THE PRETENDER DIMITRII IN HISTORY AND THE USE OF HISTORY
IN PUSHKIN’S COMEDY

Over the last 30 years I have struggled constantly with the insidious, multi-faceted impact of
Romanov-era and Soviet censorship – a topic too often neglected by historians and literary scholars. I
wrote about this problem as it affected Pushkin in The Uncensored Boris Godunov, and this morning I
wish to demonstrate that it is just as big a headache for historical research on early modern Russia. In
my book, Russia’s First Civil War: The Time of Troubles and the Founding of the Romanov
Dynasty, I overturned a long-held paradigm about early modern Russian history – that popular
uprisings at the dawn of the 17th century were manifestations of a social revolution against serfdom. I
was able to demonstrate that there was no struggle against serfdom in the Time of Troubles – that what
united Russian rebels (drawn from all social classes) was instead a fanatical, quasi-religious
determination to topple the false tsar Boris Godunov and to put the true tsar Dmitrii Ivanovich on the
throne of his father, the notorious Ivan the Terrible. I am currently working on a biography of the
mysterious Tsar Dmitrii (a.k.a. the False Dmitrii) – the only tsar ever raised to the throne by means of
popular uprisings and a military campaign. For many reasons, Tsar Dmitrii and his short reign remain
extremely controversial and poorly understood. But research being carried out today is overturning
many long-held ideas about Dmitrii, allowing us for the first time to move beyond historical images
based on propaganda and legends.
Not everyone is happy with my revisionist scholarship. I have been accused of romanticizing Dmitrii by crediting sources testifying to his virtues. Well, maybe I am something of a missionary for this unknown cipher of a hero. I would be less enthusiastic about Dmitrii – in spite of centuries of active repression of the truth – if the positive evidence about him was not so internally coherent and mutually reinforcing. Immediately after Dmitrii’s death, the assassin-tsar Vasilii Shuiskii ordered all of Dmitrii’s papers burned; as a result, it was relatively easy for Shuiskii and Romanov propagandists to lock into Russian history the distorted image of Dmitrii as an evil impostor. Yet when I began looking at early 17th century documents that survived in remote locations (such as Siberia), I discovered that long suppressed or overlooked sources strongly support the generally positive image of Tsar Dmitrii found in contemporaneous accounts written by Westerners who lived in Russia during the Time of Troubles. On a related issue, I was recently informed that it is no longer fashionable to write about heroes and villains in history, that there are no real heroes and that shades of gray must be used even when describing apparent villains. Hmmmm. I’m not quite that cynical. In my research I have found abundant evidence of resistance to evil – incredible heroism displayed by ordinary Russians – and I have encountered terrible cruelty and slaughter – perhaps enough to explain why Dmitrii came to be held in such high esteem by so many people who were willing to risk their lives and endure incredible hardships to put him on the throne.

Let me start at the beginning. By the end of the 16th century, the newly formed Russian empire faced its first severe crisis, known ever since as the Time of Troubles (1598-1613). The Troubles began when the ancient ruling dynasty died out and Boris Godunov defeated rival aristocrats to become tsar. Many questioned the legitimacy of the new ruler, whose sins supposedly included having Ivan the
Terrible’s youngest son Dmitrii killed in 1591 in order to clear a path to the throne for himself. During Tsar Boris’ reign Russia suffered a horrible famine (1601-03) that wiped out a third of the population. The effects of the famine, coupled with serious long-term economic, social, demographic, fiscal, and political problems, contributed to the delegitimization of the new ruler in the eyes of many Russians. In 1604 the country was invaded by a small army headed by a young man who claimed to be Tsarevich Dmitrii, miraculously saved from Godunov’s plot. Many towns, fortresses, soldiers, and cossacks of the southern frontier joined Dmitrii’s forces in the first popular uprising against a tsar. Godunov denounced Dmitrii as a shameless impostor, a runaway defrocked monk named Grigorii (or Grishka) Otrep’ev; but the rebellion kept growing. When Tsar Boris died suddenly in April 1605, resistance to the pretender Dmitrii quickly broke down. The Godunov dynasty was overthrown in nearly bloodless rebellions in the tsar’s army and in Moscow, and Dmitrii was warmly received by most of his subjects as the restorer of God’s grace to Russia. As Dmitrii entered Moscow, he was greeted not with silence but with enthusiastic shouts of “Long live Tsar Dmitrii!”

Tsar Dmitrii ruled for less than a year before he was assassinated by a small group of aristocrats, triggering a powerful civil war. The usurper Tsar Vasilii Shuiskii denounced the dead Dmitrii as an impostor, but the former tsar’s supporters successfully put forward the story that Dmitrii had once again escaped assassination and would soon return to punish the traitors. So energetic was the response to the call to arms against Shuiskii that civil war raged for many years and produced a dozen more pretenders claiming to be Dmitrii or other members of the old ruling dynasty. Russia’s internal disorder prompted Polish and Swedish military intervention, resulting in even greater misery and chaos. Eventually, an uneasy alliance was forged among Russian factions, and the Time of Troubles
ended with the establishment of the Romanov dynasty in 1613.

One of the casualties of that traumatic era was the historical reputation of Tsar Dmitrii. Not surprisingly, the coarse and violent behavior of the second and third False Dmitriiis helped trash his reputation. And for what today would be called national security reasons, starting in 1614 Tsar Mikhail’s subjects who dared to speak kindly about Dmitrii were arrested, tortured, and sometimes executed. This harsh policy was invoked repeatedly and left an indelible impression: False Dmitrii had been the defrocked monk Grishka Otrep’ev, a tool of Polish intervention – nothing more. End of discussion. In the 18th century, decrees by Peter the Great and Catherine the Great prohibited the portrayal of Tsar Dmitrii as anyone but the evil monk Grishka. In Pushkin’s own lifetime, Tsar Nicholas I so detested False Dmitrii that Russian writers deviating from official views of Tsar Dmitrii and Boris Godunov risked their careers.

Why all the fuss about Dmitrii? It turns out that the Romanov family had been very close to Tsar Dmitrii and may have been involved in his initial appearance as an alternative to Tsar Boris. Godunov punished the Romanovs in connection with Dmitrii’s appearance, putting two of Mikhail’s uncles to death and forcibly tonsuring his father – who became the monk (and future Patriarch) Filaret. During Tsar Dmitrii’s reign the Romanovs returned to prominent positions at court and prospered, and young Mikhail received special attention and a lavish gift from the tsar. After Dmitrii’s assassination, the new tsar Vasili Shuiskii was unable to prevent Filaret from becoming Patriarch; the pro-Dmitrii faction of the boyar council did not openly challenge the usurper but managed to block him from gaining control of the church. Almost immediately, Patriarch Filaret began plotting against Shuiskii. In retaliation, Shuiskii toppled him from the patriarchal throne, and the Romanovs became bitter enemies
of Tsar Vasili. At the court of the second False Dmitrii (aka the brigand of Tushino), Filaret resumed the title of Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church. Filaret’s service in the struggle against Shuiskii made him the darling of the cossacks – who had been ardent supporters of Tsar Dmitrii. After the civil war, the zemskii sobor convened to elect the new tsar was dominated by cossacks who admired Patriarch Filaret. Their candidate for the throne was his son Mikhail, and cossack intimidation of other candidates quickly resulted in Mikhail’s election. But for complex reasons, Mikhail and Filaret were both deeply embarrassed by their connection to the cossacks, the Tushinite court, and especially Tsar Dmitrii. Starting in 1614 it became extremely dangerous to remember Dmitrii fondly. Patriarch Filaret also set up a shop under his direct supervision to produce accounts of the Time of Troubles that covered up his activities and told a story far from the truth. According to the New Chronicle and other tales, the Romanovs never had anything to do with Tsar Dmitrii. One might say they airbrushed Dmitrii out of all family photos much as Stalin deleted embarrassing images of Trotsky from snapshots of old Bolsheviks.

We are, of course, no longer bound by the strict rules of Romanov historiography, but many scholars are still profoundly influenced by its brutal and simplistic logic. How to unravel this Gordian knot? Let’s start with something we can be sure of. According to the captain of his bodyguard, Tsar Dmitrii “was beardless, had a moderate stature and strong sinewy limbs; he had a dark complexion and a wart very near his nose, under his right eye. He was agile, generous, had a magnanimous disposition, and a forgiving nature.” Dmitrii was the first Russian ruler whose illustrated image was definitely drawn from life. In fact, he was something of an image monger, commissioning portraits and grand-scale artwork to celebrate his reign. Many contemporaries were fascinated by his image and by his military
accomplishments – King Henri IV of France and the Spanish playwright Lope de Vega among them.

Tsar Dmitrii has been accused of seducing or raping many women, including Boris Godunov’s daughter. Otrep’ev supposedly impregnated thirty nuns and had sex with monks and handsome young courtiers. He has been accused of profaning Orthodox Christianity, icons, and crosses and of practicing sorcery and communicating with Satan. The bloodthirsty monk also supposedly ordered the secret torture and execution of many people who could identify him as Otrep’ev or who opposed his evil plans. His most fiendish plot, it was claimed, was a plan to kill all the boyars and clergy in order to convert Russia to Catholicism. Even at the dawn of the 21st century, biographies of Dmitrii continue to credit many unsubstantiated stories about Grishka Otrep’ev; for example, Maureen Perrie recently concluded that the young monk may indeed have been a sorcerer.

My own research on Russia’s First Civil War has produced a strikingly different image of Tsar Dmitrii. To begin with, he was definitely not the runaway monk-sorcerer Grishka Otrep’ev. He was also not the product of a Polish or Jesuit plot. Instead, Dmitrii was the product of a conspiracy among boyar clans purged from Tsar Boris’ court—including the Romanovs. Whoever he really was, Dmitrii sincerely believed that he was Ivan the Terrible’s youngest son, and he acted the part superbly. A number of Dmitrii’s contemporaries—even some of his enemies—judged him to have been a remarkable person. The victorious young warrior-prince who “loved honor” was not only brave and bold; he was also an excellent horseman. Dmitrii was extraordinarily well educated for a Russian tsar, well versed in statecraft and very reform-minded. He promulgated excellent laws and made plans for promoting education and science in Russia. He was also a fine speaker who carried himself with “majesty and grandeur.” Contemporaries noted that he was determined to rule as a wise and clement prince, not as
a tyrant, and that he wished to make his subjects feel that they lived in a “free country.” His manifestos displayed great care and concern for his people, and he obviously strove to gain their affection. Those efforts were more than marginally successful. Many of his subjects loved him, and he was the first Russian ruler to be idealized as a “just tsar.” Dmitrii had lofty military ambitions, and he was the first tsar to call himself “emperor.” He worked hard to improve the effectiveness of the Russian army, and he often personally trained with his soldiers—who tended to adore him. In many ways, he seems more like a forerunner of Peter the Great than a mad monk-sorcerer.

Just like Peter, Dmitrii proved to be quite a shock to many of his subjects. Not raised in the claustrophobic and tradition-bound Russian court, he did not behave in the usual manner of the tsars. He upset some conservatives by his breaches of tradition and his neglect of elaborate court ceremonies and religious rites. This eccentric behavior aroused suspicions that Vasilii Shuiskii and his confederates were able to exploit. Most shocking of all to many Russians was Tsar Dmitrii’s interaction with and toleration of Protestants, Catholics, and Jews. Especially scandalous was his decision to allow Catholics—Jesuits even—to have a church in Moscow. Although Dmitrii kept his own contact with the Jesuits to a minimum (for Russians were brought up to regard the “Latin faith” as a Satanic heresy), the tsar’s religious toleration upset many people. His enemies never tired of trying to link him to Catholic plot to destroy the Russian Orthodox Church. In fact, the mere presence of Poles and other Westerners in Moscow and at court was so disturbing to some xenophobic Russians that they did not bother to distinguish between Dmitrii’s inner circle of foreign Protestant advisers and the hated Catholics found wandering around the capital during his reign.

It is a noteworthy aspect of early modern Russian political culture that much of the criticism
leveled against Tsar Dmitrii by his enemies was remarkably similar to conservative complaints about that later “Antichrist,” Peter the Great. Peter’s enemies also complained that he was a tyrant, a tool of Satan, an immoral blasphemer, and a “Latinizer” whose Western-style dress and habits, preference for foreigners who scorned the backward Russians, and mockery of sacred rituals “proved” that he was an impostor and false tsar. Unlike Tsar Dmitrii, however, Peter set up an elaborate and effective mechanism to detect and destroy those who opposed him.

Dmitrii, on the other hand, was a mild and forgiving tsar who reigned happily for less than a year before being assassinated by a small group of lords led by Vasilii Shuiskii. The assassins foolishly believed that the country would quickly settle down again, as it had after the overthrow of the Godunovs. But, unlike the Godunovs, Tsar Dmitrii was beloved by many of his subjects. To Shuiskii’s great surprise, within a few weeks Russians from all walks of life took to the field in very large numbers to oust the usurper and restore Dmitrii to his throne. Shuiskii soon lost control of half of the country and found himself besieged in Moscow by tens of thousands of angry rebels fighting in the name of Tsar Dmitrii. Rebel élan frightened and confused the desperate assassin-tsar and his henchmen. Shuiskii’s propagandists claimed that Satan was leading his enemies and that the rebels were really intent upon overthrowing the lords and seizing their wives and property. Believe it or not, that false statement and others like it led many historians to an alternate view of Tsar Dmitrii — that of heroic champion of the masses.

This curious interpretation, postulated in the early 19th century by the poet-historians Friedrich Schiller and Alexander Pushkin, eventually produced an image of Dmitrii as a cossack-tsar or peasant-tsar, the liberator of his people who was martyred by the lords before he could abolish serfdom. A
variant of that interpretation had Otrep’ev forced by the masses to abolish serfdom or face revolution himself. Fortunately, this outrageously inaccurate view of Dmitrii died with the Soviet Union, but not before it left many historians utterly confused about Tsar Dmitrii and the nature of Russia’s first civil war. Was Dmitrii a failed social revolutionary? A cynical manipulator of the naïve masses? Or neither? In any case, the fixed idea of Dmitrii as an impostor endures – and for completely understandable reasons. For one thing, the real Dmitrii died as a child in 1591. Or did he?

Tsarevich Dmitrii was born in 1582. Some whispered that Ivan the Terrible’s son by his sixth and last wife, Maria Nagaia, was illegitimate. When Ivan died in 1584, in the ensuing struggle for power between the Nagoi clan and Boris Godunov (regent of the mentally retarded Tsar Fedor Ivanovich), little Dmitrii’s faction quickly lost out. The tsarevich and his mother were shipped off to shabby Uglic where they were constantly spied upon by Godunov’s agents. When, in 1591, it was reported that Dmitrii had accidentally killed himself during an epileptic seizure while playing knife toss, some church officials concluded that his strange death was suicide – which would have denied him the right to an Orthodox burial. But Dmitrii’s relatives loudly declared that the youngster had been killed by Godunov’s henchmen in order to clear a path to the throne for Boris. The official investigation of the Uglic affair determined that Dmitrii’s death had been accidental.

Curiously enough, Dmitrii’s mother was allowed to hover over her son’s body for several days – shooing away all others and failing to bury him quickly in accordance with canon law. Members of the investigating commission were unable to verify that the body was that of Dmitrii; and the tsarevich’s burial was weirdly unceremonious and poorly attended. To this day there are still many unanswered questions about the Uglic tragedy, and no one can say with certainty that Dmitrii really died in 1591.
Some sources claim that the boy escaped death with the help of the Romanovs. Careful investigation reveals that Boris stands accused of a crime he probably did not commit – indeed, a crime that may not have happened. My research has led me to conclude that the Uglich affair was either an unfortunate accident that ended up ruining Godunov’s already sinister reputation, or it was part of a desperate plot by Dmitrii’s relatives to destroy the tsar’s all-powerful brother-in-law. It is worth noting that in Dr. Giles Fletcher’s *Of the Russe Commonwealth*, published in London in 1591, Dmitrii’s relatives are said to have fretted about a possible assassination attempt against the boy as early as 1588. And a few months before the Uglich affair, Dmitrii’s mother wrote to inform the court that her son had developed the falling sickness (in effect, that he was a worthy descendant of Julius Caesar) and that the lad had accidentally cut her with his knife during a seizure.

Many years later, after Tsar Dmitrii was assassinated, the usurper Vasilii Shuiskii ordered the retrieval of Tsarevich Dmitrii’s body from Uglich in order to prove that Tsar Dmitrii had been an impostor. But Shuiskii’s henchmen failed to locate the tsarevich’s overly modest burial place. They did, however, come up with a brilliant scam. A local boy, killed for the occasion, was proclaimed to be Dmitrii, miraculously and perfectly preserved after all those years – right down to some nuts found in his right hand (a nice touch intended to prove that the innocent lad did not kill himself with a knife). Right on cue, the body of the tsarevich reportedly gave off a fragrant smell (a sign of holiness) and produced miracles as it was conveyed back to Moscow and into Archangel Cathedral where church officials proclaimed the elevation of St. Dmitrii. A Dutch merchant living in Moscow at the time described the clumsily staged miracles occurring around St. Dmitrii and the horrible stench of decaying flesh that eventually forced embarrassed clerics to burn a huge quantity of incense before closing the cathedral.
and hastily burying the body. The remains of St. Dmitrii are, of course, still on display in Archangel Cathedral. Since we have DNA samples of Ivan the Terrible, it would be fairly simple to call the 400-year-old bluff of Shuiskii and his cynical clerical supporters. But Church officials refuse to allow the test. Interestingly enough, because the document describing the life of and miracles associated with St. Dmitrii had been hastily drawn up for political purposes, Shuiskii’s partisans were never able to get it accepted by Church as an official saint’s vita. But they did manage to lock in the view that Boris Godunov had been a regicide and Tsar Dmitrii a fraud.

And yet, eyewitness accounts attest that from the beginning of his campaign for the throne, Dmitrii played his role extraordinarily well. He went out of his way to display “great modestie” in victory, to pay for supplies, to avoid bloodshed whenever possible, and to protect the local population from harm – much to the astonishment of ordinary Russians. (Memories of his strikingly humane conduct survived for centuries in folklore.) Dmitrii’s prayers before battles and attempts to prevent the looting of Russian towns surrendering to his army quickly built powerful support for him. An Englishman who was in Russia during Dmitrii’s campaign wrote this translation of one of his prayers before battle: “O MOST JUST JUDGE, KILL ME WITH A THUNDERBOLT, DESTROY ME FIRST, AND SPARE THIS CHRISTIAN BLOOD, IF UNJUSTLY, IF COVETOUSLY, IF WICKEDLY I GO ABOUT THIS ENTERPRISE. THOU SEEST MINE INNOCENCE, HELP MY JUST CAUSE. TO THEE, O QUEEN OF HEAVEN, I COMMEND MYSELF AND THESE MY SOLDIERS.”

During his campaign, some of Dmitrii’s adherents began calling him the rising sun of Russia – using the same solar imagery that had been applied to earlier rulers. By coincidence, Dmitrii’s
campaign began at the same time Kepler’s supernova appeared and was visible even in daylight hours for many weeks. Tsar Boris was so alarmed by the celestial event that he consulted a fortuneteller about the appearance of the second sun; she told him it meant there was a challenger to his throne. Well, duh!

On the eve of the Moscow rebellion that overthrew the Godunovs, Dmitrii once again reminded his supporters that God was watching, warning them against spilling Orthodox Christian blood unnecessarily. His new subjects obeyed him, and the rebellion was virtually bloodless – except for some rebels fighting with each other over spoils taken from Godunov mansions and others drinking themselves to death on wine liberated from Kremlin cellars. This lack of bloodshed is unprecedented in early modern Russian history. The triumphant Tsar Dmitrii then exiled the Godunov clan from Moscow; only three of them were killed. Tsar Fedor Borisovich’s great uncle Semyon, the head of the secret police and the most hated man in Russia, was thrown in prison where he starved to death. The tsar’s mother (another almost universally hated figure) and 16-year old Fedor were put to death immediately, just as Pushkin portrayed it. Tsar Fedor was a handsome, intelligent, and promising ruler – and a fine cartographer. But it is noteworthy that not a single prince, boyar, or palace guard lifted a finger to save him. Pushkin accurately portrayed Fedor Borisovich and obviously wanted us to sympathize with him, but to what end? As in Greek tragic drama, is this a meditation about the sins of the father visited upon the son, about the innocent victims who suffer along with the guilty? Are we being set up for the second and third plays of Pushkin’s planned trilogy – something like The Oresteia? Would Tsar Dmitrii’s guilt overwhelm him in the second play, leading to his assassination, only to see Russia itself suffer horrific tragedy in the third play due to Shuiskii’s bloody ambition?
Upon taking the throne, Tsar Dmitrii tried to be a good ruler and repeatedly invoked God – not his own actions – as the source of his victory. I recently came across this poster printed in Poland in 1605, celebrating Dmitrii’s triumph. Note the reference to Psalm 18, King David’s modest victory prayer. That is quintessential Dmitrii. Tsar Dmitrii may have been too avant-garde for Russia at the dawn of the 17th century with its parochial, non-secular political culture. Even Pushkin gently rebuked him for his “hare-brained generosity.” But if Dmitrii had been just a little more cautious, he could easily have foiled Shuiskii’s plot, which involved no more than three hundred men and about which the tsar was repeatedly warned. Then there would have been no Time of Troubles. Instead, Tsar Dmitrii would have launched his campaign against the Turks; he planned to send an embassy to France to entice Henri IV into that crusade. If Dmitrii had lived, Russia’s trajectory into the 17th century might have been quite different.

As it turned out, the extraordinarily powerful bond between Tsar Dmitrii and the Russian people reignited the civil war and was responsible for creating a rash of copy-cat pretenders during the later stages of the Time of Troubles; it also doomed imperial Russia to endure a plague of pretenderism during the next two centuries. It is no coincidence that – like Dmitrii – rebel leaders such as Stenka Razin and Emilian Pugachev also came to be regarded as immortal, Christ-like champions of the faithful Orthodox masses – for which reason they commanded zealous, quasi-religious support. The source of that popular image of early modern Russian rebel leaders was not – as long suspected – the social utopian yearnings of the masses. Instead, it was the remarkable story of Tsar Dmitrii’s resurrection – or, rather, multiple resurrections. Contrary to the conclusions of many scholars, Dmitrii cannot be plugged into some pre-existing cultural pattern of Russian pretenderism. The literature connecting
Dmitrii to roguish impostors and the psychology of *samozvanshchina* overlooks one important point. There was no such phenomenon before Dmitrii. He was hardly typical; instead, he was archetypal. The old theory that pretenderism reached its peak with Dmitrii needs to be discarded. He was Russia’s original pretender – if pretend he did.

Turning briefly to Aleksandr Pushkin, I will begin by noting that a good project for a graduate student would be to examine how the Pushkin family papers concerning ancestors who lived, fought, and were exiled to Siberia during and after the Time of Troubles helped inspire the playwright’s pride in his family’s rebellious history and were eagerly mined by him in constructing the character Afanasy Pushkin. The relevant manuscripts that Pushkin consulted while writing his *Comedy* have survived, and they confirm that the Pushkins had indeed always been a “rebel clan.”

I am currently working on a paper I hope to present at the AATSEEL conference in December focusing on Tsar Nikolai’s personal involvement in censoring Pushkin’s play. This morning I’d like to underline what a remarkably good historian Pushkin was before becoming historian laureate of Russia in 1831. It is truly remarkable how accurately he used archaic Muscovite terms and how carefully he mined original sources for his *Comedy*, sources that moved beyond or were in conflict with Karamzin’s semi-official *History of the Russian State*. Because I spent the past thirty years researching and writing about the Time of Troubles, I am quite familiar with the sources Pushkin used to supplement Karamzin. I first became aware of some of them many years ago when I translated Jacques Margeret’s French account of Russia during the Time of Troubles; Captain Margeret’s appearance in Pushkin’s play speaking lines from his own book really caught my attention. I soon detected several other original sources worked into Pushkin’s politically incorrect *Comedy*. For example, Pushkin was
one of the first writers to use the controversial works attributed to Prince Andrei Kurbskii, Ivan the
Terrible’s friend who defected to Poland and supposedly exchanged letters with Tsar Ivan about the
proper conduct of rulers and their aristocratic subjects. Kurbskii’s texts amount to a scathing critique
of the abuse of autocratic power by Ivan, a critique Karamzin had bravely used in writing his History –
although he was careful to label Kurbskii a traitor. Pushkin also bravely used Kurbskii in his play but
went far beyond Karamzin. Among other things, he zeroed in on Kurbskii’s use of the term “Holy
Russia” – a term that (believe it or not) may have originated in Kurbskii’s writings and one the
Romanov dynasty regarded with deep suspicion and never embraced – because it detached Russia’s
holy mission from the sacred ruler and elevated the Russian land and people to sacred status. The
appearance and increasing use of the term Holy Russia in unofficial sources (for example, among the
Don cossacks!) is actually an important indicator of the growing split between elite and popular culture
in early modern Russia, a split that helped produce the Moscow riots of 1648, the Raskol, and the
Razin Rebellion. Somehow Pushkin seems to have sensed this long before scholars began to study the
issue. Equally remarkable, Pushkin’s source-based interpretation of the historical Dmitrii’s positive
relationship with the narod is startlingly similar to the best post-Soviet scholarship!

It was no accident that Pushkin put in the mouth of his rebellious ancestor, Gavrila Pushkin
(who personally triggered the overthrow of the Godunovs), those famous lines to Basmanov: “Where
our strength lies, I’ll tell you now, Basmanov: Not in our numbers, not our Polish allies, But in esteem –
in popular esteem!” Pushkin had another ancestor (this time a fictional composite of several real
Pushkins) connect Dmitrii’s successful campaign for the throne to his alleged promise to restore the St.
George’s Day privilege of peasant departure – in other words, to abolish serfdom, which had only
recently been imposed by the hated Boris Godunov. How those lines got past the censors is still unknown, but they survived to appear in the 1831 edition of *Boris Godunov*. That fact surprised at least one of Pushkin’s contemporaries who had heard him read his daring *Comedy* and was not pleased by the scaled-down, denatured play that appeared in print. Soviet scholars rightly hailed the surviving reference to St. George’s Day as one of Pushkin’s victories over the censors.

That brings me to my last topic. As already noted, Schiller and Pushkin were the first writers to assert that Dmitrii’s success was due to his promise to abolish serfdom. No wonder the narod shouts “Long live Tsar Dmitrii!” at the end of Pushkin’s *Comedy*. And no wonder the censors were nervous about this play. Tsar Nikolai was afraid of a serf rebellion, and that had a significant impact on the transformation of Pushkin’s dangerous *Comedy* into the far less provocative *Boris Godunov*. But where did Pushkin get such a dangerous idea in the first place? As it turns out, Schiller and Pushkin both did historical research about Dmitrii and used several of the same sources in developing their characterization of the Pretender as the champion of the *narod*. I am amazed by Pushkin’s brilliant historical imagination. It seems likely that his interpretation of Dmitrii was affected by the Pugachev Rebellion, which openly challenged serfdom. Pushkin was deeply interested in Pugachev and eventually wrote the first scholarly study of the Pugachev Rebellion. Pushkin’s Dmitrii may also have been affected by romantic notions of the French Revolution and Napoleon. In any case, I can assure you that most historians of early modern Russia have no idea – and would be flabbergasted to find out – that Pushkin launched the interpretation of Dmitrii as the leader of a social revolution. Many of Pushkin’s contemporaries were, on the other hand, well aware of this fact; it is one of the reasons why his *Comedy* was so popular and why the censors feared it. Pushkin’s friend Mikhail Pogodin was so
powerfully moved by Pushkin’s *Comedy* that his own plays about Boris Godunov and Tsar Dmitrii built upon Dmitrii’s strong popular support. Pogodin went on to become a prominent historian keenly interested in the establishment of serfdom in Russia. It is no coincidence that Pogodin’s most famous pupil, the renowned historian Sergei Solov’ev, was the first to write about rebellions in Dmitrii’s name as a “peasant war” – the same term Soviet scholars later used to describe what they thought was social revolution in the Time of Troubles. Incidentally, in the reactionary atmosphere of 1849, Tsar Nikolai’s censors seriously considered not allowing Solov’ev to print his dangerous findings even in an academic journal with low circulation. That makes the survival of Pushkin’s reference to St. George’s Day in the 1831 edition of *Boris Godunov* all the more remarkable.

The idea of the Time of Troubles as a period of social revolution blossomed after Tsar Nikolai’s death. By the time Musorgskii revised *Boris Godunov*, not only was Pushkin’s *Comedy* available in print but several historians had published studies of the Time of Troubles in which Dmitrii stirred the masses by challenging serfdom. Not surprisingly, after the Russian Revolution that interpretation enjoyed the support of many Bolshevik historians. During the 1920s, Tsar Dmitrii was championed as a revolutionary hero, a cossack-tsar or peasant tsar whose attempt to abolish serfdom triggered his assassination and Russia’s First Peasant War. In the Stalin era, Dmitrii was demoted again to Grishka Otrep’ev, the evil tool of Polish intervention – just as the reputation of Comrade Pushkin was recovering from its eclipse in the 1920s (due in part to Krupskaya’s campaign against him as a decadent writer). Consider this: If Pushkin’s reputation had not suffered during the 1920s, we might have seen both Pushkin and Dmitrii rehabilitated at the same time. It is not difficult to imagine that in such an atmosphere the creation of the canonical text of Pushkin’s play might have turned out...
differently. As we assemble to celebrate Meyerhold’s vision of the play, it is intriguing to consider what he might have done with Pushkin’s fully restored *Comedy* and the image of Tsar Dmitrii as a revolutionary hero.

I wish to thank Caryl Emerson, Sergei Fomichev, Lidiia Lotman, and Antony Wood for all their help in conceptualizing and writing *The Uncensored Boris Godunov*. I learned a great deal from each one of my co-authors. Let me end with this heartening update from St. Petersburg: A new Academy edition of Pushkin’s *Boris Godunov* is being prepared in Pushkinskii Dom, and – thanks to the tireless efforts of my colleagues Sergei and Lidiia (who, by the way, turns 90 this year!) – it will include as an appendix the full text of Pushkin’s *Komediia* which in our opinion belongs in the canon of the great poet’s works. Fomichev’s careful transcription of the original manuscript of *Komediia* – completed for our NEH sponsored book project – will soon appear in Russia. Can a performance in Moscow or St. Petersburg be far behind? I’m sure Pushkin would be very pleased.

Thank you for being such a patient audience.