The Executions in Moscow

The crop failures of 1569–70 had grave consequences for the whole of Russia, and the plague which had swept the Novgorodian land spread in the later part of 1570 to the central districts of the country. The epidemic was recorded in 28 towns.

The sufferings of the common people were grievous, but the government did not take any measures to ease their plight. During the terrible famine, so Staden reported, “in the farms of the tsar’s villages, which supplied the court, many thousand sheaves of unmilled grain stood in the barns, but he had no desire to sell them to his subjects ...”.¹ Fearing another bad harvest, the authorities refused to sell grain to the starving from the dvorets stocks. Large landowners and merchants tried to hold their grain back from market so as to make a greater profit on it.

Despite the calamity, the oprichnina government was determined to continue its bellicose policies.

Preparing for armed conflict with Sweden, the oprichnina diplomats again promoted the idea of forming a vassal kingdom in Livonia under the aegis of the tsar. The Russian government offered the Livonian crown to the ruler of the island of Oesel, Duke Magnus, who was a brother of the Danish king. In June 1570, Magnus came to Moscow, acknowledged himself a vassal (“goldovnik”) of the tsar and was crowned with the Livonian crown. Ivan showered the Dane with rich gifts and betrothed him to his niece, promising to give her a dowry of five barrels of gold. There was one important proviso to the agreement. The newly-crowned Livonian king was to receive all the Russian possessions in Livonia after he had defeated Reval and Riga. Until this condition was met, the tsar gave his vassal only one fairly small Livonian castle, Polchev (Oberpalen), and the surrounding district.² King Magnus’s tiny appanage was situated on the border of Swedish-held territory in Livonia.

In the spring of 1570, ambassadors from King Sigismund Augustus arrived in Moscow. The tsar had not forgiven the Lithuanians their secret intrigues against the throne and subjected the envoys to humiliating treatment, but long

¹ Staden, Zapiski, p. 92.
² Opisi tsarskogo arkhiva, p. 79; Shcherbachev 1916, pp. 32f; Schlichting, Novoe izvestie, p. 60; DDG, p. 440.
and difficult negotiations eventually culminated in the signing of a three-year truce.

The devastation of Novgorod intensified the internal crisis in the Russian state. On his return to Moscow after the expedition, the tsar had a long “exchange of opinions” with Ivan Viskovaty, the Keeper of the Seal (gosudarstvennyi pechatnik) and de facto chancellor. Viskovaty insistently advised Ivan to forsake bloodshed, “especially not to exterminate his boyars, and asked him to think about who he would not only go to war with, but who he would live with, if he executed all his courageous men.” The tsar replied to this admonition with threats against the keeper of the seal and his boyar patrons. “I have not destroyed you yet; I have only just begun, but I shall endeavour to eradicate you all, so that not even the memory of you remains. I hope I shall succeed, but if it comes to the worst and God punishes me so that I am obliged to fall down before my foe, then I would rather make some major concession to him only so as not to become a laughing-stock for you, my bondsmen.” Viskovaty’s protest had a profound affect on the tsar. The keeper of the seal occupied a prominent position in the zemshchina government thanks to his brilliant abilities and exceptional mind. Although of common stock, he was head of the Posol’skii prikaz for 20 years. By the time of the oprichnina, Viskovaty had gathered under his control a number of different bodies within the prikaz administration. Together with the Treasurer Nikita Funikov, he managed the exchequer, the Kazennyi prikaz. As pechatnik Viskovaty was keeper of the great seal of state and used it to ratify the most important documents produced by other prikazy. Formally, the keeper of the seal ranked one degree below the tsar’s treasurers, in practical terms he enjoyed great influence and his office became the foremost institution in the whole prikaz administrative apparatus. Contemporaries spoke of the keeper of the seal as “the chief chancellor” of the state.

Viskovaty’s expostulation expressed the mood of the zemshchina boyars who stood behind him, and that is what alarmed Ivan more than anything.

Viskovaty had special reasons to protest against the oprichnina terror. At the beginning of July 1570, his brother Tret’iak Viskovaty was arrested. The keeper of the seal made desperate attempts to save his brother, but all in vain. Tret’iak was savagely tortured and put to death.

Viskovaty’s protest gave the oprichnina inquisitors a pretext for levelling charges of treason against the upper echelons of the prikaz bureaucracy – the Treasurer Funikov and those heads of prikazy who belonged to the chancellor’s clique. On the day the treasurer was executed, Ivan addressed him with the following words: “You are to die not by my hand, not by my instigation, or

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3 Schlichting, Novoe izvestie, p. 62.