

The Minority of Ivan IV*

Charles Halperin

Ivan IV was born on August 25, 1530 (7038). His father, Vasiliï III, died on December 3, 1533 (7042). Thus Ivan was three years and three months old when he became grand prince of Muscovy. Ivan's minority lasted approximately fourteen years, ending no earlier than 1547 with his coronation as tsar and marriage when he was sixteen.

Nancy Shields Kollmann has noted an anomaly in the narrative accounts of these years: governmental decisions are improbably credited to Ivan despite the obvious fact that he "was too young to have performed most of the acts which the chronicles blithely attribute" to an "underage sovereign," which she considers a characteristic of the "genre" of the depiction of the ruler.¹ However, this pattern was not confined to narrative sources; all government documents—such as charters, military registers, and diplomatic records—derived their legitimacy from the minor grand prince.

The degree to which the Muscovites were guilty of cognitive dissonance in their perception of the minor Ivan need not be gauged by inference alone. There is considerable evidence, both indirect and direct, that the Muscovites "knew" that the boy Ivan was not in charge. The indirect evidence is found in their treatment of Ivan's widowed mother, Grand Princess Elena Glinskaia; the direct evidence is found in numerous explicit references to Ivan's youth.

With stultifying monotony, the very same annals which identified decisions as emanating directly and only from Ivan also depicted him as acting in concert with his mother. The phrase "Grand Prince Ivan Vasil'evich of all Rus' and his mother, Grand Princess Elena" appeared ubiquitously on the pages of

* An earlier version of this article was presented at the annual convention of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies, Arlington (Crystal City), VA, 17 November 2001.

¹ Nancy Shields Kollmann, "The Grand Prince in Muscovite Politics: The Problem of Genre in Sources of Ivan's Minority," *Russian History/Histoire russe* 14 (1987): 298, 305. Mikhail Markovich Krom, "'Mne sirotvuiushchu, a tsarstvu vdovstvuiushchu': Krizis vlasti i mekhanizm priniatiia reshenii v period 'boiarskogo pravleniia' (30–40 gody XVI veka)," in *Rossiiskaia monarkhiia: Voprosy istorii i teorii. Mezhdvuzovskii sbornik statei, posviashchennyi 450-letiiu uchrezhdeniia tsarstva v Rossii (1547–1997)*, ed. Mikhail D. Karpachev (Voronezh: Izd-vo "Istoki," 1998), 46, concurs.

all the early chronicles, the Resurrection Chronicle (*Voskresenskaia letopis'*), the Obolenskii manuscript of the Nikon Chronicle, the separate tale of the arrest of Prince Andrei Ivanovich, the Vologodsko-Perm' Chronicle, short chronicles from the Kirillo-Belozerskii and Iosifo-Volokolamsk monasteries, the Continuation of the 1512 Chronograph (*Khronograf*), and others. Ivan and his mother consulted the boyars, received congratulations from Archbishop Makarii from *their* patrimony of Novgorod and Pskov, ordered arrests, deployed troops, enhanced urban fortifications, reformed the currency, and attended church services. According to these narratives the dying Grand Prince Vasiliï III entrusted Ivan until his majority (*vozmuzhanie*) to his widow.² Inconsistently the same passages sometimes attributed actions both to Ivan alone, and to Ivan and Elena jointly.³

In his redaction of the vita of Mikhail Klopskii, Vasiliï Tuchkov wrote that Ivan and his Christ-loving mother Elena ordered troops gathered in Novgorod in 1537 to fight the Tatars. Elena was referred to as *samoderzhitsa* (the feminine form of *samoderzhets*, autocrat) because Ivan was only seven years

² *Polnoe sobranie russkikh letopisei* (hereafter *PSRL*), vol. 8 (*Voskresenskaia letopis'*) (St. Petersburg: Tip. Eduarda Pratsa, 1859), 285–90 (7042–46 [1534–38]); *PSRL*, vol. 13, pt. 1 (Nikon Chronicle) (1904; repr., Moscow: Nauka, 1965), 76–98, right columns (7042–46); Mikhail Nikolaevich Tikhomirov, "Maloizvestnye letopisnye pamiatniki XVI veka," *Istoricheskie zapiski*, no. 10 (1941): 84–87; *PSRL*, vol. 26 (Vologodsko-Perm' Chronicle, starting only with the Andrei Ivanovich episode) (Moscow: Akademiia nauk SSSR, 1959), 317–18 (7045/1537); Aleksandr Aleksandrovich Zimin, "Kratkie letopistsy XV–XVI vv.," *Istoricheskii arkhiv*, no. 5 (1950): 12–13 (early 1550s short chronicle of Mark Levkeinskoi from the Iosifo-Volokolamsk monastery); *ibid.*, 38–39 (1536–37 chronicle from the Kirillo-Belozerskii monastery); Sigurt Ottovich Shmidt, "Prodolzhenie khronografa 1512 goda," *Istoricheskii arkhiv*, no. 7 (1951): 85; Arsenii Nikolaevich Nasonov, ed., *Pskovskie letopisi*, vypusk 1 (Moscow-Leningrad: Izd-vo AN SSSR, 1941), 107–08 (Pskov I, continuation of Pogodin manuscript, [7044/1536]); *PSRL*, vol. 4, pt. 1, vypusk 3 (Rostov Chronicle) (Leningrad: Akademiia nauk, 1929), 573 (7044). Consequently, Sergei Bogatyrev oversimplified when he observed that only uninformed local, provincial chronicles attributed decisions to the minor Ivan IV. See Bogatyrev, *The Sovereign and His Counsellors: Ritualised Consultations in Muscovite Political Culture, 1350s–1570s*, Suomalaissen Tiedeakatemia toimituksia/Annales Academiae Scientiarum Fennicae, Humaniora series, vol. 307 (Saarijervi: Gummerus, 2000), 82. Kollmann documents the depiction of Ivan's "improbable" actions by citing the admittedly later Alexander Nevskii Chronicle (*Aleksandro-Nevskaia letopis'*), which appears to be derivative of the "Tsar's Book" (*Tsarstvoennaia kniga*), though nonetheless often conjoins Ivan to Elena (Kollmann, "The Grand Prince in Muscovite Politics," 298n18).

³ For example, in the Sofia II chronicle, Vasiliï did not entrust Ivan to Elena until his majority, but the elite still swore a loyalty oath to them both. *PSRL*, vol. 3 (St. Petersburg: Tip. Eduarda Pratsa, 1853), 267–76.

old and was only in the fourth year of his holding the scepter of his realm (*tsarstvo*).⁴ Ivan was still young and had not yet fully grown up.⁵

Non-chronicle sources reproduced this practice. An imprisoned informer claimed in a petition for mercy to have saved both Ivan's and Elena's lives.⁶ The 1475–1598 official Muster Book (*Razriadnaia kniga*) twice attributed assignments and decisions to the inseparable pair—Ivan and his mother “agreed” (*prigovorili*)—while the private 1475–1605 Redactions did so more often.⁷ A Nogai mirza in 1537 petitioned not only Ivan, but also “the prince's mother.”⁸ The inventory for the royal archive referred to a copy of a 1533 (7042) oath of Prince Andrei Ivanovich Staritskii to Grand Prince Ivan Vasil'evich of all Rus' and his mother Grand Princess Elena.⁹ In an extant “agreement charter” (*do-konchal'naia gramota*), perhaps from 1537, Prince Andrei Ivanovich Staritskii kissed the cross to his elder, “lord” (*gospodin*) Grand Prince Ivan and to his mother Grand Princess Elena; this loyalty oath repeated the well-worn phrase no fewer than 15 times.¹⁰ In his May 1537 “admonitory speech” (*nakaznaia rech'*) Metropolitan Daniil threatened Prince Andrei Ivanovich Staritskii with excommunication if he did not return to Moscow, for betraying the love of Grand Prince Vasilii III, “our mother” Grand Princess Elena, and the metropolitan himself.¹¹

⁴ This term might be considered an anachronism, since Ivan was not crowned tsar until 1547.

⁵ Lev Aleksandrovich Dmitriev, ed, *Povest' o zhitii Mikhaila Klopskogo* (Moscow-Leningrad: Akademiia nauk SSSR, 1958), 166–67.

⁶ *Akty istoricheskie, sobrannye i izdannye Arkheograficheskoiu komissiei* (hereafter *AI*), vol. 1 (1841), 197–98 (no. 136), translated in *Russian Private Law in the XIV–XVII Centuries*, ed. Horace W. Dewey and Ann M. Kleimola, Michigan Slavic Materials, no. 9 (Ann Arbor: Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, 1973), 7–8 (no. 1).

⁷ *Razriadnaia kniga 1474–1598*, ed. Viktor Ivanovich Buganov (Moscow: Nauka, 1966), 83 (7042/1533–34), 93 (7046/1537–38); *Razriadnaia kniga 1475–1605 gg.*, ed. N. G. Savich, vol. 1, pt. 2 (Moscow: Akademiia nauk SSSR, 1977), 243, 244, 249, 252, 253, 271. The redaction names utilized here reflect Iurii Vladimirovich Ankhimiuk, *Chastnye Razriadnye knigi s zapisiami za posledniuiu chetvert' XV – nachalo XVII vekov* (Moscow: Drevnekhranilishche, 2005). I wish to express my sincerest appreciation to Russell E. Martin for calling Ankhimiuk's work to my attention.

⁸ *Prodolzhenie drevnei Rossiskoi vivilofiki* (hereafter *PDRV*), pt. 7 (St. Petersburg: Imperatorskaia Akademiia nauk, 1791; repr., Slavistic Printings and Reprintings, no. 251/7; The Hague: Mouton, 1970), 259.

⁹ Sigurt Ottovich Shmidt, ed., *Opisi tsarskogo arkhiva XVI v. i arkhiva Posol'skogo prikaza 1614 g.* (Moscow: Izd-vo Vostochnoi literatury, 1960), 61.

¹⁰ *PDRV*, pt. 6 (St. Petersburg: Imperatorskaia Akademiia nauk, 1790; repr., Slavistic Printings and Reprintings, no. 251/6; The Hague: Mouton, 1970), 28–33 (no. 182).

¹¹ *AI*, 1: 201 (no. 139).

The precise nature of Elena's role, its formal or juridical status, is a separate matter. Elena might have been receiving no more than the ceremonial deference due a Queen Mother, who exercised effective power behind the scenes. However, there is no ambiguity whatsoever in passages in the "Brief Chronicle of the Beginning of the Empire" (*Letopisets nachala tsarstva*), the Academy manuscript of the Nikon Chronicle, the "Book of Degrees" (*Stepennaia kniga*), and the "Tsar's Book" (*Tsarstvennaia kniga*), all of later provenance, which characterized Elena as *gosudarynia* (the feminine form of *gosudar'*, sovereign, an even more potent title than *samoderzhitsa*). Iurganov has comprehensively traced such usages.¹² According to these chronicles, on his deathbed Vasillii III granted Elena governance (*pravlenie*), the scepter of the realm (*derzhava*). Elena was likened to Grand Princess Ol'ga, and even to the mother of Emperor Constantine I, the sainted Helena. She received the disgraced Muscovite client Chingissid Shah Ali (Shigalei) and his wife, Fatma Saltan, in her own quarters in the Kremlin when Shah Ali sought restoration to the grand prince's good graces. In her obituary, the *Letopisets nachala tsarstva* summarized that after her husband's death, Elena "held authority" (*vlastodr'-zhaostoovala*) for four years and four months, and the *Stepennaia kniga* notes that Elena "reigned" (*derzhatstvova*) beginning with Vasillii III's death.¹³

Naturally there were still ambiguities. These chronicles did not always label Elena *gosudarynia*; both in passages from earlier chronicles and in new entries she was still sometimes referred to as "grand princess" alone. An intriguing passage from the Academy manuscript of the Nikon Chronicle suggests the inconsistencies in Elena's elevation to *gosudarynia*. In January 1536 (7044) the autocrat (*samoderzhavets*) Grand Prince Ivan and his mother, Grand Princess and *gosudarynia* Elena, in the third year of his "reign" (*gosudarstvo*), ordered the relocation of the city of Temnikov, for which the grand princess, not called *gosudarynia* in this clause, ordered new fortifications.¹⁴

These passages cannot be dismissed as anachronistic rhetorical excesses by chroniclers craving favor with Ivan IV by extolling the virtues of his deceased mother. While there are no state charters (*gramoty*) issued by Ivan and his mother jointly, let alone one in which she was described as *gosudarynia*, there is incontrovertible evidence of the title's contemporaneousness. Disgraced boyar Prince Andrei Shuiskii petitioned Makarii, archbishop of Nov-

¹² Andrei L'vovich Iurganov, "Politicheskaia bor'ba v 30-e gody XVI veka," *Istoriia SSSR*, no. 2 (1988): 101–12.

¹³ *PSRL*, vol. 29 (Moscow: Nauka, 1965), 9–32, esp. at 9–10, 12, 14, 16, 20–23, 23–24, 25, 32 (7042–46/1533–38); *PSRL*, vol. 13, pt. 2, 76–123 left column, esp. 76, 80, 85, 87 (*tsaritsa vtoraiia* Elena), 92, 102–07, 109–11, 112, 123 (7042–46/1533–38); *PSRL*, vol. 21, pt. 2 (St. Petersburg: Tip. M. A. Aleksandrova, 1913; repr., Slavica-Reprint no. 67/2, Dusseldorf: Brücken Verlag; Valduz: Europe-Printing, 1970), 630, 634 (both *derzhatstvova*); *PSRL*, vol. 13, pt. 2, 416 (as wise as Ol'ga), 425–27.

¹⁴ *PSRL*, vol. 13, pt. 1, 109–10, left column; *PSRL*, vol. 29, 25.

gorod, to intercede with *gosudar'* Ivan Vasil'evich and his mother *gosudarynia* Grand Princess Elena on his behalf.¹⁵ In September 1534 the Trinity-St. Sergius Monastery successfully petitioned Grand Prince, not *gosudar'*, Ivan and his mother, *gosudarynia* Grand Princess Elena, for restoration of the full eight *dengi* (small silver coins) customs from the sale of each Nogai horse in Moscow.¹⁶ According to the collected diplomatic papers dealing with Polish affairs, on September 22, 1535, Prince Ivan Fedorovich Ovchin Telepnev Obolenskii wrote Prince Fedor Vasil'evich Ovchin Telepnev Obolenskii, who was being held in Lithuanian captivity, that he had petitioned Grand Prince Ivan and his mother, the great *gosudarynia* Elena, to protect his wife, family, and property, which *they* had granted (*pozhalovali*).¹⁷ In his will, written in 1534 or 1535 (7043), Prince Mikhail Vasil'evich Gorbatiyi left an icon and 100 pieces of gold to Ivan, and another icon with a like sum of money to his "mother," *gosudarynia* Elena.¹⁸ A letter from the captive Prince Fedor Obolenskii's servant Andrei Gorbatiyi to his lord's sons accorded Elena that title,¹⁹ as did documents from the negotiations with appanage Prince Andrei Ivanovich Staritskii in 1537.²⁰

¹⁵ *Dopolneniia k Aktam istoricheskim, sobrannye i izdannye Arkheograficheskoiu Komissieiu* (St. Petersburg: Tip. II otd. Sobstvennoi Ego Imperatorskago Velichestva kantseliarii, 1846), 27 (no. 27), dated only approximately 1533–38.

¹⁶ Published in Sergei Mikhailovich Kashtanov, *Ocherki russkoi diplomatiki* (Moscow: Nauka, 1970), 437–38. Elena carried this title only once in the extract from the books of "secretary" (*d'iak*) Timofei Kazakov; elsewhere she was merely "grand princess."

¹⁷ *Sbornik [imperatorskogo] russkogo istoricheskogo obshchestva* [hereafter *SbIRIO*], vol. 59, entitled: *Pamiatniki diplomaticheskikh snoshenii drevnei Rossii s derzhavami inostrannymi*; additional title: *Pamiatniki diplomaticheskikh otnoshenii moskovskogo gosudarstva s Pol'sko-litovskim*, vol. 2 (1533–60), ed. G. Karpov (St. Petersburg, 1887), 14–15 (no. 3); *Akty, otnosiashchiesia k istorii Zapadnoi Rossii, sobrannye i izdannye Arkheograficheskoiu Komissieiu*, vol. 2 (1506–44) (hereafter *AZR*) (St. Petersburg: Tip. II otd. Sobstvennoi Ego Imperatorskago Velichestva kantseliarii, 1848; Slavistic Printings and Reprintings 261/2, The Hague-Paris: Mouton, 1971), 232–35 (no. 175).

¹⁸ *Akty Suzdal'skogo Spaso-Efim'eva monastyria, 1506–1608 gg.* (Moscow: Pamiatniki istoricheskoi mysli, RGADA, Akty russkikh monastyrei, 1988), 90–93 (no. 35). Iurganov did not refer to this document, available to him in Nikolai Tikhonravov, comp., *Vladimirskii sbornik: Materialy dlia statistiki, etnografii, istorii i arkhologii Vladimirskoi gubernii* (Moscow, 1857), 128–30, which is cited in *Akty Suzdal'skogo Spaso-Efim'eva monastyria*, 93. I wish to thank Mikhail Krom for calling this earlier publication to my attention and confirming the reference.

¹⁹ *AZR*, 2: 340–41 (no. 188).

²⁰ *Sobranie gosudarstvennykh gramot i dogovorov* (hereafter *SGGD*) (Moscow: Tip. N. S. Vsevolzhskago, 1819), pt. 2, 37–38 (no. 30), 38–39 (no. 31), unlike *SGGD*, pt. 1 (Moscow: Tip. N. S. Vsevolzhskago, 1813), 451–52 (no. 163).

One need not agree with Iurganov that as *gosudarynia* Elena was her young son Ivan's co-ruler²¹ to conclude that calling Elena *gosudarynia* made sense only if her son, *gosudar'* Ivan, were a minor or otherwise incompetent to rule on his own. Regardless of her title, the Muscovites were hardly likely to misconstrue who actually made decisions attributed to Ivan and his mother.²² The Muscovite chroniclers must have understood that an adult and mentally competent ruler would not have required his mother's assistance in performing the functions of his office.²³ Repeated allusions to Elena's role attest to an implicit recognition that Ivan did not yet rule.

In addition to this circumstantial evidence of Muscovite consciousness of, indeed, sensitivity to, Ivan's tender years during his minority, there are sources which directly state more than once that Ivan was a child during this time. Allusions to Ivan's youth during his minority did not originate only after he became an adult; they began contemporaneously. The *Voskresenskaia letopis'* and Obolenskii manuscript of the Nikon Chronicle described how Vasilii III summoned to his deathbed his eldest son, Ivan, who was still young (*mlad*), "in his fourth year from birth."²⁴ The *Tsarstvennaia kniga* modified Vasilii III's admonition to Elena to include a more specific reference to Ivan's age, urging her protect Ivan during his youth (*mladenstvo*) and until his maturity (*osmuzhanie*).²⁵ The *Tsarstvennaia kniga* contained a story, echoed in the "unofficial" or "private" Postnikov Chronicle, of Vasilii III's deathbed blessing of Ivan. Vasilii did not want to see his son because Ivan was still young, three going on four, and Vasilii was afraid his illness would frighten the boy. Ivan had to be carried in, because he was a child. Vasilii admonished Elena to

²¹ Iurganov asserts that references to Elena as *gosudarynia* were absent in the foreign-policy papers and in public and legal sources (i.e., government-issued documents). Although no charters seem to have been issued in Elena's name, she certainly appears in foreign-policy papers, albeit not as a sole policy initiator. Iurganov's use of artistic evidence, miniatures, is very intriguing (Iurganov, "Politicheskaia bor'ba v 30-e gody XVI veka," 103–04, 111). It is possible Elena waged the same kind of legitimacy campaign as Sofiia Alekseevna. See Lindsey Hughes, "Sophia, 'Autocrat of all the Russias': Titles, Ritual and Eulogy in the Regency of Sophia Alekseevna," *Canadian Slavonic Papers/Revue canadienne des slavistes* 28: 3 (September 1986): 266–86; and Isolde Thyrêt, *Between God and Tsar: Religious Symbolism and the Royal Women of Muscovite Russia* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2001), 139–69.

²² Krom concludes that Vasilii III intended a regency council to run the government during Ivan's minority, but Elena outmaneuvered its members and soon assumed control. See Krom, "Sud'ba regentskogo soveta pri maloletnem Ivane IV," *Otechestvennaia istoriia*, no. 5 (1996): 34–49.

²³ Elena Glinskaia's role is to be distinguished from the grand prince's traditional consultation with his mother, especially on family matters, during the 14th and 15th centuries (Thyrêt, *Between God and Tsar*, 19).

²⁴ *PSRL*, vol. 8, 285; *PSRL*, vol. 13, pt. 1, 75 (1533/7042).

²⁵ *PSRL*, vol. 13, pt. 2, 416.