Kurbskii angrily accused the heads of the Russian Church of bowing and scrapping to the secular power. His rebukes were, however, only partially justified. At first the new ecclesiastical leadership, in the shape of Metropolitan Afanasii, lacked the secure position and authority to be able to make any kind of independent moves. But as soon as Afanasii gained the support of the holy council and established closer ties with the Boyar Duma, he tried to reinstate the Church in the role which it had played under Metropolitan Makarii. We can assume that he began with private admonishments, returning to the age-old function of the royal chaplain. But Ivan had not installed his mentor as metropolitan in order to listen to his lectures as he had during Silvestr’s time. When he became convinced that pastoral talks were pointless, Metropolitan Afanasii decided to speak out openly. The occasion for his protest came with the unlawful killing of the voevoda Prince Dmitrii Ovchina-Obolenskii. Schlichting wrote that the tsar remained quiet for almost six months after Ovchina’s death and then introduced the oprichnina. From this it follows that the whole episode took place in the summer of 1564, that is, straight after Ivan’s return to Moscow at the beginning of July. By virtue of his aristocratic status, Ovchina possessed an indisputable right to the title of boyar and despite his youth he had already distinguished himself in military service. In 1560 he took part, under Kurbskii’s leadership, in the campaign against Wolmar, in the course of which he smashed a detachment of Livonian knights. During the Polotsk campaign he served in the tsar’s retinue and “rode behind the sovereign” (“ezdil za gosudarem”), following which he was in Prince Mikhail Repnin’s detachment at Velikie Luki from March 1563.¹ On some occasion, however, Ovchina quarrelled with Fedor Basmanov and accused him of having unnatural relations with the tsar. Ivan was deeply offended by such insolence and summoning the voevoda to the palace he ordered his huntsmen to strangle him.²

In his letter to Kurbskii, the tsar had written that he was at liberty to execute any of his subjects, and the killing of Ovchina seemed to confirm his words. But, as always, theory and practice proved to be some way apart. The monarch’s arbitrary repressions provoked open condemnation from the clergy and

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2 Schlichting, Novoe izvestie, pp. 16f.
the aristocracy. Schlichting, an extremely well-informed writer, gives the following details of the matter. Stunned by the slaying, some members of the aristocracy, as well as the head of the Church, believed it necessary that they should make the tsar listen to reason and refrain from shedding the blood of his subjects in so savage a manner without any cause or offence. It was not fitting, they declared, for the Orthodox tsar to torment people as if they were cattle. The metropolitan, in keeping with his office as royal chaplain, began reminding his charge of the terrors of the Last Judgement.3

As he did not know the real reasons for the metropolitan and the boyars speaking out, Schlichting was inclined to put it down to the enormous influence which “Count” Ovchina had supposedly enjoyed in Muscovy. In reality, Ovchina’s death was nothing more than a suitable occasion for some extremely influential forces to take a stand in an attempt to obtain a change in the course pursued by the administration.

In 1563–64 an exceptional political situation arose in Russia. During the Chosen Council period, Ivan IV had submitted totally to the authority of mentors who managed affairs in complete accord with the Boyar Duma. After removing Adashev and the other leaders of the Council, the tsar attempted to rule the state in accordance with his own wishes, using as his powerbase the blizhniaia duma, in which the Zakhar’ins, the tsar’s kin by marriage, held sway. Ivan’s attempt at independent rule ended in failure. In 1563, the senior clergy and the Boyar Duma refused to sanction the monarch’s decision to put the appanage prince Vladimir Andreevich and his supporters in the Duma on trial. The ruler’s quarrel with his cousin was of a personal nature, but it concealed behind it the conflict between the aristocracy and autocracy which had reared its head. The outcome of the clash revealed that the upper echelons of the ruling boyar group had retained their political dominance even after the dismissal of the leadership of the Chosen Council. The tsar found himself helpless in the face of a Boyar Duma which had closed ranks.

In order to by-pass consideration of the affair in the Duma, early in 1564 Ivan gave orders for the killing, without trial, of the boyars Mikhail Repnin and Yurii Kashin, and later Dmitrii Ovchina. In the summer of 1564, the Duma and the leadership of the Church again resisted the arbitrary wishes of the tsar. And again the monarch was forced to admit defeat and submit to public opinion. For the period of half a year, the tsar refrained from any sort of repressions against the aristocracy or the nobility.

Ivan IV was unable to break the resistance of the Duma while remaining within the bounds of traditional law and order. As a consequence, he was

3 Ibid., pp. 17f.