THE CANONIZATION OF TSAREVICH
DMITRII: A KINSHIP OF INTERESTS

After Vasilii Shuiskii engineered the downfall of the first False Dmitrii in May 1606, one of his first acts as the new sovereign of Muscovite Rus’ was to transfer to Moscow the remains of the real tsarevich, buried at Uglich in 1591, display the body publicly, and arrange for his canonization. Discussion of the event has generally focused on its intended effect, namely, to reassure Muscovites that the real tsarevich had died at Uglich and that the recently-dispatched Dmitrii had indeed been an imposter, to forestall the appearance of other pretenders, and to strengthen the impression that Boris Godunov had been the one responsible for Dmitrii’s murder. These actions brought limited benefit to Tsar Vasilii Shuiskii, as shown by the rapid emergence of anti-Shuiskii conspiracies, the arrival of the second False Dmitrii, and the overthrow of Shuiskii himself in July 1610. Emphasis on the political sequence of events, however, has diverted attention from how the canonization benefited a coterie of kin, related to the tsarevich and to each other, who had profited from his “miraculous return” in 1605 but to whom he was of even more value as an undecayed, but safely deceased, saint.

Dmitrii, born in 1582, had been the youngest son of Ivan IV by his seventh wife, Mariia Nagaia. Since the marriage was uncanonical, his legitimacy was dubious, but when his father died in March 1584, Dmitrii inherited the appanage principality of Uglich. Dmitrii’s half-brother Fedor, the eldest surviving son of Ivan IV, became the new ruler. By the end of May Tsar Fedor’s advisers (his uncle, the boyar Nikita Romanovich Iur’ev; his second cousin, reportedly also young Dmitrii’s godfather, the senior member of the boyars Prince Ivan Fedorovich Mstislavskii, whose wife was the sister of Nikita Romanovich Iur’ev’s wife; and Fedor’s brother-in-law, the boyar Boris Go-

dunov) deported Mariia Nagaia, along with her son, her father, and her brothers Grigorii and Mikhail, to Dmitrii’s appanage. Afanasii Fedorovich, Mariia’s most politically prominent brother, was exiled to Iaroslavl’, while his son Petr was subsequently sent in disgrace to the Trinity-Sergius Monastery. An influential associate of the Nagoi clan and favorite of Ivan IV during his last years, Bogdan Iakovlevich Bel’skii, was relegated to a provincial post.

In Uglich the Nagoi clan lived under the supervisory eye of officials appointed in Moscow. There was friction over the administration of Uglich, over finances, over exile from court. The Nagie feared government agents would try to murder tsarevich Dmitrii, while stories circulating in Moscow suggested that young Dmitrii already showed signs of his father’s cruelty. For both groups, Dmitrii represented future hopes and fears.

On May 15, 1591, the tsarevich was found dead in the courtyard of the palace in Uglich. Despite considerable scholarly analysis, his death remains a puzzle, with contradictory evidence which is often politically suspect. The tening present by his godfather, Prince Ivan Mstislavsky”
