The early nineteenth-century historian N. M. Karamzin concluded his hostile and very influential study of Ivan the Terrible with a lament: "Ivan's good reputation has outlived his bad in popular memory," he wrote. "The evidence of terrible deeds has remained in the libraries, while over the course of centuries the people saw Kazan', Astrakhan', and Siberia as living monuments to the tsar-conqueror." Karamzin's comment on Ivan's popular image is perhaps excessively pessimistic, at least in so far as we can judge from Russian folklore. Norman Ingham argues in his essay in this issue that Ivan has predominantly negative traits in at least one genre of folklore, although positive ones may prevail in others. As he also shows, however, Ivan is a figure of unchallenged authority even in the historical songs (istoricheskie pesni) in which the terror he inspires outweights his redeeming qualities.

Whatever the reason for Ivan's importance in the oral tradition, the tsar did not become a prominent or imposing character in the popular literature that gained sway among literate lower class readers during the last half century of tsarist rule. Why Ivan was eclipsed in the new print medium is the subject of this essay.

The authors of Russia's commercialized prerevolutionary popular literature created a modern printed equivalent to folklore that accorded with the changing interests and values of their audience. The result of competition to satisfy consumer demand, is a better guide to the taste of the common reader than the latter, whose relationship to its intended audience is less clear. I discuss the various of this literature as well as its major themes in When Russia Learned to Read: Literacy and Popular Literature, 1861-1917 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1985).
of Ivan that Karamzin found so objectionable not because they had any commitment to historical truth, but because they were engaged in promoting a notion of Russia’s past and an idea of empire in which a divinely sanctioned tsar-conqueror had little place. When they praised a tsar as a model of political authority it was Peter the Great. When they wrote about the glory of empire, they lauded Ermak, the conqueror of Siberia, instead of Ivan, or even his namesake, Ivan III, whose virtues Karamzin extolled. Peter was preferred by popular writers because he was identified with modernity at a time when modernity was prized. Ermak, an adventurer and former bandit, elbowed aside his sovereign, Ivan the Terrible, in the popular imagination largely because the private citizen rather than the tsar made a more compelling national hero for the new common reader of the late imperial period.

That Ivan the Terrible should be portrayed differently in popular literature and folklore is not surprising, since the imaginative context of each was different. The collectors of folklore were often animated by romantic or populist notions of the folk. They addressed their work to educated Russians who frequently shared their views, but they sought their materials among peasants often far removed from the urban milieu. The publishers of commercialized popular literature were concerned with profit in the market place. Their authors gathered information from various levels of society, but their clientele had to be literate.

The available audience for popular literature gradually shifted down the social scale during the nineteenth century, and after the emancipation a new reading public of peasants, former peasants, and other lower class city inhabitants predominated. These new readers were younger, more involved in the market economy, and closer to urban Russia than their illiterate brethren. Their views and the views of those who wrote for them were different from those found in compilations of folklore. The new popular commercialized literature the writers produced was an instrument of education and Westernization in the lower class milieu.

When the popular writers depicted Ivan, Karamzin was their guide. Karamzin’s portrayal of Ivan as an irrational tyrant was widely known in the nineteenth century, and it was echoed in Lermontov’s narrative poem, “The Song of Tsar Ivan Vasil’evich, the Young Oprichnik, and the Bold Merchant Kalashnikov” (1838), A. K. Tolstoi’s novel, The Silver Prince (1862), and I. E. Repin’s famous painting of Ivan killing his son (1885). Karamzin’s characterization of the tsar was challenged by other historians, however, and the popular writers had two historical interpretations of Ivan to choose from by