A Russian History Play

Pushkin’s *Boris Godunov* centers on a few years from the period Russians refer to as “The Time of Troubles” – the period between the death of Tsar Fyodor in 1598 and the establishment of the Romanov Dynasty in 1613.

By the end of his rule in 1505, Tsar Ivan III (“Ivan the Great”) had created the modern state of Russia out of what had been a number of smaller kingdoms and republics. His grandson, Ivan IV (“Ivan the Terrible”) continued his strong autocratic rule from 1544 until 1584. Ivan’s death left Russia with a succession problem. Ivan had tragically and seemingly accidentally killed his oldest son by striking him over the head with his staff. Although his younger son, Fyodor, was named Tsar on his father’s death, he was not mentally sound and was incapable of ruling Russia on his own. Instead, Boris Godunov, his brother-in-law, effectively ruled the state as regent. Fyodor died in 1589 with no heir. Ivan IV’s remaining son, Dimitri, would have had a strong claim to the throne, but he died in 1591 at the age of 9 – possibly the victim of assassination. Instead, Boris Godunov was elected successor.

Pushkin’s play, officially entitled *Comedy about Tsar Boris and Grishka Otrepiev*, centers on Boris’s brief tenure as tsar from 1598 until 1605 and the challenge posed to his rule by a man pretending to be Dimitri, the youngest son of Ivan IV. This “False Dimitri” was able to enlist the support of the Polish court, the Cossacks, and disaffected Russian boyars in order to march against Boris in 1604. In 1605, after the death of Boris from natural causes, the “False Dimitri” was crowned tsar.