Chapter 1

THE TERRIBLE "GOOD TSAR"

On miserable winter evenings the following tale is perhaps still being told to amuse Russian children:

> When *Ivan* went his progress, many of the Commons as well as Gentry presented him with fine Presents: A good honest Bask-shoemaker, who made shoes of Bask for a *Copeak* a pair, consults with his wife what to present his Majesty; says she, a pair of fine *Lopkyes*, or shoes of Bask; that is no rarity (quoth he); but we have an huge great Turnip in the Garden, we'l give him that, and a pair of *Lopkyes* also. Thus they did; and the Emperour took the present so kindly, that he made all his Nobility buy *Lopkyes* of the fellow at five shillings a pair, and he wore one himself. This put the man in stock, whereby he began to drive a Trade, and in time grew so considerable, that he left a great estate behind him. His Family are now Gentlemen, and call'd *Lopotsky's*. There is a tree standing near his *quondam* house, upon which it is a custom to throw all their old *Lopkyes* as they pass by, in memory of this Gallant.

> A Gentleman seeing him so well paid for his Turnep, made account by the rule of proportion to get a greater Reward for a brave Horse; but the Emperour suspecting his design, gave him nothing but the great Turnep, for which he was both abash'd and laugh'd at.[1]

The story is simple and so is its moral: the good person is rewarded; the bad is punished. And in a folk tale, it is only natural that the good man is poor, hardworking and diligent; the bad is a lazy nobleman. There is nothing special to the tale, even in the fact that the tsar appears in the tale as the ultimate champion of right in all things, since both the structure and the moral of a great number of tales are similar—whether they focus on a king, an emperor, a caliph or a tsar. This is familiar almost everywhere in the world, appearing in the folklore of any nation at any time. It expresses the desire of the everyman before the industrial revolution to see the world around him change in a way that suits him. In many ways it resembles the religious anticipation of the Messiah, though, of course, it is much more down-to-earth. Herein is a popular utopia that expects happiness still in this world and can imagine justice only within well-known and reverently-respected bounds. The key role of the monarch is quite understandable: he is God's governor here on Earth and would certainly put an end to the despotism of evil landlords and officials—if only he know about it, if he did not live there in the capital, so far away from the simple folk. So let us open his eyes and teach a lesson to miserly lords and thereby restore his justice as well. By and large this is the very simplistic ideological pattern of popular rebellions in the Middle Ages. However naive, this unconditional belief in the "good" monarch may seem too omniscient in hindsight; however it was clearly the strongest popular ideology in pre-industrial societies. In this regard the Russian development is similar to that of other nations.

Naive monarchism, the belief in the "good tsar," emerged almost simultaneously with the institution of tsardom. The above little tale proves that Ivan IV, the first tsar of Russia* known as Ivan the Terrible, was also the first "good tsar." Thus the belief in the good tsar has a paradoxical nature even at its birth, initially being applied to one of the most loathsome figures in Russian history. Let us, however, not seek any controversy in this fact, as such legends are often born long after the death of the actual historical person—when his reign is already well shrouded in benevolent obscurity and he can personify the "good" and may be recreated through an embellishing popular memory, almost regardless of what actually happened during his reign. In fact, the above tale appeared not very long after the period it depicts, being collected in the imperial court in the 1660s by the English physician Samuel Collins (hence the world "shilling" in the story). Later we shall return to the question of what political interests were being served by idolizing Ivan IV in the early seventeenth century. Here we note only that certain groups at court must have consciously spread the tale in a wide circle to enhance the image of the terrible tsar. This was easy to do, as Ivan's homicidal campaigns against his immediate and less immediate entourage (that is, the *dvoriane*) were deeply imbedded in the collective memory. He was seen as the tsar who had even boyars killed, and this story could be set into the tripolar folklore pattern.[2] The Church also did its best to promote the image of Ivan IV, since the elevation of Russian grand princes to tsars produced a spectacular rise in the prestige of Church as well as that of the secular power. Even if the Russian tsar's influence on matters of religion cannot be compared with Byzantine caesaro-papism, almost all of them brought the church hierarchy under their jurisdiction. In Ivan's time, however, this state of affairs corresponded with the interests of the clergy, who could

* "Grand Duke of all Russians" from 1533; "Tsar and Grand Duke of all Russians" between 1547 to 1584.

now claim that their country was more or less the only stronghold of the true faith—the Third Rome—and that they were conducting a kind of mission in trying to protect the Orthodox masses living far away from Muscovy. Through the consistent argument of theologians, the doctrine of the divine origins and limitless authority of the tsar's power was thus shaped and hammered into all subjects with an astonishing speed, so much so that even one of the most tragic periods of Russian history, the "Time of Troubles," following the reign of Ivan the Terrible could not shake the faith in the authority of tsardom for a long time to come.[3]

Hardly sixty years after the coronation of the first tsar of Russia in 1547 and two decades after his death, the first direct attack on the sovereign's power was launched, inflicting deep wounds that took long to heal. The ideas concerning the good tsar had just emerged; the doctrine of God's anointed had barely taken roots, when the first attempt was made to undermine them. Was the recent concept of the good tsar still fragile? Hardly so, as the failure of the struggle to undermine it proves. Though a broad alliance of social classes topped the lawful tsar for a short time in 1605, justification for it was the elevation of a cunning tale to the level of doctrine and its evolution into a mass belief. This anti-tsar movement maintained that the sovereign was an usurper and that its own leader was the genuine successor. The real was fake, the fake was real. Thus, as a kind of reverse version of the belief in the good tsar, the ideology of Russian false tsars was born and was to live to the incredible age of two and a half centuries, producing countless—well, at least about a hundred self-appointed tsars—tsareviches and providing the belief that initiated all but one of the Russian popular rebellions.

Just as belief in the good tsar, a belief in the false tsar is not confined to Russian history either. False kings, pretenders, saviors are known to the history of almost every nation: examples can be drawn from ancient Egypt, from Rome, from medieval Europe. Some of these became relatively important figures in their own time, such as Perkin Warbeck who, enjoying foreign support in the

last phase of the English dynastic struggle known as the Wars of Roses, caused considerable difficulties to King Henry VII. Unlike an earlier impostor, Lambert Simnel, who ended up as a scullion in the royal kitchens, Warbeck was taken seriously enough to be eventually executed.[4]

Others found a place in the hearts of the masses, such as the three false Jeanne d'Arcs who donned the maid's garb or at least rode her popularity years after her martyrdom. In particular Claude, the first of them, made quite a career by scrupulously harvesting a great deal of moral and, even more, material compensation for the sufferings of the heroine who died at the stake, presenting her bill wherever she could.[5] Another example can be taken from Hungarian history where false princes were also known. The legend of the "good Rákóczi"* was in full bloom during the eighteenth century, and several impostors claimed to be either Rákóczi himself or his son. It was no accident that, during 1735 peasant revolt of Pero Szegedinac, people took their oath to Prince Rákóczi. Although there is a strong similarity between the belief in the false Rákóczis and the false tsars, in Hungary it was much weaker. Unlike in Russia, the false pretenders and the popular movements never really connected with each other.[6]

In Russia, during a long period of its history, there appeared a huge number of false tsars and tsareviches. For this reason alone, their activities cannot be compared to the role of fake rulers elsewhere. Thus, when in the following pages we cover three hundred years of history of false tsars and tsareviches, attention will be paid to the uniqueness of Russian experience and mindset.**

* Prince of Transylvania and Hungary; he led one of Hungary's wars of independence (1703–1711) against the Habsburgs.

** I wrote this work in 1985 in Hungarian, which was published in 1988. Notes were added to this English language version. These include references to publications of the past ten years.