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 hated and loved too fiercely. And he never forgot anything. Ivan was definitely smart and despite his cruelty, his reign is a great one in Russian annals. In Russia Ivan was called "Grozny", which has always been translated to "the Terrible", but actually means "the Awesome".

Ivan was only 3 years old when his father died. His uncle Yuri challenged his rights to the throne, was arrested and imprisoned in a dungeon. There he was left to starve. Ivan's mother, Jelena Glinsky, assumed power and was regent for five years. She had Ivan's other uncle killed, but a short time afterwards she suddenly died, almost surely poisoned. A week later her confidant, Prince Ivan Obolensky, was arrested and beaten to death by his jailers. While his mother had been indifferent toward Ivan, Obolensky's sister, Agrafena, had been his beloved nurse. Now she was sent to a convent.

In 1547 Ivan was finally crowned Tsar of all Russians. He had taken methodical and meticulous care in preparing for his coronation. Later, 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" 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 was advised by three devote men: Alexej Adasjev, the priest Silvester and the metropolitan Macarius. Ivan reformed the government and reduced both corruption and the influence of the boyar families. He also reformed the church and the army, creating an elite force, the Streltsi. Subsequently, Ivan conquered the Khanates of Kazan and Astrakhan near the Wolga River. In 1558 he conquered the Baltic cities Narva and Polotsk and started trading directly with England.

In the midst of these wars, in March 1553, Ivan had fallen ill with a high fever. During his illness Ivan demanded the Princes and boyars to swear an oath of allegiance to his baby son Dmitri, but most were unwilling to do so. Ivan recovered, but he never forgave the treachery of those around him when they thought he was dying. Henceforth his policy was to set up a strong centralized state and to oppress and destroy his enemies within it. A few months later the Royal couple was visiting a monastery to give thanks to God for Ivan's recovery, when a nurse accidentally dropped Dmitri into the river. The baby drowned.

In the summer of 1560 Anastasia succumbed to a lingering illness. At her
death Ivan suffered a severe emotional collapse. He banged his head on the floor in full view of the court and smashed his furniture. His suspicion deepened into paranoia. Angry and depressed, with his old cruelty resurfacing, Ivan raged against the boyars. He suspected them of having Anastasia poisoned and although he had no actual evidence against the boyars, he had a number of them tortured and executed. His advisor Adasjiev died in prison, Silvester was exiled and in 1563 Macarius died of natural causes. Ivan had alternately violent fits of temper and feelings of remorse, while blasphemy and superstition succeeded his pious moods.

Shortly before Christmas in 1564, Ivan suddenly packed his belongings and treasures, secretly left Moscow and announced his intention to abdicate. The populace called for his return. After a month of negotiations Ivan agreed to come back, demanding absolute power to punish anyone he considered disloyal and to dispose of their estates as he wished. It is likely that Ivan deliberately used his threat as a weapon against the boyars' resistance to strengthen his position as absolute ruler of Russia.

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: they dressed in black and rode black horses. Many were criminals without any remorse about killing anyone Ivan disliked. The Oprichniki didn't hesitate to burst into a church during mass, either abducting the priest or murdering him in front of the altar. Subsequently, Ivan founded a pseudo-monastic order: he was the 'abbot' and his Oprichniki were the 'monks'. Frequently Ivan would act as master of the rituals, in which, with sharp and hissing-hot pincers, ribs were torn out of men's chests.

In 1570, on the basis of unproved accusations of treason, Ivan sacked and burned the city of Novgorod and tortured, mutilated, impaled, roasted, and otherwise massacred its citizens. A German mercenary wrote: "Mounting a horse and brandishing a spear, he charged in and ran people through while his son watched the entertainment...". Novgorod's archbishop was first sewn up in a bearskin and then hunted to death by a pack of hounds. Men, women and children were tied to sleighs, which were then run into the freezing waters of the Volkov River. The mass of corpses made it flood its banks. Novgorod never recovered. Later the city of Pskov suffered a similar fate.

After two years of bad harvests, a plague epidemic ravaged the countryside in 1570. The next year Moscow was devastated by a fire. The Crimean Tartars, the Turks, the Lithuanians and the Swedes threatened Russia's borders. Ivan lost Narva, but the Tartar invasion was stopped after their sacking of Moscow. In 1572 Ivan suddenly dismissed the Oprichniki. Some of Ivan's strangest behavior occurred that year, when he again abdicated and placed a Tartar general, Simeon Bekboelatovitch, on the Moscow throne, while he retired to a
country estate. Ivan made regular visits to the capital to pay homage to the new Tsar. The charade lasted for a year.

Ivan's married life had become unstable, underlining his egocentricity, insecurity and manic temperament. In 1561 he had married a Circassian beauty, Maria Temriukovna, but he soon tired of her. Two years after her death in 1569 he married Martha Sobakin, a merchant's daughter, but she died two weeks later. Ivan's fourth wife was Anna Koltovskaya, whom he sent to a convent in 1575. He married a fifth time to Anna Wassilchikura, who was soon replaced by Wassilissa Melentiewna. She foolishly took a lover, who was impaled under Wassilissa's window before she, too, was dispatched to a convent. He drowned his 7th wife. His eighth and last wife was Maria Nagaya, whom Ivan married in 1581.

Ivan had always had quite a good relationship with his eldest son, and young Ivan had proved himself at Novgorod. On November 19, 1581 Ivan became angry with his son's pregnant wife, because of the clothes she wore, and beat her up. As a result she miscarried. His son argued with his father about this beating. In a sudden fit of rage, Ivan the Terrible 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, knocking his head against his son's coffin.

Ivan's mistrust, sadism and uncontrolled rages suggest an abnormal personality. His disturbing behavior can be traced back to his traumatic childhood. After his illness of 1553, which could have been pneumonia, and the death of his first wife in 1560, Ivan's erratic and cruel behavior increased. He had some psychopathic characteristics; his quick mood shifts, unreliability, egocentricity 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 Adasjiev 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. 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. His body swelled, the skin peeled and gave off a terrible odor. In 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.

Directions: Answer the following questions in complete sentences.

1. Who was Ivan's wife, and how many of their children survived infancy?
2. What were three positive things Ivan did early in his reign?
3. What ultimately happened to Ivan's wife and son?
4. Who were the Oprichniki and what would they do?
5-6. Give two examples of Ivan's strange behavior in 1572?
7. How many wives did Ivan ultimately have?
8. What happened to Ivan's son (Ivan Jr.)?
9. Ivan suffered from what type of poisoning?
10. How did Ivan behave by the end of his life?