.

deti boiarskie, and *okol'nicie*, the tsar had to consult them and find an agreement on the basis of full consensus. More than that: because the tsar was in theory like God Almighty, but practically a *primus inter pares*, he himself was a part of the subtle network of power, marriage, and heredity that linked the Muscovite nobility and that had to be preserved as much as political bonds.

The tsar's task to judge and punish his people is seen in *Prosvetitel'* within morally restricted bonds for the tsar. The people have to accept the tsar's punishments, because they come from God himself. In the case of an evil tsar who broke the bond between himself and God, the people have to choose the way of Jesus Christ, give the tsar what is his, but on the other hand not obey him, if he is evil, but follow Christ's path to martyrdom.

The relationship between the ruler and his advisors was personal and moral rather than institutional or constitutional, and it led to an informal politics of personal consensus.⁴³ In Rowland's words, the boyars had a "literarily defined role to fill as junior colleagues of the ruler."⁴⁴ What makes Boris Godunov an evil tsar in the sources on the Times of Troubles⁴⁵ is that he destroyed the network of power by becoming a tsar, for as the brother-in-law of the tsar and his advisor he already was the most powerful among the boyars.

The autocratic power of a Muscovite ruler was merely discursive and heavily limited by the moral, personal and social bonds of himself and his boyars.

We find the theme of martyrdom in Ivan Groznyi's correspondence with Prince Kurbskii.⁴⁶ The first letters of this correspondence have since been proven as genuine. Kurbskii accuses Ivan of spilling the blood of martyrs when he had his *voevody* killed. Ivan, of course, knows that Kurbskii is referring to the term "*muchitel'*" and thus accuses him of being an evil tsar who broke the bond of God, as we saw it in *Prosvetitel'*. So, in his answer Ivan makes a great effort to deny his victims the status of martyrs and claims that he only punished his people, that means, acted as a rightful tsar. Both are, of course, possible with recourse to *Prosvetitel'*.⁴⁷

The two components of tsardom, the virtual component set down in literature and court ceremonial, and the real component of counselling and social networks, had to be internalized by a tsar to fulfil his task properly. While the first component could be learned from teachers and by reading, the second one had to be acquired by imitation. A man had to be socialized into the network of power, marriage and heredity to act according to it. For Ivan Groznyi this was not the case. He could not learn the difference between virtual and real power of the tsar from his father,

43. *Ibid.*: 153.

44. *Ibid.*

45. See note 17.

46. Since Morozov found copies of the first letter in a late sixteenth-century Sbornik. See B. N. Morozov, "Pervoe poslanie Kurbskogo Ivanu Groznomu v sbornike kontsa XVI-nachala XVII v., *Arkheograficheskii ezhegodnik za 1986* (1987): 277-288.

47. See C. Soldat, *Urbild und Abbild*, *op. cit.*: 227, for textual evidence.

because his father died when Ivan was three, and he could not learn it from the reign of his mother — as, say, Dmitrii Donskoi had —, because his mother was very ill during her reign and died in 1538, when he was eight.⁴⁸ So he had to feel the strong tension between the virtual and the real form of tsarship without having the example of someone who already ruled within its limitations. In their superb biography on Ivan the Terrible, Maureen Perrie and Andrei Pavlov make this tension one of the reasons why comparatively soon after his ascension to power, in the early 1550s, the relationship between Ivan and his advisors became worse and Adashev and Sil'vestr, his moderating advisors, were dismissed.⁴⁹

In conclusion I would argue that surely the ruling elite felt that tension between virtual and real power, too. They handed it down to the next generation, as well as acted according to paternalistic structures and due to the vertical system of society that were established by the image of the divinely ruling tsar and his subjects. So, we may find the same problems in the social sub-systems of household and family, from boyar households down to the townspeople, the village people and the ordinary slave family — mirrored, incidentally, in the *Domostroi*.

The social determination of a tsar's power and office seem to be the reason that no boyar could take it on without being called an usurper. Within the network of power of the boyars, the tsar functioned as the one who held the balance. In the case of Boris Godunov and Prince Vasilii Shuiskii, who already had power as boiars, I should argue that they achieved too much power by becoming tsars and therefore destroyed the boyars' network.

On the other hand, at the election of Mikhail Fedorovich in 1613 the *zemskii sobor* not only declared that he was first God-chosen and then elected. They also elected a comparatively powerless man, who yet held no place within the social network of the power-holding boyars. Mikhail was 17, not yet married and had a monk for a father and a nun for a mother, i.e. parents who were virtually cut out of the boyar ranks by the *skhema*. Also, his hereditary claim was not very strong, as he had to trace it back to a *tsaritsa*, Anastasiia, who already had been dead for 50 years.

Peter I's rule and his distinct behaviour as antichrist appear as reluctance to act according to the traditional image of a tsar. Possibly, Peter was the first tsar who actually ruled in the full sense of the term "autocracy."

Russian "absolutism" is an ambiguous concept. If one regards the theory as we have done here in the case of the *Prosvetitel'*,⁵⁰ absolutism means unlimited power for the tsar. His subjects had no right to resist him. In practise, however, it was heavily limited by tradition. The ruler and tsar of all Rus' could only act in accordance with his boyars who were woven around him in a careful network of kinship

48. See Andrei Pavlov, Maureen Perrie, *Ivan the Terrible* (London et al., 2003): 32 (Profiles in Power).

49. *Ibid.*: 85-89.

50. I am aware that Iosif never wrote a theory of absolutism in *Prosvetitel'*, but the text is mostly referred to as one.

and power balance that must not be destroyed. While the network functions with the tsar as pious and humble *primus inter pares* everything is perceived as fine. Should the balance be lost, sources invariably speak of a bad time, the Time of Troubles. A Muscovite ruler had rather be socialized in the customs that limit the power of the tsar than trained in the theory of unlimited rulership and responsibility only to God.

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