IVAN THE TERRIBLE

Ivan IV “the Terrible” of Russia (1530-1584) was a cruel tyrant, who never knew the meaning of moderation; he drank too much, laughed too loudly, and was incredibly violent. He held grudges and never forgot anyone that was unfair to him. Ivan was definitely smart and, despite his cruelty, his reign is a great one in Russian history. In Russia, Ivan was called “Grozny”, which has always been translated to “the Terrible”, but actually means “the Awesome”.

Ivan, born August 25, 1530, was only 3 years old when his father, Vasily III died. His uncle Yuri challenged Ivan's rights to the throne, but was arrested, tortured, and imprisoned in a dungeon. There he was left to starve to death. Ivan's mother, Jelena Glinsky, assumed power and was regent for five years. She had Ivan's other uncle killed before he tried anything, but a short time afterwards she suddenly died, (was poisoned by unknown person). A week later her closest friend, Prince Ivan Obolensky, was arrested and beaten to death by his jailers. While his mother paid little attention toward Ivan, Obolensky's sister, Agrafena, had been his beloved nurse. A year after his mother died, she was sent to a convent for the rest of her life by powerful Boyars (the Russian Nobles) who were slowly eliminating all those around Ivan. The Boyars wanted to have more power over the ruling of Russia.

Not yet 8 years old, Ivan was an intelligent, sensitive boy and an insatiable reader. Without Agrafena to look after him, Ivan's loneliness deepened. The boyars neglected and often molested him. Ivan and his deaf-mute brother Yuri often went about hungry and naked. No one cared about his health or well being and Ivan became a beggar in his own palace. The Boyars dared not kill Ivan for fear that the population would be enraged, but they barely did enough to keep him or his brother alive. As the Nobles schemed for power, rivalries between powerful noble families escalated into bloody feuds. Armed men roamed the palace, seeking out enemies and frequently bursting into Ivan's quarters, where they often beat Ivan and took whatever possessions he had. Murders, beatings, verbal and physical abuse became commonplace in the palace and the young impressionable Ivan saw all of it. Unable to escape the situation or stop his tormentors, Ivan took his frustrations and anger out on defenseless animals; he tore feathers off birds, pierced their eyes and slit open their bodies. He also threw animals off of the roof of the palace to watch them hit the ground. (abusing animals are behavioral traits that many serial killers exhibit in their childhoods)

In December 1543, 13-year-old Ivan, now old enough to have power and strong friends, ordered the arrest of Prince Andrew Shuisky at a palace banquet attended by many powerful Nobles. Wanting to intimidate all those attending, he had Shuisky thrown into an enclosure with a pack of his starving hunting dogs. He forced all the guests to watch as he was eaten alive. This event basically ended the rule of the palace by the Boyars (do you think??)

By this point, Ivan was a deeply disturbed young man and had a drinking problem as well. He roamed the Moscow streets with a gang of his friends, drinking, beating old people, abusing children and raping women. He often disposed of rape victims by having them hanged, strangled, buried alive or eaten alive by his hunting dogs. He became an excellent horseman and was fond of hunting. Killing animals was not his only delight, Ivan also enjoyed robbing and beating up the local farmers. He continued to devour books at an incredible pace, mainly religious and historical texts. At times Ivan seemed very religious, and prayed for forgiveness. In a more extreme form of worship, he would throw himself before the icons (religious pictures) in church, and bang his head against the floor (often for hours). This resulted in a slightly deformed forehead and quite possibly brain damage.

In 1547 Ivan (now 17) was finally crowned Tsar of all Russians. When he decided to choose a wife, Ivan had eligible young Princesses and daughters of noblemen presented to him in a kind of 'Miss Russia Contest'. He instantly fell for the beauty and charm of Anastasia Romanovna and married her. By all accounts Anastasia had a quieting effect on Ivan. He called her his "little heifer" (cow) and they were to have 13 years of wedded bless. Anastasia bore him six children of whom only two survived infancy.
In the first years of his reign Ivan chose very capable advisors who helped him reform the government, reduce corruption among government employees and lessen the influence of the boyar families. He also reformed the church and the army, creating an elite force fighting force known as the Streltsi. Subsequently, Ivan’s armies conquered large areas and many cities, expanding the size and population of Russia. By 1558 he had established a port city, (Archangel) and started trading with England and the Netherlands.

In the summer of 1560 Anastasia died and Ivan suffered a severe emotional collapse. He banged his head on the floor in full view of the court and smashed all of the furniture in the palace. His thirteen years of relative calm while Anastasia was alive, came to an abrupt end. Ivan raged against the boyars and accused them of having Anastasia poisoned. (in 2001 scientists proved he was right) Although he had no actual evidence against the boyars, he had a number of them tortured and executed. Ivan became much darker and more violent now that his wife was dead. In a fit of self pity and rage, he gave up the title of Tsar and left the palace. The population begged him to return and continue as Tsar, he did, but warned them that he would not tolerate any opposition to his rule.

The instruments of Ivan's new rule were the “Oprichniki”, who were handpicked by Ivan and had to swear him a personal oath of allegiance. The mere sight of the Oprichniki instilled fear into all that saw them: they dressed in black and rode black horses. Many were criminals without any remorse about killing. The Oprichniki were essentially a hit squad that also tortured anyone that angered Ivan.

Ivan carried a metal-pointed spear with him, which he often used on people who offended him. A few of his favorite things to do: he enjoyed having peasant women stripped naked and used as target practice by his Oprichniki, had several hundred beggars drowned in a lake, an unlucky boyar was set on a barrel of gunpowder and blown to bits, he forced a Boyar’s mother to watch him being impaled, then had her eaten alive by his dogs while the dying Boyar watched, boiled thousands in a huge kettle that he had built for the purpose, roasted thousands after putting them on a spit and placing them in front of huge fires, and killed almost every man woman and child in two cities: Novgorod and Pskov.

Ivan's personal life was as erratic as his behavior. In 1561 he had married Maria Temriukovna, but he soon tired of her and had her poisoned and strangled. Two years later he married Martha Sobakin, but she mysteriously died two weeks later. Ivan's fourth wife was Anna Koltovskaya, whom he sent to a convent for life in 1575. His fifth wife Anna Wassilchikura, was murdered while being kept in jail. Wife number 6, Wassilissa Melentiewna foolishly cheated on Ivan, who had her boy-toy impaled while she was forced to watch. She was also sent to a convent where she was violently murdered. On the wedding day of his seventh marriage, Ivan discovered that his new bride, Maria Dolgurukaya, was not a virgin. He had her drowned the next day. His eighth and last wife was Maria Nagaya, whom Ivan married in 1581.

Ivan usually had a good relationship with his eldest son, and young Ivan Jr. On November of 1581 Ivan became angry with his son’s pregnant wife, because of the clothes she wore, and beat her up causing her to have a miscarriage. Ivan Jr. decided to confront his father about the beating. His father, in a sudden fit of rage, raised his iron-tipped staff and struck his son a mortal blow to the head. The Prince lay in a coma for several days before succumbing to his festering wound. Ivan IV was overcome by extreme grief. Ivan never forgave himself for this act.

By the end of his life, Ivan was habitually bad tempered and almost totally deranged. Witnesses stated that during his frequent rages, Ivan “foamed at the mouth like a horse”. He looked older than his years with long white hair dangling from a mostly bald head. In his last years, he had to be carried on a litter. His body swelled, and his skin peeled off and gave a terrible odor. On March 18, 1584, while playing a game of chess, Ivan fainted suddenly and died. During his reign Russia had grown much larger and more powerful. He is given credit for those achievements, yet anything that was gained during his rule came at a terrible price for those unlucky enough to come into contact with “Ivan the Terrible”
Ivan's mistrust, sadism and uncontrolled rages suggest an abnormal personality. His disturbing behaviour can be traced back to his traumatic childhood. After his illness of 1553, which could have been pneumonia or encephalitis, and the death of his first wife in 1560, Ivan's erratic and cruel behaviour increased. He had some psychopathic characteristics; his quick mood shifts, unreliability, egocentricity and his impersonal sex life and lack of lasting emotions. His first mock abdication shows that he was a master at manipulating other people, while convincing them of his good intentions. He was without any compassion for his subjects, whom he beat up, robbed or raped just for fun. His personal friendships were of short duration and his friends usually ended up dead. Some examples are the fate of Adasjev and Silvester and the impalement his brother-in-law, when his third wife died. However, he did show signs of remorse after the death of his son. Ivan became addicted to the ingestion of mercury, which he kept bubbling in a cauldron in his room for his consumption. Later the exhumation of his body showed that he suffered from mercury poisoning. His bones showed signs of syphilitic ostratis. Ivan's sexual promiscuity with both sexes, his last illness and many features of his personality support a diagnosis of syphilis, a venereal disease that was often 'treated' with mercury. However, it can not be determined indisputably if Ivan's problems were basically organic or psychological.

By the end of his life, Ivan was habitually bad tempered. Daniel von Bruchau stated that in his rages Ivan “foamed at the mouth like a horse”. He had long looked older than his years with long white hair dangling from a bald pate onto his shoulders. In his last years, he had to be carried on a litter. His body swelled, the skin peeled and gave off a terrible odour. Jerome Horsey wrote: "The Emperor began grievously to swell in his cods, with which he had most horribly offended above fifty years, boasting of a thousand virgins he had deflowered and thousands of children of his begetting destroyed." On March 18, 1584, as he was preparing to play a game of chess, Ivan fainted suddenly and died. During his reign hardly a family of noble birth had not been touched by his murders, and some had been completely eliminated. Countless acres of cultivated land had been abandoned by farmers during the terror of the Oprichniki, and forests had begun reclaiming the land.