

# Pretenders and popular monarchism in early modern Russia

*The false tsars of the Time of Troubles*

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## Introduction

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More than a dozen impostors, all claiming to be long-lost tsars or tsareviches, appeared in Russia in the early seventeenth century, in the period of civil strife that is generally known as the ‘Time of Troubles’ (*smutnoe vremya*). The Troubles were sparked off by the invasion of Russia in 1604 by the First False Dimitry, a pretender proclaiming himself to be the youngest son of Tsar Ivan the Terrible (1533–84). Tsarevich Dimitry of Uglich had died in 1591, in mysterious circumstances; seven years later, the old dynasty of the Muscovite rulers came to an end, with the death of Dimitry’s elder half-brother, Tsar Fedor Ivanovich. The throne passed to Boris Godunov, Tsar Fedor’s brother-in-law, who was widely believed to have plotted against the heirs of Ivan the Terrible in order to gain power for himself. Godunov had been tsar for five years when the pretender appeared in Poland. ‘Dimitry’ defeated Boris’s armies, succeeded in obtaining the throne, and occupied it for almost a year. The overthrow and murder of the pretender in May 1606 led to a further period of civil war and foreign invasion, in which there appeared not only new false Dimitrys, but also various other ‘tsareviches’ who professed themselves to be descendants of Tsar Ivan. Order was restored only in 1613, when a new dynasty was established with the election of Michael Romanov as tsar.

Pretence was not an exclusively Russian phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> Royal imposture, indeed, may be regarded as an occupational hazard of any hereditary monarchical system. Ancient history provides the examples of the Pseudo-Smerdis of Persia and the False Agrippa of Rome;<sup>2</sup> the medieval period offers

<sup>1</sup> The phenomenon of pretence or royal imposture is known in Russian as *samozvanstvo* or *samozvanchestvo*. A pretender (*samozvanets*) is literally a ‘self-styled’ (*samozvannyi*) tsar or tsarevich, that is, someone who has falsely adopted a royal title and identity. *Samozvanets* is therefore a narrower term than the English word ‘pretender’, which can be used for any claimant to a throne (the broader Russian equivalent is *pretendent*). ‘Impostor’ is perhaps the more correct translation, but I shall follow established custom and practice in using ‘pretender’ along with ‘impostor’ as English equivalents of *samozvanets*.

<sup>2</sup> Bercé, *Le roi caché*, pp. 369–70. This book provides a useful overview of pretenders and the popular political ideas associated with them.

the False Count Baldwin of Flanders and the False Emperor Frederick II.<sup>3</sup> The closest parallels and the most immediate precedents for the Russian pretenders of the Time of Troubles, however, can be found in early modern Europe. England had known the impostors Lambert Simnel and Perkin Warbeck in the late fifteenth century;<sup>4</sup> and in the last decades of the sixteenth century a number of royal pretenders appeared in Moldavia,<sup>5</sup> as well as a series of False Don Sebastians in Portugal.<sup>6</sup> Nor was pretence purely a pre-modern phenomenon: about forty claimants to the identity of Louis XVII were to appear in the early nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup>

In spite of these precedents and parallels elsewhere, however, royal imposture has long been considered to have had especial significance in Russia.<sup>8</sup> It has particularly attracted the attention of historians because it was associated with major popular uprisings in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: not only those of the Time of Troubles, but also the Pugachev rising of 1773–4 and (to a lesser extent) the revolt of Sten'ka Razin in 1669–71. Two generalising essays about pretence by pre-revolutionary Russian historians, written almost a century apart, linked the phenomenon with revolts in which cossacks sought to take advantage of the credulity and gullibility of the uneducated peasant masses in order to rouse them to rebel under the banner of a 'true tsar'.<sup>9</sup> A number of more recent scholars have associated pretence with 'popular monarchism', the naive faith in the benevolence of the tsar towards the common people (*narod*) that was believed to be particularly characteristic of the Russian peasantry.<sup>10</sup> My own interest in *samozvanchestvo*, indeed, sprang from a concern with the evolution of popular monarchism in Russia, in its various forms, from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries.<sup>11</sup> Yet not all Russian pretenders were themselves recruited from the ranks of the *narod*, nor were their supporters drawn exclusively from the lower classes. A number of pretenders were confidence tricksters, political opportunists or adventurers; others were pathetic deluded individuals. Many had no popular support, or only a handful of followers.<sup>12</sup> And popular monarchism itself could assume forms other than pretence, such as rebellion 'in

<sup>3</sup> Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, pp. 90–93, 113–15.

<sup>4</sup> Gairdner, *History of the Life and Reign of Richard the Third*; Gairdner, *Henry the Seventh*; Pollard, ed., *The Reign of Henry VII*; Alexander, *The First of the Tudors*.

<sup>5</sup> Mokhov, *Ocherki; Istoricheskie svyazi*, vol. 1.

<sup>6</sup> D'Antas, *Les faux Don Sébastien*; Brooks, *A King for Portugal*; Bercé, *Le roi caché*, ch. 1.

<sup>7</sup> Bercé, *Le roi caché*, pp. 328–39.

<sup>8</sup> Solov'ev, 'Zametki o samozvantsakh', p. 265; Klyuchevskii, *Sochineniya*, vol. 3, p. 27; Chislov, *Russkie narodnye*, p. 29; Troitskii, 'Samozvantsy', p. 134; Longworth, 'The Pretender Phenomenon', p. 61; Uspenskii, 'Tsar' i samozvanets', p. 201.

<sup>9</sup> [Shcherbatov], *Kratkaya povest'*; Solov'ev, 'Zametki o samozvantsakh'.

<sup>10</sup> Field, *Rebels*, pp. 1–26.

<sup>11</sup> Perrie, *The Image of Ivan the Terrible*, pp. 1–4.

<sup>12</sup> Troitskii, 'Samozvantsy'; Longworth, 'The Pretender Phenomenon'.

the name of the tsar' – directed against his evil counsellors – and the idealisation of individual rulers of the past as 'good tsars'. Thus the precise relationship of pretence to popular monarchism has to be established empirically for each individual occurrence of the phenomenon.

Of all the Russian pretenders of the seventeenth century, the best known is the First False Dimitry. His adventures captured the imagination of contemporaries well beyond the frontiers of Russia, and literary treatments of his story were popular throughout Europe long before Pushkin's verse drama served as the basis for Musorgskii's opera, *Boris Godunov*.<sup>13</sup> Nineteenth-century historians were fascinated by the question of the pretender's true identity, and some were intrigued by the possibility that he might really have been the son of Ivan the Terrible.<sup>14</sup> By the end of the nineteenth century, the proliferation of popular literature about the First False Dimitry had somewhat discredited the topic of pretence in the Time of Troubles as a 'serious' subject for historical study. S. F. Platonov, the author of what is still the most influential account of the period, referred somewhat pissily to the 'arbitrary conjectures and speculative hypotheses' of popular historians, and insisted that for the purposes of his own scholarly analysis there was 'not the slightest necessity to dwell on the question of the identity of the first Pretender'.<sup>15</sup> For Platonov, pretence was simply a political device employed by various warring social groups whose struggle for power in the Time of Troubles derived from a deep-rooted crisis in sixteenth-century Muscovy.

In the Soviet period the designation of the early seventeenth century as a 'Time of Troubles' was abandoned in favour of the notion of a 'peasant war', and the historiography was dominated by sterile debates about how best to fit the events of the period into a conceptual framework derived from the inappropriate model of Germany in 1525.<sup>16</sup> I. I. Smirnov's study of the Bolotnikov revolt of 1606–7 depicted that episode alone as the 'first peasant war' in Russia,<sup>17</sup> and this became the orthodox position. After Stalin's death, however, some Soviet historians contended that the entire sequence of events from 1603 to 1614 constituted a 'peasant war'.<sup>18</sup> Pretenders were of interest to Soviet historians if – like Pugachev – they could be identified as leaders of peasant wars. But the pretenders of the early seventeenth century did not

<sup>13</sup> Brody, *The Demetrius Legend*; Emerson, *Boris Godunov*.

<sup>14</sup> See especially Kostomarov, *Kto byl pervyi Lzhedimitrii?*; Pierling, *Rome et Démétrius*; Bestuzhev-Ryumin, *Pis'ma*; Suvorin, *O Dimitrii Samozvantsse*; Waliszewski, *La crise révolutionnaire*; Barbour, *Dimitry*.

<sup>15</sup> Platonov, *Ocherki*, p. 189; p. 447, n. 71.

<sup>16</sup> See, in particular, the debate in the journal *Voprosy Istorii* in 1958–61: Zimin, 'Nekotorye voprosy'; Smirnov, 'O nekotorykh voprosakh'; 'O nekotorykh spornykh voprosakh'; Koretskii, 'Iz istorii krest'yanskoi voiny'; Ovchinnikov, 'Nekotorye voprosy'; Sklyar, 'O nachal'nom etape'; 'O krest'yanskoi voine'.

<sup>17</sup> Smirnov, *Vosstanie Bolotnikova*.

<sup>18</sup> Zimin, 'Nekotorye voprosy'; Makovskii, *Pervaya krest'yanskaya voina*.

easily lend themselves to such a categorisation. In the early Soviet period M. N. Pokrovskii and his disciples had attempted to present the First and Second False Dimitrys as cossack or peasant tsars, but the revival of Russian nationalism under Stalin encouraged scholars to view these pretenders as puppets of the ‘feudal Polish interventionists’.<sup>19</sup> Only Bolotnikov’s ally, the cossack ‘Tsarevich Peter’, was regarded as the leader of an anti-feudal uprising.<sup>20</sup> In the post-Stalin period, however, revisionists such as A. A. Zimin argued that although pretenders such as the First False Dimitry were themselves ‘political adventurers’, they were able to acquire widespread popular support from peasants and slaves.<sup>21</sup>

In discussing the ‘ideology’ of ‘peasant wars’, Soviet historians of the older generation were required to base themselves on Stalin’s comment of 1931 that leaders of popular rebellions in Russia, such as Razin and Pugachev, were ‘tsarists’, who ‘acted against the landowners, but for “the good tsar”’. Stalin identified Bolotnikov, along with Razin and Pugachev, as the leader of a peasant uprising against ‘feudal oppression’;<sup>22</sup> and in his monograph on the Bolotnikov rising I. I. Smirnov linked pretence with peasant monarchism: ‘the tsarist psychology of the peasantry created the social base for “*samozvanstvo*”, because in this the peasant faith in the “good tsar” found its expression’.<sup>23</sup> The slogan of the ‘good tsar’, Smirnov observed somewhat cryptically, constituted a ‘peculiar peasant utopia’.<sup>24</sup>

An interesting development of this approach to the phenomenon of pretence was provided, after Stalin’s death, in an influential book by the Soviet folklorist K. V. Chistov. Chistov was primarily concerned not with pretenders but with popular myths. He placed *samozvanchestvo* in the context of ‘popular socio-utopian legends’ in which tsars or tsareviches were removed from power because their courtiers feared that they planned to liberate the people from oppression. The peasants however believed that these ousted rulers would return one day to implement the reforms that had been thwarted by the ‘traitor-boyars’. Pretenders, according to Chistov, attracted popular support because they were seen as the embodiments of these longed-for royal ‘deliverers’, and pretence constituted ‘one of the most curious ideological and political manifestations of the feudal crisis and one of the most specific and persistent forms of anti-feudal protest’.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>19</sup> For a review of Soviet historiography of the period, see Skrynnikov, *Sotsial’no-politicheskaya bor’ba*, pp. 6–9.

<sup>20</sup> Troitskii, ‘Samozvantsy’, pp. 134–8.

<sup>21</sup> Zimin, ‘Nekotorye voprosy’, p. 99.

<sup>22</sup> Stalin, ‘Beseda’, p. 113.

<sup>23</sup> Smirnov, *Vosstanie Bolotnikova*, p. 29.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 506.

<sup>25</sup> Chistov, *Russkie narodnye*, p. 29. For a critical review of Chistov’s views, based on evidence relating to the Time of Troubles, see Perrie, ‘“Popular Socio-Utopian Legends”’.

The most recent work by a Russian historian on the early seventeenth century is a series of volumes by the prolific R. G. Skrynnikov.<sup>26</sup> In his first publications on this period Skrynnikov presented the events as an anti-feudal peasant war that constituted a form of popular protest against the process of enserfment. In line with this approach, Skrynnikov not only reproduced Smirnov's view that faith in the 'good tsar' was a 'peculiar peasant utopia', but he also endorsed Chistov's views about 'popular socio-utopian legends', and saw pretenders as leaders of anti-feudal peasant movements.<sup>27</sup> In his most recent works, however, Skrynnikov has abandoned these interpretations. He now rejects the appropriateness of the concept of a 'peasant war' even for the Bolotnikov rising of 1606–7, and views the Time of Troubles as a civil war caused not only by the enserfment of the peasantry, but also by a crisis within the system of land allocation to the nobility. Skrynnikov continues to regard pretence as an expression of a 'social utopia or myth about a kindly tsar-deliverer', but he now argues that this myth, together with faith in the 'good tsar', was characteristic not only of the peasants but also of many other social groups.<sup>28</sup>

Rather a different approach to the phenomenon of pretence has been taken by the distinguished Russian scholar B. A. Uspenskii, in a brief but stimulating essay on *samozvanchestvo* that places it in the broader context of the political philosophy of Muscovite Russia and its religious culture. The process of the sacralisation of the monarchy in the sixteenth century, in Uspenskii's view, reflected the notion that true tsars were chosen by God alone. When the natural hereditary order of succession was broken, the new elected ruler was seen by some as a false tsar; and the accession of such a usurper – or 'pretender on the throne' – provoked the appearance of other pretenders, all claiming to be the true tsar. Uspenskii's approach is of particular interest because – in contrast to other Soviet scholars – he considers pretence from the perspectives of both 'high' and popular culture, and his semiotic outlook illuminates many aspects of contemporary reactions to the appearance of pretenders.<sup>29</sup>

The present study too endeavours to place pretence in the broad context of the mentality of the age, and to examine both popular and 'official' atti-

<sup>26</sup> Skrynnikov has produced a bewildering number of works on the period, some of a scholarly nature and others of a more popular character. Many of them overlap considerably in their content. His more scholarly works, which cover events to 1607, are: *Sotsial'no-politicheskaya bor'ba; Rossiya v nachale XVII v.* (a revised version of the previous work); and *Smuta v Rossii*. His 'popular-scientific' works are: *Boris Godunov* (available in an English translation with the same title); *Minin i Pozharskii* (available in an English version as *The Time of Troubles*); and *Samozvantsy*.

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, Skrynnikov, *Sotsial'no-politicheskaya bor'ba*, pp. 97–100, 324–6.

<sup>28</sup> Skrynnikov, *Rossiia v nachale XVII v.*, pp. 79–80, 249–51; Skrynnikov, *Smuta v Rossii*, pp. 246–53.

<sup>29</sup> Uspenskii, 'Tsar' i samozvanets'.

tudes towards the phenomenon. The book is not primarily designed as a history of the Time of Troubles, but it inevitably deals with the main political and military events of the period as background to the appearance and activities of the pretenders.<sup>30</sup> The main focus, however, is on the *samozvantsy* themselves, and on the ways in which they were perceived both by their supporters and by their opponents. Because of this emphasis, attention has been paid not just to major historical actors such as the first two False Dimitrys, but also to the minor pretenders and to the theatres of the civil war where they were active – the Volga basin, and the towns of north-west Russia.

The book comprises four main sections. The Prologue, entitled ‘Tsarevich Dimitry and Boris Godunov’, deals with events from the death of Ivan the Terrible in 1584 to the Khlopko rising of 1603, as background to the appearance of the first pretender in Lithuania. Part 1 is devoted to the career of the First False Dimitry, while Part 2 covers the period of the Bolotnikov rising of 1606–7. Part 3 is concerned with the later stages of the Troubles, to 1614. Two chapters in this section deal with the career of the Second False Dimitry, while the final chapter is devoted to the Third False Dimitry and to the fate of ‘Tsarevich’ Ivan Dimitrievich, the son of the Second False Dimitry. A brief Epilogue discusses later pretenders in early modern Russia, focussing on the period between the end of the Time of Troubles and the accession of Peter the Great. The Conclusion attempts to place the Russian impostors of the Time of Troubles in a wider context, comparing them with pretenders elsewhere in early modern Europe. It also discusses how and why *samozvantsy* succeeded in attracting so much support in the early seventeenth century, and tries to establish the precise relationship of pretence to ‘popular monarchism’ in this period.

<sup>30</sup> For general coverage of the period in English, see Platonov, *Boris Godunov*, together with Platonov, *The Time of Troubles*; and Skrynnikov, *Boris Godunov*, together with Skrynnikov, *The Time of Troubles*. There is a useful short treatment in Crummey, *The Formation of Muscovy*, ch. 8.