



The *Oprichnina* (a secret-police organization which existed between 1565-1572) consisted of about 6,000 political police (called *oprichniki*) who were at the service of Tsar Ivan IV (also known as "Ivan Grozny," meaning "Ivan the Terrible").

The job of the secret police was to find individuals who were supposedly plotting against the Tsar, then confiscate their lands and put the plotters to death.

As Ivan IV designed the system, it would function outside the boundaries of law. Persecutions took place without any legal limits and without restraint.

Although he claimed to be deeply religious, the Tsar did not spare clerics—or the wealth contained in some Russian Orthodox churches—if religious men were rounded-up by the *oprichniki*.

Russian nobles and aristocrats were the main targets of this system of domestic terror. As the *oprichniki* became more ruthless, more people died. The city of Novgorod was particularly hard hit.

In this work of water-color-and-charcoal-on-paper, by Apollinary Vasnetsov (1856-1933), we see members of the *Oprichnina* coming into a town. The immediate result is that everyone flees as fast as they can. This scene was used as a setting for Tchaikovsky's opera *The Oprichnik*.

In the end, the nobles and aristocrats rose up against the *Oprichnina*:

Under conditions of mass terror, universal fear, and denunciations, the apparatus of violence created in the Oprichnina acquired an entirely overwhelming influence on the political structure of the leadership. In the final analysis, the infernal machine of terror escaped from the control of its creators.

The final victims of the Oprichnina proved to be all of those who had stood at its cradle. (R.G. Skrynnikov, *Oprichnyi Terror*, at page 223 - quoted by Aleksandr Yanov in *The Origins of Autocracy: Ivan the Terrible in Russian History*, at pages 315-316.)

Years later, under the Bolsheviks and also during the Stalinist era, Russians once again endured the existence of secret police. The first head of *that* version of *oprichniki*—known as the *Cheka*—was a ruthless man called Felix Dzerzhinsky. He voiced his opinion on the use of terror:

We stand for organized terror—this should be frankly admitted. Terror is an absolute necessity during times of revolution.

Dzerzhinsky's words, in an article he published in *Krasnaya Gazeta* ("The Red Gazette") on the 1st of September, 1918, would have meshed with the actions of the *oprichniki* during the time of Ivan the Terrible:

Without mercy, without sparing, we will kill our enemies in scores of hundreds. Let them be thousands; let them drown themselves in their own blood.

Click on the image for a full-page view.

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Water-color-and-charcoal-on-paper, by Apollinary Vasnetsov (1856-1933), entitled *The Street in the Town: The Set to "Oprichnik"* by Pyotr Tchaikovsky (1911). Original maintained by the State Theatrical Bakhrushin Museum, in Moscow.

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