The Viskovaty Affair of 1553-54: Official Art, the Emergence of Autocracy, and the Disintegration of Medieval Russian Culture*

In November 1553 Tsar Ivan IV of Russia and Metropolitan Makarii, head of the Russian Orthodox Church, convened an ecclesiastical council to hear charges of heresy against State Secretary (d'iak) Ivan Mikhailovich Viskovaty. It found Viskovaty guilty of blasphemous criticism of icons, frescoes, and an altar with which artisans had decorated the Kremlin Church of the Annunciation and the imperial palace after the disastrous fire of 1547. Viskovaty repudiated his accusations and repented. On 14 January 1554 he received a sentence modified to three years of gradually moderating prohibitions from religious celebration, one for each of the three years of his perverse criticism. 1

Our knowledge of the Viskovaty trial comes from contemporary evidence that is relatively complete, unusually factual, and free of tendentious editing, features rare in the sources regarding crucial events of Ivan's reign. There is an extended account of the proceedings in a manuscript from the Volokolamsk Monastery. According to the Soviet historian A. A. Zimin, it is written in mid-sixteenth century script and in its meticulous recording, even of Viskovaty's charges, appears to be the product of an official compiler and close to the trial record. Those parts which defects render unreadable are present in later, also defective, manuscripts from monastic libraries which include fragmentary selections from records of the mid-century heresy trials. Two of the three

*A draft of this article was presented 14 April 1978 at the Midwest Slavic Conference, Indiana University. I wish to thank the Russian and East European Center, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, for research support, and Professors Alexander DeGrand and Susan Weininger of Roosevelt University, Richard Hellie of the University of Chicago, and Ann Kleimola of the University of Nebraska for their suggestions.

1. "Rozysk ili spisok o bogokhulnykh strokah i o somnenii svatych chestnych ikon diaka Ivana Mikhailova syna Viskovatago v leto 7062" [hereafter "Rozysk"], ed. O. Bodianskii, Chteniia v Imperatorskom obshchestve istorii i drevnostei rossiiskikh pri Moskovskom universiteite [hereafter Chteniia], 25, bk. 2 (1858), 1, 37-40. The record is confusing as to Viskovaty's sentences. The original sentence was a separation from the church and deprivation of sacraments for two weeks. That seems less onerous than the revised sentence handed down after Viskovaty's capitulation.
manuscripts have been shown to date from the late sixteenth century. In 1932 Nikolai Andreyev wrote an extended article about the affair. Over forty years later new evidence has confirmed much of what Andreyev wrote about the stormy political and cultural life of Russia at mid-century. It also allows us to understand better than he the nature of Viskovaty's criticism and its cultural and political significance.

Between Ivan's coronation as the first Russian tsar in 1547 and the Viskovaty trial the government had achieved a series of impressive successes. In 1550 it formulated a new law code and began to fashion new service requirements and administrative institutions to promote centralization and autocracy. In 1552 Russia's armies conquered and annexed the Khanate of Kazan. In 1547 and 1549 church councils canonized several dozen national saints and established central control of cults. The Stoglav council of 1551 organized the regulation of all aspects of ecclesiastical life. The emerging sense of national purpose evident in these achievements, however, did not signify the resolution of the divisive and longstanding factional and clan rivalries among the service elite and within the church which had raged during Ivan's minority. The trend toward autocracy since 1547, if anything, increased the seriousness of these struggles. Therefore, when Ivan became critically ill in March, 1553, and ordered that his infant son succeed him should he die, the court divided over whether to obey. A large faction declared for Ivan's cous-

2. The basic text (Moscow State Historical Museum, Eparkhal'noe Collection, No. 432/14) is printed in ibid., pp. 1-41. See also P. M. Stroev, Opyatie rukopisei monastirei Vologolamskogo, Novyi-Ierusalimskogo, Savvina-Storozhivskogo, and Pafnutieva-Borovskago [Oshhestvo liubitelei drevnei pis'mennosti, Izdaniia, No. 98] (St. Petersburg, 1891), p. 180, and A. A. Zimin, "Iz istorii sobranii rukopisnykh knig Josifo-volokolamskago Monasterya," Zapiski Otdela rukopisei Gosudarstvennoi biblioteki im. V. I. Lenin, No. 38 (Moscow: Kniga, 1957), 15-30. It omitted the conclusion of Sil'vestr's complaint, the complaint of the priest Simeon, Viskovaty's reply to them, and several other passages. These survive in two late-sixteenth-century fragmentary versions of the primary text: "Moskovskie sobory na eretikov XVI veka, v isarstvovanii Ivana Vasil'e-vicha groznogo," ed. Bodianskii, Chteniia, 4, bk. 3 (1847), 1-23, printed from a sixteenth-century collection of I. P. Sakharov which has been described but does not survive, and Akty, sobrannye v bibliotekakh i arkhivakh Rossiskoi imperii Arkheograficheskogo ekspeditsionnogo obshchestva akademii nauk [hereafter AAEE], 4 vols. (St. Petersburg: Tipografii II Otdelenia Sotsialnoi nauki E. I. V. Kantseliarii, 1836), I, no. 236, pp. 241-49, printed from a late-sixteenth-century manuscript of the Solovki Monastery: Leningrad State Public Library, Solovetskoe Collection, No. 857/1967, pp. 192°225°, and Opisanie rukopisei Solovetskogo monastireya, nakhodiaschikhsya v biblioteke Kazanskoi duchovnoi akademii, 3 pts. (Kazan': Dukhovnaia akademii, 1881-98), pt. 2. An alternative reading appears in a manuscript from the same library: Pogodinsko Collection, No. 1558, pp. 56-71. See also the description by Zimin in J. S. Peresvetov i ego svosennik (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Akademii nauk SSSR [hereafter AN SSSR], 1958), 176-79.