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BETWEEN HISTORY AND MYTH: IMPERIAL IMPOSTURE
AND ITS RELATION TO POPULAR MONARCHISM
IN RUSSIA

Popular monarchism and imperial or royal imposture are not exclusively Russian phenomena but, if the former has many parallels in other countries, the latter has particular persistent features in Russian history: not only is it connected with the popular idea of monarchy, but it also represents the parallel profane imitation of, and active opposition to, the utopian idea of a benevolent Tsar-deliverer.

The relation between ruler and people in Russia has been studied from a variety of aspects: literary, folkloric, social, political, and even religious. In his study on the bandit-revolutionary Sten'ka Razin, Philip Longworth has compared conventional literary sources with songs and legends from oral tradition and stressed that it is wrongly assumed that Russian peasant revolts were ‘spontaneous, elemental outbursts, lacking coherent goals and uninformed by ideology’. In fact, far from being a simple reaction to given stimuli, the presence of recurrent patterns suggests a continuity of ideas in such uprisings. Boris A. Uspenskii has concentrated on the study of the nature of imperial imposture as a cultural phenomenon and adds to the social or political perspective a religious one. His approach to the question is based on the analysis of the ideological conceptions of Russian society and explains how ‘royal imposture in the broader sense of the term is by no means invariably linked to social movements, nor does it necessarily involve a

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1 See Yves-Marie Bercé, Il re nascosto. Miti politici popolari nell'Europa moderna, tr. Augusto Comba, Torino, 1996 (hereafter Il re nascosto).
struggle for political power'. Daniel Field presented two case studies and focussed on the significance of two complementary myths: the myth of the benevolent Tsar and the myth of the peasant. What emerges from these and other studies is the invariable - and ancient - connection between the phenomenon of imperial imposture and popular monarchism as it was mutually perceived or constructed by the ruler himself, the people and even by pretenders or impostors from the beginning of the centralisation process that followed the fixation of imperial power.

At the roots of this connection lies the perception of the monarch as a sacred figure, a concept founded on the opposition between righteous and unrighteous Tsar developed in early Russia and legitimated during the centuries by combining elements from divine and natural law. A righteous Tsar is a true Tsar 'by nature': God predestined him to this role before his birth, his sacred inner nature and his power are both conferred by God, and he is perceived as an image of God, as an icon. Conversely, an unrighteous Tsar is such an act of self-will, not by God's grace. Even if legitimately enthroned, he is considered as a usurper, a pretender claiming the sacred religious qualities of a true Tsar. His power is only 'outward appearance' conferred by the Devil and he is perceived as an idol. However, the only criteria for the distinction of a true Tsar from a false one was predestination and this allowed any imperial impostor to claim his right to the throne on this same

3 See Boris A. Uspenskii, 'Tsar and Pretender: Samozvanchestvo or Royal Imposture in Russia as a Cultural-Historical Phenomenon', in A. Shukman (ed.), The Semiotics of Russian Culture, Ann Arbor, 1984 (hereafter 'Tsar and Pretender'), pp. 259-260.
4 See Daniel Field, Rebels in the Name of the Tsar, Boston, 1976 (hereafter Rebels).
5 While P. Longworth has used the term 'pretender' meaning either a claimant to the throne or an impostor, D. Field has drawn a distinction: a pretender claims the throne on the basis of rules of succession differing from those that the reigning monarch relies on; an imperial impostor presents himself as the person who, under the commonly accepted rules of succession, would be the legitimate monarch. See P. Longworth, 'The Pretender Phenomenon in Eighteenth-Century Russia', Past and Present, 66, 1975 (hereafter 'The Pretender Phenomenon'), p. 61; D. Field, Rebels, p. 8.
ground, especially when the natural line of succession was interrupted, and a ruler, who could be seen as a pretender himself, was enthroned (e.g. the False Dmitrii, Boris Godunov, Catherine II etc.). In this context B. A. Uspenskii can see imperial imposture as 'a quite predictable and logically justified consequence' of this conception of imperial power.\(^7\)

The dichotomy Tsar-icon/Pretender-idol corresponds to the juxtaposition order/disorder, the first being the reflection of Christian, normative behaviour, the second of pagan, carnivalesque 'anti-behaviour'. In early Russia anti-behaviour seems to have been connected to masquerades (involving the dressing up

\(^7\) To stress the necessity of considering the conception and the representation of power in Russian society when speaking about pretenders and impostors, it is worth noting that the opposition between a sacred (iconic) institution and false, misleading idols was still alive in the nineteenth century: K. P. Pobedonostsev referred to power as something sacred 'founded on truth, and inasmuch as truth it has as its source the All-High God and His commandments (...) The first act of power must be the finding of truth and its discrimination from falsehood; on this is founded the faith of the people in power, and the gravitation towards it of all mankind.' What Pobedonostsev considered falsehood (idolatric) were institutions, such as Parliamentaryism, founded on false principles: 'It is sad to think that even in Russia there are men who aspire to the establishment of this falsehood [Parliamentarism] among us (...) Yet even where centuries have sanctified its existence, faith already decays; the Liberal intelligence exalts it, but the people groans under its despotism, and recognises its falsehood. We may not see, the overthrow of this idol, which contemporary thought in its vanity continues still to worship.' Cf. K.P. POBEDONOSTSEV, Reflections of a Russian Statesman, Ann Arbor, 1965, pp. 43-44, 253-254. See B.A. USPENSKII, 'Tsar and Pretender', pp. 262-263, 265; on the conception of imperial power and the meaning of the term Tsar see also the works of GIANNFRANCO GIRAUDO, 'L'eta di Ivan III', Rivista Storica Italiana, LXXXIV (1972), 2, pp. 358-436; DRAKULA, Contributi alla storia delle idee politiche nell'Europa Orientale alla svolta del XV secolo, Venezia, Libreria Universitaria Ed., 1972; Alle origini dello Stato russo: da Ivan III a Pietro il Grande, Venezia, CLUEC, 1984; 'L'eretica come filo rosso nella storia della Rus', Studia Slavica Mediaevalia et Humanistica Riccardo Picchio dicata, Roma, Ateneo, 1986, pp. 299-310; 'Rol' pravoslavnogo carja v učreždenii moskovskogo patriaršestva', IV centenario dell'istituzione del Patriarcato di Mosca, Roma, Herder. 1990, pp. 105-115; 'Idea di Roma e retaggio russo nell'ideologia di Pietro il Grande' Idea giuridica e politica di Roma e personalità storiche, II, Roma, Herder, 1992, pp. 79-111; Lessico giuridico, politico ed ecclesiastico della Russia del XVI secolo, Roma, Herder, 1994 (co-author G. Maniscalco Basile); 'Appunti sul lessico politico della Moscovskaia Rus', Ricerche Slavistiche, XLIII (1996), pp. 37-61; 'Titul gosudarej moskovskih v venecianskoj istoričeskoj literature i diplomatičeskih dokumentah (XV-XVII vv.)', Rim, Kostantinopol', Moskva: Sravnitel'no-istoričeskoe issledovanie centrov ideologii i kul'tury, Moskva, RAN, 1997, pp. 326-350.
in the Tsar’s clothes to simulate the external signs of his status) and to have been perceived by the authorities as a blasphemous attempt to ‘steal’ the Tsar’s sacred attributes.\textsuperscript{8} Paradoxically, Tsars such as Ivan IV and Peter I are known to have forced aristocrats to represent a false Tsar, the court and prelates of the Church to unmask or denigrate opponents and to lay emphasis on their authentic (predestined) right to the throne as well as on the divine nature of their power.\textsuperscript{9} At the

\textsuperscript{8} B.A. Uspenskii has indicated that in historical, folklore and ethnographical documents “playing at Tsar” “is seen as playing at being a sacred, omnipotent being\textsuperscript{,} as “a variant of royal imposture, though one completely divested of any kind of political pretensions” and for this reason “ruthlessly punished in the seventeenth century”; further he assumed: “any kind of masquerade or dressing up was inevitably thought of in early Russia as anti-behaviour, i.e. a sinister, black-magic significance was attributed to it in principle” and “this is how imposture too, and evidently, ‘the game of Tsar’, was perceived in early Russia”. Cf. B.A. Uspenskii, ‘Tsar and Pretender’, pp. 266-268, 272.

\textsuperscript{9} “Ivan IV (...) seems to have deliberately flaunted the religious standards, which were the basis of his legitimacy, especially during the Oprichnina. He revelled in blasphemy and his cruelties often manifested the ironic twist of what is termed “glumlenie”: he denigrated his victims, ostentatiously violating their status by immersing them in inverted worlds of carnival”. According to Priscilla Hunt there is a relation between Ivan IV’s sense of own sacredness and his practice during the Oprichnina. His actions would respond to a whole system of ritual and mythical analogies and oppositions, the centre of which were the Tsar and the State, bound to sacralize blasphemy and atrocity. This connection is detectable in the personal mythology of kingship Ivan developed, “by which he interpreted his blasphemies and atrocities during the Oprichnina as Christian and which he articulated to justify himself in face of criticism and betrayal by his subjects”. Cf. P. Hunt, ‘Ivan IV’s Personal Mythology of Kingship’, Slavic Review, 52 (1993), (hereafter ‘Ivan IV’s Personal Mythology of Kingship’) pp. 769-772, 774. Paul A. Bushkovitch has analysed how the changes introduced in the rite of the Epiphany ceremony of the Russian court since the 16th century affected its ideological symbolism. Some of his conclusive remarks on the ceremony in the 18th century relate to the theme of masquerades and anti-behaviour. The church created this court ritual as an alternative to the folk practices (sviatki) in the 15th century, but under Peter the Great it seems to have faded away, and by 1710 only the church without the Tsar and the court being present observed it. “What Peter did was to allow a ceremony of the Russian court that was part of the court ritual to die (...). In its place, Tsar Peter and his friends brought the folk culture to the court by producing their own version of sviatki, one close to the popular custom, with its drunken parties, eroticism, and dressing up. Peter also used the carnival atmosphere of sviatki to substitute a ceremony that mocked the church for one that had visually demonstrated the superiority of the church to the Tsar. (...) Peter was constructing a counter-ritual to the traditional with its bless-
same time, popular belief associated anti-behaviour to black magic and sorcery: following the images of popular consciousness, Boris Godunov regarded Grishka Otrep’ev, the first False Dmitrii, as a sorcerer; the latter, recognized, in his turn, Godunov as a false Tsar, a pretender and a magician; Vasilii Shuiskii was haunted by the False Dmitrii’s ghost; Sten’ka Razin was a wizard who voted himself to black magic, engaged in unexplainable metaphysical performances, and was visited by witches.  

Like their imperial counterparts, who encompassed the unity and integrity of Christ’s two opposite natures (human and divine) in one single body, performers of anti-behaviour

ing of the waters”. Cf. P.A. Bushkovitch, ‘The Epiphany Ceremony of the Russian Court in the 16th and 17th Centuries’, Russian Review, 49, 1990, (hereafter ‘The Epiphany Ceremony’), p. 16. Lindsey Hughes has observed that during Peter’s reign “many ‘serious’ institutions and endeavours had their own mock counterparts. The ceremonial aspects of the Petrine era cannot be understood without attempting to reconcile the apparent conflict between, on the one hand, the elevation of monarchical power through lavish triumphal parades, panegyric literature, and engravings, and on the other hand, its debunking through mock rituals and play offices and institutions”. Mock ceremonies involved the All-Mad, All-Jesting, All-Drunken Assembly which L. Hughes interpreted as “Peter’s version of ‘rebellious ritual’ and ‘group abdication from the structures of the social order itself’, but it was subversion with rules, which took established models (in this case religious rites dress, and formulae), then undermined them. Rather than being subverted from below, however, with paupers becoming princes, in this case it was the ‘prince’ himself who effected the swap, but the iron hand of the tsar was never effectively disguised in the person of Archdeacon Peter, Peter Mikhailov, or whoever”. “Peter’s masquerades were not true carnival at all, in the sense that ‘people are liberated from authority, behaviour is unfettered and hierarchy is suspended’. On the contrary, Peter’s ‘courly carnival’ celebrated authority as sacred”. Cf. L. Hughes, Russia in the Age of Peter the Great, London, 1998, pp. 248, 257, 266. See also R.K. Massie, Peter the Great: his Life and World, London, 1981, pp. 119-121, 262, 268-270; Stephen Lessing Baehr, The Paradise Myth in Eighteenth-Century Russia, Stanford, 1991, pp. 57-64.


also had a messianic feature: legends about Sten’ka Razin often portrayed him as a Christ-like figure, born of a devout widow, immortal or due to resurrect; his death was interpreted as a martyrdom and Pugachev was believed to be Razin revived. ¹² Part of this same feature is the popular consideration of crime as a misfortune and of the criminal as a wretch. This conviction derives from the Christian idea of salvation through suffering and of passive resistance to the evil, an idea that recalls the humiliation and scorn suffered by Christ. ¹³  

In his Christ-like nature it would seem that an impostor could be as sacred as a Tsar, which would confirm what B. A. Uspenskii sustained about the phenomenon of royal imposture being the second side of the sacralized Russian idea of the power and the ruler. In the context of the emergence of a pretender to the throne the Christ-like element could also be related to the motif of the immolation of the tsarevich. ¹⁴ This theme has first been developed in the early Russian chronicles in the story of the assassinations of Boris and Gleb: the two are Christ-like sanctified characters that die as martyrs taking the sins of the world upon themselves. They represent the first Russian prototype of the innocent heir to the throne killed in the struggle for power. At this stage there is still only a prince-ly power in Kievan Rus’ but in later Muscovite times the ap-

¹² Although Razin wasn’t a pretender himself, he is certainly an example of an anti-behaviour performer. His supposed resurrection in Pugachev’s clothes (when he actually becomes a pretender) reflects this dual nature: according to legends on this theme, he was believed to be “the secular Messiah, the apocalyptic social liberator and avenger” concerned with the people’s welfare that everybody awaited. Cf. P. Longworth, ‘The Subversive Legend’, pp. 22-23. See also Y-M. Bercé, Il re nascosto, pp. 122-123. ¹³ See J. Brooks, Quando la Russia imparò a leggere, p. 262. ¹⁴ See Francis Conte, Gli Slavi, tr. Ernesto Garino, Dario Formentin, Torino, 1991, pp. 491-492. See also Racconto dei tempi passati. Cronaca russa del secolo XII, ed. Itala Pia Sbriziol, Torino, 1971, pp. 76-81. Y-M. Bercé has underscored how the accounts on the death of the first Dmitrii present the event as a martyrdom in which the impostor with his passive resistance to his fate is identified with Christ. At the same time his inclination to sacrifice draws a parallel between the false Dmitrii and the assassinated true tsarevich, whose early age, rank and death modality show, in turn, his holy affinity to the sanctified Boris and Gleb. In time contaminations and overlapping in the accounts and legends on the young Dmitrii’s death relate not much to this episode, as to the theme, common in all ages, of the innocent prince who dies and resurrects for the redemption of the Russian people. See Y-M. Bercé, Il re nascosto, pp. 97-98, 100-102, 212-213.
pearance of an impostor claiming to be the tsarevich escaped from death (e.g. Dmitrii Ivanovich) acquires the messianic significance of the social deliverer.

The element of sorcery on the one side, and the messianic feature on the other, can both be read as part of a mythologizing process of the historical figures of impostors: it has been shown that, irrespective of historical period and geographic location, collective memory remembers a historical personality and a historical act by assimilating them to a mythical hero, who undergoes mythical trials and performs mythical deeds. The same process can be applied to rulers as well: popular culture transmitted an idealized image of Tsars, who appear to have gained the reputation of champions of the people, of liberators from oppression and oppressors. This is particularly evident in the legend of the Tsar-deliverer. Even if subjected to variations, the story tells of a deliverer who wants to free the faithful people from oppressors; his intentions are contrasted by wicked courtiers and officials who try to kill the deliverer; having escaped death, the deliverer then wanders from place to place, understanding the people’s sufferings by experiencing them himself; eventually, he returns to the capital, is recognized as the true Tsar and inaugurates a new regime of liberty by freeing the people from oppression.

Maureen Perrie has raised an interesting issue on the concept of the ‘benevolent Tsar’ related to Ivan IV, and her conclusions on the promotion of this belief may also be reflected in the pretenders’ and imperial impostors’ devices to gain followers. To the hypothesis of V. K. Sokolova on the fact that Ivan IV’s struggle against the boyars created his positive image, M. Perrie adds the intention of the Tsar himself to project such an image by means of demagogic appeals to the people.

15 In his study on the image of bandits in popular literature J. Brooks has remarked that Russian outlaws who first abandoned the social order and in the end returned to it, either as redeemed or defeated, have common features with the heroes of the monomythical religions, such as the Christian one, who undergo an initiating journey into another world and after ritual passages finally return to earth. See J. Brooks, Quando la Russia imparò a leggere, p. 255. See also Mircea Eliade, Il Mito dell’eterno ritorno (Archetipi e Rpetizione), tr. Giovanni Cantoni, Roma, 1968, pp. 61, 64-65; M. Eliade, Trattato di Storia delle Religioni, ed., Pietro Angelini, tr. Virginia Vacca, Gaetano Riccardo, Torino, 1999, p. 394.

16 See D. Field, Rebels, p. 6.
Ivan’s purpose was to win popular support in his campaign against the boyars by presenting them as oppressors of the common people, but in reality his campaign covered a policy ultimately directed toward the interests of a centralising State. Apparently, like Ivan IV, impostors demagogically played with people’s psychology to promote their image of social deliverers-avengers: they exploited the myth of the ‘benevolent Tsar-deliverer’ by promising justice and freedom to gather supporters in their uprisings, but at the same time they acted, dressed, and behaved in front of their followers in a way to produce a likeness corresponding to the illusionary image of the ruler rooted in popular imagination; officials, secretaries and counsellors worked for them; they also fabricated proofs, false documents, or body marks to strengthen their credibility. This should make evident that conscious ‘self-mythisation’ both by Tsars and impostors played a great role in the building of the Tsar-deliverer utopia and that personal charisma was indisputably associated with the active participation in this myth-making process when pretenders and true Tsars reinforced a (legitimate or illegitimate) claim to the same throne.

One could ask what was the meaning of this gigantic repre-

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17 M. Perrie has seen evidence of Ivan’s attitude in the way the Oprichnina was introduced, e.g. leaving Moscow and announcing his abdication because of the treason of the boyars, voevody and officials (1565): “Ivan was here clearly bidding for the support of the citizens against the boyars, and in their reply the Muscovites not only called upon the tsar to defend them against ‘the wolves’ and ‘the mighty’, but also offered to help him to destroy their common enemies”. “Ivan was seeking to present the introduction of the Oprichnina as a continuation of the policy of curtailing the power of the boyars. (...) he was, at least, trying to win the support of the common people for his reforms, by claiming that he had their interests at heart”. Cf. M. Perrie, “The Popular Image of Ivan”, pp. 279-281.

18 The exploitation of the belief in the Tsar-deliverer by pretenders has been identified by P. Longworth as well: “The archetypal pretender was a would-be revolutionary, albeit of a primitive type, a man who exploited the device of pretension as the only possible means of acquiring the necessary charisma to raise mass support among the Russian people”. Cf. P. Longworth, ‘The Pretender Phenomenon’, p. 74; see also pp. 77-78, 82; P. Longworth, Les Cosaques, tr. Robert Latour, Paris, 1972 (hereafter Les Cosaques), p. 145; J. Brooks, Quando la Russia imparò a leggere, p. 264; B.A. Uspehenskii, ‘Tsar and Pretender’, p. 264; Y-M. Bercé, Il re nascosto, pp. 81, 115, 127-128.

19 Y-M. Bercé has reported on the ability of the first False Dmitrii to touch King Sigismund’s feelings when the Polish court recognized him as the real Tsar. See Y-M. Bercé, Il re nascosto, p. 84.
sentation for the mass of the people. P. Longworth saw in the legends on Sten'ka Razin a vehicle for seditious ideas and regarded them as 'an oral forerunner of the samizdat' of ordinary people. As such they convey a subversive ideology and an exhortatory message calling for an active participation in the struggle against oppressors, even after the hero's death. Razin's messianic element does not imply passive religious belief in the hope of deliverance by external means, and popular uprisings in subsequent governments prove that there is a connection between the social myth of the impostor who declares himself to be the Tsar-deliverer and active peasant protest.

As stated above, the appearance of an impostor was seen as a manifestation of anti-behaviour and disorder, and an impostor was considered either as a bandit-criminal, or as a rebel. In popular literature bandits question the relation between the individual and society: they refuse submission to the institutions of the ordered society (Church and State), and chose to live in freedom outside of it, in disorder and persecution. This rebellion against the authorities is usually marked by failure and the rebel seeks to be readmitted in society. The only means of reintegration is either repentance and submission to the State, or a humiliating death. It turns out that folklore legends and popular literature mirror a whole system of values at variance with that of the ruling élite. If impostors were perceived in legends, popular literature and in their life as social

21 According to P. Longworth, "the legend must be held to reflect an ideology, however primitive, likely to challenge the existing order (...). There can be no doubt that its messianic features kept the idea of social liberation alive; that many of its themes served to legitimise the idea of rebellion by casting rebels in a favourable light; that the debonair and daring 'son' of Razin must have presented an exemplary model for the young; and that various of the stories about Razin himself were of an obviously agitationary character". Cf. P. Longworth, 'The Subversive Legend', p. 33.
22 See J. Brooks, Quando la Russia imparò a leggere, p. 258-259.
23 In comparing American, English and French outlaws with their Russian counterparts in popular literature J. Brooks has pointed out how the value of individual independence of Russian bandits and criminals was strongly diminished by the power of the ordered society. They never succeed in asserting their individual heroism but on the contrary their adventures show the superiority of the legitimate social order embodied in the divine person of the autocrat over the (extraordinary) individual. See J. Brooks, Quando la Russia imparò a leggere, pp. 255-256; see also pp. 281-282.
deliverers by the people, but as rebel-bandits by the authorities, this is an indication of the feeling of alienation of the mass from the oppressive higher social strata and their institutions. Peasants understood and justified the condition of the rebel-bandit that led him to act against the law, because the law was identified with the social enemies. 24 However, the delegitimization of the law did not imply the delegitimation of Tsardom: loyalty to the Tsar was promoted, whereas unjust laws were attributed to the influence of wicked officials and of Tsar agents, guilty of standing as an obstacle between the ruler and the common people. 25

Nevertheless, as D. Field indicated, the myth of the Tsar-deliverer itself had a subversive aspect. According to the idea of power discussed above, the Tsar's sacred plenitude of powers made him accountable only to God. The Christian idea of a future reward (deliverance) helped to shape the ruler as a source of hope and consolation, but the myth also inculcated passive submission in the people. By contrast, hostility towards the officials inspired rebellion. Illegal performances were frequently passed off as having been legitimized by the Tsar. Asserting the false approval of the Tsar was a device used in peasant revolts and tells something about the awareness of peasants, or at least of their leaders, that social myths could be constructed and manipulated against the regime. 26 When em-

24 Because of the inevitable failure of his rebellion, the bandit was inexorably compelled to make a choice between punishment and repentance in front of society; this made of him also an object of compassion for the peasants. See J. Brooks, Quando la Russia imparò a leggere, p. 261.

25 See D. Field, Rebels, pp. 1, 15.

26 Ibidem, pp. 13-15, 23. This is also P. Longworth's opinion about the legends on Razin: "whereas the legend's attitude to gentry, merchants, officers and officials is clearly hostile, its attitude to the Tsar is not. (...) Razin might prey on ships belonging to merchants and boyars, for example, but never on the Tsar's. Indeed he often flies his flag. Features of this kind have been dismissed as manifestations of the 'Tsarist illusion'. This interpretation is imperceptive, however-for such features do not imply loyalty to the Tsar as such but rather to Tsardom as a legitimising agency. (...) He flies the Tsar's flag as a cover for his piracy and even claims to plunder on the Tsar's behalf. In this way laws regarded as unjust are not attributed to the Tsar, while lawless activities are given the spurious sanction of the Tsar's authority. This attitude (or legitimising trick) was exemplified repeatedly in peasant protest from the 17th century onwards, and it is quintessentially subversive". Cf. P. Longworth, 'The Subversive Legend', p. 28. See also P. Longworth, Les Cosaques, pp. 135, 144-145. See also Yves-Marie Bercé, Il re nascosto, p. 121.
bodied or exploited by charismatic impostors, the myth of the Tsar-deliverer manifested its subversiveness in social protest and served as a means of advancing political demands. Such demands often found expression in some programme of reform. For instance, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, rebellions led by impostors in the name of the Tsar originated prevalently from marginal social groups – Cossacks, bandits, runaway serfs – especially in the geographical area between the Ukraine, the Black earth belt and the Orenburg region, where the once-free population was then undergoing a process of enserfment. These revolts were independent from established political interests, and reform programmes implied the determination to overthrow the oppressive government, a substantial revolutionary change of the social order. Incidentally, if, on the one hand, Sten'ka Razin insisted on loyalty to the Tsar, on the other hand, he proposed a rudimental model of democracy to rule the provinces, of which the Cossacks *krug* was a prototype.  

In the cases of intervention by the authorities, the rebels employed, in their turn, the obverse and complementary myth of the naïve peasant: ‘gullible, easily misled and blindly trusting in a benevolent Tsar’. Both myths worked, to a certain degree, as a ready-made excuse to commit illegal acts of protest and, at the same time, to avoid punishment.  

The phenomenon of royal imposture and popular monar chism are the result of the way in which power was crystallized and understood in Russia both by the ruler and the ruled. The explanation of power by official ideologues and the application of it by the rulers promoted the idea of the sacralized nature of the ruler and of his function. This concept presupposes the fundamental opposition between the expression of truth (a true Tsar) and its obverse (the appearance of a false Tsar). As a consequence, a whole system of oppositions is reflected in the nature of Tsardom as an institution: if the holder of power is the representative of a sacred truth wanted and established by God Himself, the challenger of this sacred figure is the representative of a blasphemous devilish will. The Christian faith of the ruler manifested through archetypal Biblical rituals contrasts

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the leftovers of a pagan pre-ordered culture, i.e. the superstitious beliefs and carnivalesque performances of the inverted world. The order given by a centralized monarchical State is in opposition to the consequent disorder of a (democratic) separation of power.

As Y-M. Bercé put it, if power can shape opinions, popular expectations can impose their shape on power. In the popular representation of power the myth of the benevolent Tsar-deliverer, as the personification of a glorious future rule of liberty and justice, is deep-rooted both in the image of the ruler and in the image of the impostor. The function of this mythisation by the people is a projection of their hope that the next ruler, be it the legitimate heir (i.e. Dmitrii Ivanovich, Aleksei Petrovich) or an impostor, will be concerned with social welfare and that his sacrifice will produce the change needed. From this point of view, it would seem that in the people’s eyes only the ruler, or the misjudged impostor interested in the ‘common good’ has the ‘divine’ right to call himself ‘true’ and, as a consequence, sacred, no matter whether he is of royal descent or not.

There is messianism in the expectation that the true tsarevich-Saviour escaped death and will come back to save the people. There is also opportunism in the way legitimate power is represented: if the only criterion to distinguish a true Tsar is predestination, then the legitimate tsarevich could be hiding among any community and any community could arbitrarily build up a ‘legitimate Tsar’ to follow and pursue its own interests. Only when the legitimate principle is overtaken by the constitution of a legal government the usurpation will be perceived as such. As if, somehow, a legal principle killed the myth of the legitimate Tsar-deliverer, of that Messiah who, in his quest for the truth, experienced the people’s sufferings and is bound to return to re-establish prosperity.

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29 See Y-M. Bercé, Il re nascosto, pp. xii.
30 Ibidem, pp. 298-300; 212-214; 112.
ABSTRACT
If power can shape opinions, popular expectations can impose their shape on power. At the roots of the connection between the phenomenon of imperial imposture and popular monarchism in Russia lay the perception of the monarch as a sacred figure, a concept that presupposes the opposition between righteous and unrighteous Tsar. However, the only criterion for the distinction of a true Tsar from a false one was predestination and any imperial impostor could claim a right to the throne. As a consequence the phenomenon also represents the parallel profane imitation of, and active opposition to, the utopian idea of a benevolent Tsar-deliverer.

KEY WORDS
Russia. Myth. Imperial Imposture.