The Search for a Compromise

Russia sought peace with the Polish-Lithuanian state, but its claims to Livonian lands were rejected by the king. The negotiations with the great embassy which arrived in Moscow from Poland dragged on.

In June 1566, the Muscovite authorities broke off the negotiations and summoned a Zemskii Sobor. Apart from the members of the Boyar Duma and the senior clergy, representatives of the nobility, prikaz officials and the richest merchants were invited to attend. The issue of peace with Lithuania and a continued struggle for Livonia was put to them in the name of the tsar. The “chiny” (estates) each gave their response to the tsar’s questions separately.

The senior clergy expressed opposition to conceding to the Lithuanians the Livonian lands “on the approaches” to Dorpat and Pskov, arguing that if those areas were left in enemy hands, not only Dorpat and Pskov “will be hard pressed, but trade will be cut off for the merchants of Great Novgorod and other cities too” (tesnoty budut velikie, no Velikomu Nougorodu i inykh gorodov torgovym liudem torgovli zatvoriatta).1

In the opinion of the Duma, the Lithuanians were only seeking a truce with Moscow in order to strengthen the border near Polotsk and to concentrate additional forces in Livonia. As soon as they achieved that goal, “Polotsk would not be defensible [and] Pskov too would be in difficulty, not only Dorpat and its neighbours” (togdy i nevolei Polotsku ne prostoiati ... i Pskovu budet nuzha, ne tokmo Iur’evu s tovaryshchi). The Boyar Duma advised the tsar against making peace with the Lithuanians and urged him “begging God’s mercy, to press matters now with the king” (prosia u Boga milosti, nyne s korolem promyshliati).

“And”, the boyars added, “we should all lay down our lives for our Sovereign” (A nam vsem za gosudaria golovy svoi klasti).2

Ivan Viskovaty, as a member of the Duma and head of the Posol’skii prikaz, put forward a separate statement of his own opinion. He pointed to the possible conditions for a truce with Lithuania and took a more cautious stance regarding the issue of war. The dumnyi d’iak believed that it would be sufficient for the conclusion of a truce if the king were to withdraw his forces from the Riga area, after which the tsar would take that city for himself.

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1 SGGD, Part 1, No. 192, p. 546.
2 Ibid., p. 548.
The nobles proclaimed their preparedness, as the tsar’s vassals, to do whatever he wanted, to serve him “even unto death” (A nam sia vidit, kholopem ego: chto gosudariu nashemu prigozhe, za to za vse stoiali; a nasha dolzhnaia kholopei ego, za nego gosudaria i za ego gosudarevu pravdu sluzhiti emu, gosudariu svoemu, do svoei smerti). Aware of the tsar’s own mood, the representatives of the nobility came out against any sort of concessions to the Lithuanians. If things were to come to a new large-scale war, “as is known unto God and our Sovereign”, then they declared themselves ready without hesitation to lay down their lives for their sovereign’s cause (dlia ego gosudareva dela). The pomeshchiki from the frontier districts expressed willingness to die for an “acre” (desiatina) of Polotsk land. “We are now on our horses,” they declared, “and we shall die in the saddle for our Sovereign’s sake” (Nyne na konekh sidim, i my za ego gosudar’skoe s konia pomrem).\(^3\)

The prikaz officials and the merchant class expressed themselves just as decisively in favour of war: “we pray God that our Sovereign’s hand be exalted; and we who are not in the service, as God and our Sovereign know, are ready too to give up not only our property but also our lives everywhere, so that our Sovereign’s hand be everywhere exalted ...” (my molim Boga o tom, chtoby gosudareva ruka byla wysoka: a my liudi nesluzhilye, sluzhby ne znaem, vedaet Bog za gosudar; ne stoim ne tokmo za svoi zhivoty, i my i golovy svoi kladem za gosudaria vezde, chtoby gosudareva ruka vezde byla wysoka).\(^4\)

On 2 July 1566, the Zemskii Sobor ratified the text of its resolution. The members of the Boyar Duma and Church dignitaries appended their signatures to this final document. The other participants took an oath to serve the tsar’s cause “without any manner of duplicity [and] stand against his enemies” (bezo vsiakie khitrosti ... protiv ego nedrugov stoiati).

After the dissolution of the Sobor, the government made haste to terminate the negotiations with the Lithuanians. On 22 July, the great embassy was sent packing. The Polish-Lithuanian attempts to reach a peaceful resolution of the conflict had ended in obvious failure.

The tsar only summoned people belonging to the zemshchina to the Zemskii Sobor. There is a fairly simple explanation for the absence of oprichniki. The government needed funds to continue the Livonian war. Its main goal in summoning the assembly was to obtain from the zemshchina sanctions for new, extraordinary expenditure. With the help of the Zemskii Sobor, the tsar wanted to transfer the military expenses and place all the burden of the struggle over Livonia on the zemshchina.

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\(^3\) Ibid., p. 550.

\(^4\) Ibid., p. 554.