

## Ian Mitchell's Russia-related **BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS**

50 – *Ivan the Terrible*  
(22 March 2020)

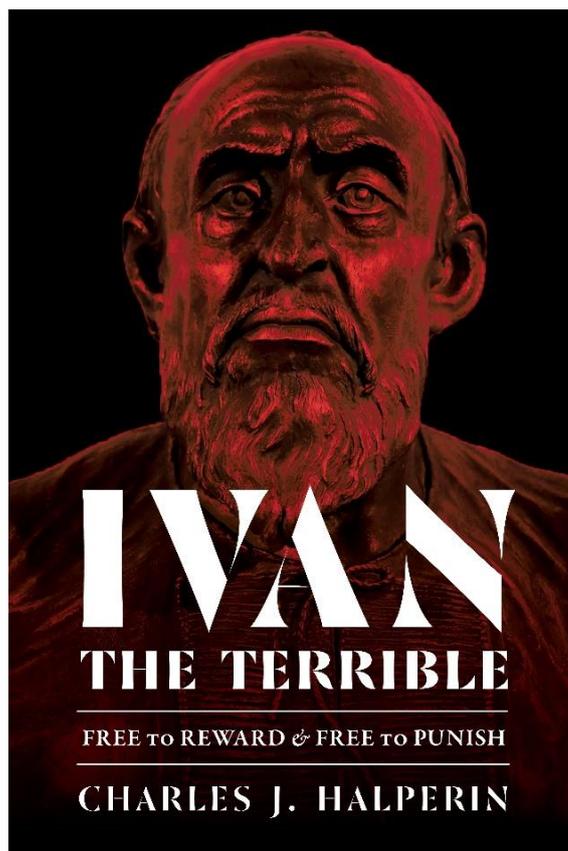
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### **IVAN THE TERRIBLE:** **Free to Reward and Free to Punish**

**Author:** Charles J. Halperin

**Publisher:** [University of Pittsburgh Press](#), 2019  
(available on *Amazon*, [click on cover image for link](#))

**Descriptor:** A new view of Ivan in which he is seen as an example of a general, European approach to absolutism that was adopted by many of the more important monarchs of the day.



**RusRoL relevance:** *Central: Ivan created the relationship between the state and the people which has in many (illiberal) respects persisted ever since. Whereas Ivan III had applied STATUS mainly to competing princedoms (and Novgorod), Ivan IV brought that principle into the daily life of all Muscovites. He treated merchants, the Queen of England and even elected monarchs as inferior dupes of a false world of CONTRACT, in which their authority was inevitably limited. He regarded those who could not murder their subjects with impunity as weak, as all rulers who depend on STATUS must.*

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**“Ivan formulated his theory of rule succinctly: he was ‘free to reward our slaves... and also free to punish them’.” (p. 73)**

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**Reason to read:** This is a very different view of Ivan, presented by a scholar of impeccable academic credentials who is a much-admired student of the Mongol period in Russian history. This book presents the case for the defence and, as such, is slightly unbalanced. I did not find Dr Halperin’s argument entirely convincing for reasons explained below. However, he is surely right to raise many of the questions he does as he is able to debunk many of the more egregious myths about Ivan. I would not recommend this book to a newcomer to the subject, but for anyone reasonably well versed in pre-Petrine Russian history, it is an invaluable “dissident” text. It is not a biography, but a book-length essay. Halperin is not so much telling a story, as presenting his argument against the Anglo-American Ivanophobic establishment.

**Main talking points:**

1. Violence: Halperin's main point is that Ivan was not so violent as has been supposed and, in tandem with that, that his violence was, with few exceptions, on a comparable scale to that of Henry VIII of England—an example often quoted. On the first point, it is possible to argue with Halperin's drastic reduction in numbers killed by the oprichnina in Tver, Novgorod and elsewhere, but as he himself stresses, we can never arrive at an even remotely accurate figure. Maybe 30,000 were killed; maybe 5,000. However, the most important point is that if Ivan and his leading boyars wanted a few thousand killed, they were killed and there was no institution in the state which could stop that. In England, Henry had to be more careful. He had to get legislation through parliament in order to attack the monasteries and had to declare martial law on a formal basis before his lethal campaigns, for example in the north (though it is true Ireland was different). This is a subject on which I have written elsewhere:

'Given the scale of what Ivan III did to Novgorod in the 1470s and what Ivan IV was to do there a century later, it is worth pointing out that even Henry's application of martial law was nowhere near as murderous as that of his Russian counterparts, even in Ireland where the relationship to authority was more imperial than it was in England. Steven Ellis has written about this in an article entitled "Henry VIII, Rebellion and the Rule of Law". (*The Historical Journal* (1981) vol. 24, p. 513) Professor Ellis says that there were 178 executions after the Pilgrimage of Grace, and makes the point that this was many fewer than Queen Elizabeth executed after the less dangerous Northern Rising thirty years later. The revolt in Ireland in 1534 under the Earl of Kildare ended with about 75 executions, even though there had been 4-5,000 rebels under arms. (p. 528) The reason was that "the extent of the King's vengeance was limited by the need to retain local support for his parliamentary programme and the administration of the region more generally." (p. 529) The Pilgrimage of Grace had a similar political context. The King could take only "limited revenge" as "full vengeance could not be extorted or the north would have become ungovernable." (p. 530) Professor Ellis concludes by saying that "the rule of law was an ideal towards which the King by and large aspired" but which was not yet "an undoubted fact of government".'

That is surely the nub of the issue: the rule of law was a "live" issue in England, and had been since Magna Carta. By the end of the seventeenth century, it was more or less established as the underlying assumption of parliamentary government. Ivan's Russia was the opposite, with the Tsar claiming supreme authority over Church, State and the people, subject only to his *own* view of the moral duties of Christian ruler. To my mind, Halperin's arguments about numbers killed, and even about motivation for the killings (did Ivan order them, or were the oprichniki on a jolly?), are in one sense details. It is a principle of *law* that you are as much a murderer if you murder one person as a hundred. However, *politically* there is a world of difference between rulers who murder their subjects on an occasional basis and under some sort of legal restraint, and those who do so thoughtlessly and on a mass scale, by which I mean that nobody even knows the names of those being murdered. That was not even true, for the most part, of Richard II's suppression of the Peasant Revolt in 1381; but it *was* true of Ivan in the 1570s.

2. I am not sure Halperin is being entirely consistent when he says “the Muscovite regime lacked the institutional apparatus... to rule by coercion alone. It had no choice but to utilize nonviolent mechanisms to create social consensus... Precedence, consultation and court ritual and ceremony fostered cohesion... The philanthropy and mercy of the tsar also applied to everyone; all subjects could petition him to request succour” (p. 216) because he later notes: “When Ivan turned to mass terror to repress opposition to the oprichnina, he unintentionally unleashed the tensions germinating in the Muscovite elite by over a century of territorial expansion, state building and social mobilisation... To carry out the policy it was necessary to give the oprichniki autonomy from the law.” (p. 236; why “autonomy”, surely he means “immunity”) What law? the reader asks. Was this law based on “precedence, consultation and court ritual and ceremony”? If so, it was not law, but status as a force of habit, presumably made mandatory by the threat of violence. Or is the word “law” really misused here, implying something far more rigid and neutral than it actually was at the time? The question is important as the real problem with Ivan was his complete ignorance of the principles of law as a mutual discipline of rulers and ruled. That was the essence of STATUS: the ruled counted for nothing and had no protection from their ruler.

**Left Field:** Actually, despite everything I have said, Halperin is sort of right, in that Ivan did have quite a lot in common with Henry VIII in England—except scale, of course. The fact is that all rulers in Ivan’s day lived in a world of almost compete STATUS. The big break came in the seventeenth century. Only after that is it meaningful to talk about CONTRACT in government, and even then only in some aspects. However, I am not sure this is the point. Halperin admits Ivan’s murderous propensities, but pleads in mitigation that he should be seen in the same light as Henry, but I am not convinced—see 1 & 2 above. Scale is important in politics, and therefore history. Beyond that, Henry had to work in the context of a general belief in law, which had survived the dishonouring of the Magna Carta but which was still in the air. He could not escape that completely, as Ivan could. What the two rulers had in common was a *desire* to escape the restraints of law; the difference was in their ability to do so.

**Negative issue:** The evidential base: this book is too detailed for the amount of information we have on Ivan. Halperin acknowledges that, but it does not stop him taking a “juryman’s view” of much of what Ivan did. I am not sure this is reasonable—or even matters: so what if we think Ivan a brute, or a wise nation-builder? The important facts are those which enable us to say what he did. Moral arguments seem to me beside any possible point, except the fact that the Ivanophobe establishment has continually made the case that Ivan was bad so Muscovite autocracy was also bad. Halperin provides a good corrective to that view, if perhaps an over-enthusiastic one. He is right to observe in his Introduction: “It is no exaggeration to say that everything significant about Ivan’s life is contested among historians, from his parentage to his cause of death.” (p. 5)

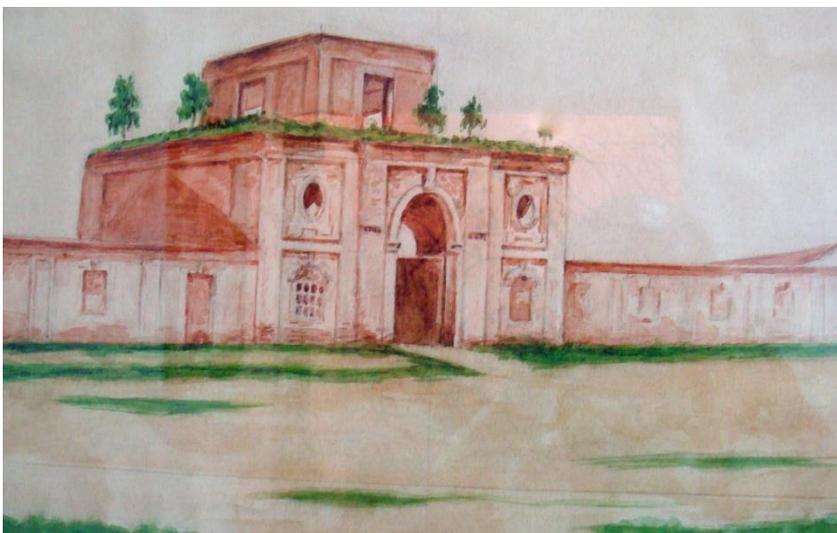
**Style:** Functional, didactic, and without the desire to help the reader imagine what is being described. This is history written in the CONTRACT style but about a subject whose life was pure STATUS. In library-shelf terms, this is pressed steel when old oak is wanted.

**Publishing quality:** Excellent, except for the machine-generated index which does not differentiate between the important entries and mere passing mentions.

**Smile(s):** This is a book totally devoid of humour. The only occasion when my soul lightened was reading this: “Holy fools expressed popular piety in Muscovy and supposedly engaged in more political protest than the holy fools of Byzantium, where the practice originated. The sixteenth century witnessed the apex of Muscovite holy foolishness, possibly because there were fewer charismatic monks to compete with them. No analogies to holy fools occur in Judaism, Islam, Catholicism, or Protestantism.” (p. 114) I liked the phrase “holy foolishness”, and the amusing thought of holy fools in, for example, the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing). It struck me that only an author without a sense of humour could use a phrase like “holy foolishness” with a straight face.

**Author:** I have characterised this book as Halperin’s “argument against the Anglo-American Ivanophobic establishment”. I use this formulation deliberately because Halperin is an unusual case within American academia in that he does not occupy a regular teaching, or salaried research, post. I once asked him why he never visited Russia, and did not fully understand the answer. However, I did take from it that fact that he stands very much outside the academic establishment. I note this as it seems to me that this book is too much an expression of his outsider status and not enough a new introduction to the life of Ivan. As far as I can make out—his publisher tells us nothing—Halperin works from home in Bloomington, Indiana, and has not visited Russia for decades. I cannot help thinking that this will have contributed to the excessively legalistic view of Ivan’s actions that Halperin adopts. The wider context—or “vibe”—is absent from this account.

Since I can find no picture of Halperin to use, I attach one of my own shots (next page) of the inside of Ivan’s oprichnina headquarters at Alexandrovskaya Sloboda, where I cycled in May 2011. It makes an interesting contrast to the drawing I photographed in the museum there of the entrance to the monastery/kreml made in 1947 (see below). That shows the state of the place in the time of Ivan’s greatest popularity in official Russia, when Stalin was “on the throne” and Eisenstein was making his famous film about Ivan. The picture is described as “Impression of the gate of the former cavalry barracks at Alexandrovskaya Sloboda, by F.F. Lavrovsky, 1947 (paper, acrylic, copy)”





**Link(s):** Fascinating discussion with Sean Guillory on the SRB podcast with Charles Halperin about this book: <https://srbpodcast.org/2019/12/30/ivan-the-terrible/>

**Overall recommendation level:** HIGHISH – so long as you already know the background

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**About the reviewer:** Ian Mitchell is the author of four books, including *Isles of the West* and *The Justice Factory*. He is writing a comparative study of Russian and Western constitutional history to be called *Russia and the Rule of Law*—hence the “RusRoL Relevance” section at the top. He can be contacted at: [ian@ianmitchellonline.co.uk](mailto:ian@ianmitchellonline.co.uk).

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