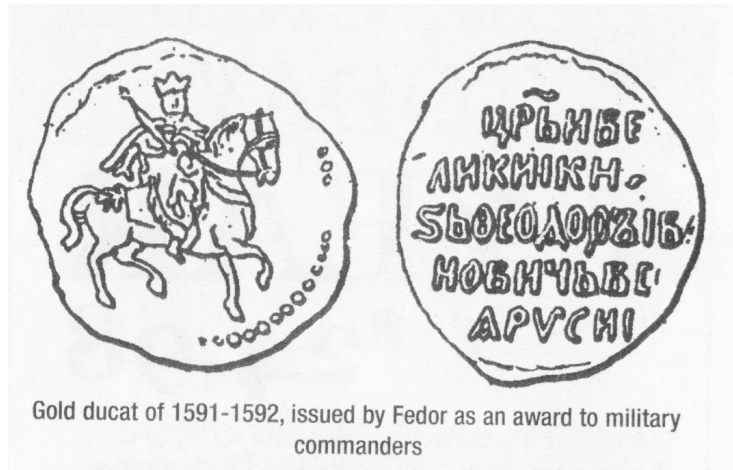


The Coinage of Russia - Wire Money, 1547 – 1598

By R. W. Julian



RUSSIAN CZAR IVAN IV is known to history as Ivan the Terrible and well-earned this feared name. The first years (1533-1547) of his reign were relatively mild as various relatives jockeyed for power. In the absence of firm authority, public order began to deteriorate; pillage and theft became the established rule. In late 1546, barely 16 years old, Ivan shocked the court by seizing control of the government and marrying, almost in the same breath.

The coronation was held in January 1547, in itself showing haste as the normal date was September 1, New Year's Day in the Russian calendar. It was traditional to throw gold coins under the great prince's feet, but a drawing of this ceremony shows the coins being thrown at both head and feet. These coins would have contained the new title of "czar," which was officially adopted at the time of the coronation.

The marriage, held in February 1547, was to Anastasia Romanov, the first time that a member of this important family would become part of the ruling dynasty; it would not be the last.

When Ivan IV named himself as czar (king) of the Muscovite state, this is considered by historians as a watershed in Russian history between the old order and the new. The title proclaimed to the world that the ancient state of Rus, founded by Rurik in 862, had been re-established and that Moscow was the capital. Princes rule principalities; kings rule countries. Not only would there be changes in the coinage, but in the map of Russia and Europe as well.

At first Ivan IV acted in the best interests of the people. He ruthlessly put down brigandage and thieves were severely treated. Within a short time, the country had been pacified and Ivan was considered a good ruler. Conquests of Golden Horde (Tartar) lands were undertaken and in the 1550s two strategic territories were subjugated: Kazan and Astrakhan.

The captures of Kazan and Astrakhan led to the creation of St. Basil's Cathedral, perhaps the most famous church in Russia and well known in the West as well. Ivan IV wanted to commemorate these victories in a permanent way and ordered the cathedral built. It took from 1555 to 1561 for its completion under skilled architect Postnik Yakovlev. The oft-repeated myth about the architect being blinded afterwards, so that he could not duplicate this masterpiece elsewhere, is not true.

In 1553, however, Ivan IV fell seriously ill and, as a result, became more and more suspicious. In the 1560s a collection of murderous thugs (the oprichnina) created by the Czar was turned loose on the land; murder and rapine became a way of life. Anyone remotely thought to be in opposition to Ivan IV was hunted down like an animal, be he serf or mighty lord; the nation was in torment.

Ivan's paranoia reached a crescendo when he killed his own son, Ivan, in a fit of rage in 1581. This monstrous act in itself came to symbolize the reason that Ivan earned the title of "The Terrible."

There had been a great reform of the coinage in 1534, which was long overdue. This had been carried out by the czar's mother, Helen Glinski, but she would not long survive her triumph, being murdered in 1538. It was on the basis of 1534 that Ivan the Terrible's coinage would extend and enrich itself after 1547. (Helen Glinski, known in Russia as Elena Glinskaya, was of Scandinavian origin but was very pro-Russian in her days as regent for her son.)

After 1547 polushkas (quarter kopecks) and dengas (half kopecks) were struck much less frequently, even stopping for years during some reigns. These pieces were so small now that it was increasingly expensive to make them; for the public the silver kopeck, about the size of a watermelon seed, would have to do.

Gold coins were struck under Ivan IV, both before and after 1547, but in no case were they meant for public use. Small gold coins (from kopeck and denga dies) were strewn under the prince's feet at the coronation or sometimes thrown to the nearby crowds. These and the larger coins (on the ducat standard) were also struck as military awards, which were made on the basis of rank, not heroism.

One of the most spectacular of the gold coins struck after 1547 is one weighing 5 ducats and measuring about 35 mm, roughly the size of the American silver dollar. Double-headed eagles are on both sides and the elaborate legend reads "By the Grace of God Great Prince Ivan Vasilievich [Ivan IV] of all the Russias, Vladimir, Moscow, Novgorod, Pskov, Tver, Polotsk, Czar of Kazan, [and] Czar of Astrakhan."

Unlike some of the other rulers Ivan IV did not use his patronymic (Vasilievich - son of Vasily) on the regular silver coinage and it is only on the larger special gold pieces that we see his name in full.

Ivan IV continued to emulate King Henry VIII of England by marrying wives and then discarding them when children were not produced. They were simply divorced or put into convents. Maria, the seventh (and last), however, in October 1583 produced a son, Dmitry Ivanovich; he was later murdered by Boris Godunov.

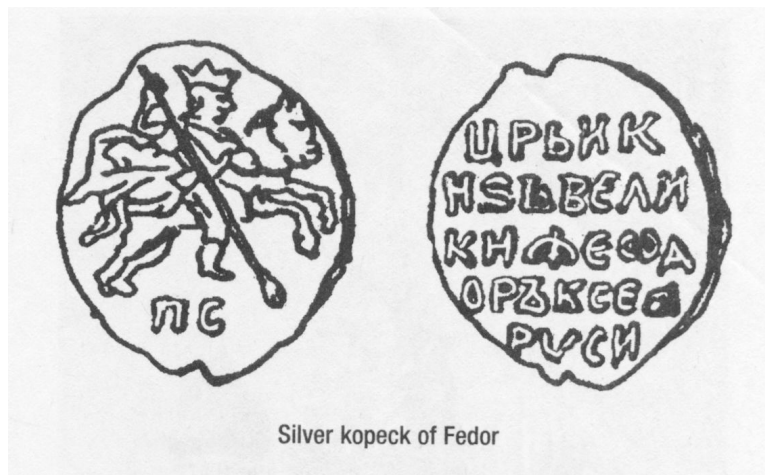
The country was wracked with war during the late 1570s and early 1580s as well as with the oprichnina. Even though the Polish war ended in 1582 the people had long ago had enough of Ivan and his murderous ways; in March 1584 he finally served a useful purpose by dying.

Czarevich (heir-apparent) Ivan's death in 1581 at the hands of his father left only two male survivors when the Czar died, Fedor (26 years of age) and the infant Dmitry. Because of the hatred and hostility that had surrounded his father (Ivan IV), Fedor changed the traditional coronation date from the first day of September to May 31.

Despite the hurried preparations, the coronation in the Moscow Kremlin was, as noted by historian Isaac Massa, "brilliant and solemn." Gold coins, from denga and kopeck dies, were strewn at his feet though none seems to have been thrown to the crowds. Apparently older dies (of his father) were used for the striking. Some quarter ducat (and larger) gold coins are known for this reign, but these were certainly military awards; the designs generally follow those of his father, Ivan IV.

Fedor Ivanovich, usually called Fedor I in the West. was a man of entirely different outlook than his father. A very gentle and God-fearing man, his reign was generally a peaceful one. He married Irina Godunov, but their only child died at a young age. Ivan IV tried to force his son to put Irina in a convent, so that a fresh marriage could take place, but Fedor refused and remained faithful to Irina.

Fedor's silver coinage followed the rules of the past except that, for the first time, the altyn (3 kopecks) was now struck. This coin, however, although made strictly in accordance with the regulations of 1547, was nonetheless a military award. It is quite rare and seldom obtained by collectors. The altyns went more to common soldiers while the gold was presented to officers and the higher ranks.



Silver kopeck of Fedor

It had been the practice for several decades (i.e. well before 1534) to put only the given name of the ruler on the reverse of the silver coinage and not the patronymic. All of this was to change under Fedor as we now find the altyn and some of the kopecks carrying the inscription "Czar and Grand Duke Fedor Ivanovich of All the Russias." Others, however, do not have the patronymic "Ivanovich" (son of Ivan).

Most of the silver coinage under Fedor Ivanovich consisted of silver kopecks although there appears to have been a reasonable number of dengas (half kopecks) struck as well. The collector, under the circumstances, will find it much easier to acquire the kopecks.



Silver denga (half kopeck) of Ivan IV.

Silver kopeck of Ivan IV as czar.

In 1596, for the first time, the mints began the practice of dating some of the obverse dies. These dates, in Cyrillic characters, were on the traditional Russian system, from the beginning of the world. Thus the date 7104 meant 1596 in modern terms.

The Czarina Irina's brother was Boris Godunov, a man of both high ability and great ambition. He soon persuaded the Czar that he (Boris) should take the day-to-day management of state affairs and leave Fedor to more spiritual matters.

Boris Godunov wanted to become czar himself and set about carefully to achieve this end. Close relatives of Czar Fedor were sent to distant cities, ostensibly as governors, but in reality to have them far enough away that when they were murdered by Boris' men, the reaction in Moscow would be muted. The former czarina (Maria, the widow of Ivan IV) and her young son Dmitry Ivanovich were sent to Uglich and kept under close watch. Dmitry was now heir apparent as the czar (Fedor) had no children.

In 1591 Dmitry Ivanovich was murdered at Uglich and popular suspicion was widespread that Boris was directly involved, though the naive czar (Fedor) thought that his half-brother's death was just an accident. Boris pretended great indignation and even destroyed the castle at Uglich as a place defiled by murder.

Although Boris was certainly a crafty man, he was also very resourceful. In 1591, when a Tartar invasion reached the gates of Moscow and all seemed lost, Boris snatched victory from the jaws of defeat. He persuaded a nobleman to let himself be captured by the Tartars: the agent then gave false information under torture. The information was that large bodies of foreign mercenaries had just arrived in Moscow and would shortly annihilate the Tartars.

The Tartars believed the agent and panicked, fleeing the area in such haste that hundreds were killed in the ensuing stampede of horses and men. Boris rewarded the troops with a mass issue of gold coins struck in Fedor's name. The largest such piece now known is the 2 ducats, which would have gone to an army commander. The smallest denomination, quarter ducat, would have gone to lesser officers defending Moscow.

After 1591 Fedor withdrew even further from active participation in governmental affairs and Boris Godunov carefully strengthened his hold on the reins of power. In January 1598 the czar died and, with great "reluctance," Boris accepted the throne. The dynasty founded by Rurik more than 700 years ago no longer existed.

In 1598 Russia began the slow plunge into anarchy; by 1605 it was to become so bad that until 1613 the era even has a special name in history: The Time of the Troubles. Despite this, the coinage of 1598-1613 is among the most interesting in Russian numismatic history, at once both fascinating and complex.

Identification of Silver Wire Coinage, 1547-1598

It is not difficult to identify most of the silver wire coinage struck after 1547 if the coins are examined carefully. The first step is to look at the obverse to see if the great prince is holding a spear or sword. The spear is aimed towards the ground while the sword is held in the air.

The spear (kopie) distinguishes the kopeck while the overhead sword is the mark of the denga, or half kopeck. Polushkas (quarter kopecks) normally have a small bird on the obverse. Virtually all silver wire coinage of 1547-1718 follows these rules of design.

The next step is to examine the reverse carefully and determine the words that appear. Most of the wire kopecks (and other denominations as well) are poorly struck but in general the bulk of pieces may be identified. First, look for the word "czar." If it is not present (on a complete inscription), the piece was struck prior to 1534.

The title "Grand Duke" (sometimes translated as "Great Prince") also normally appears on the reverse, with "Duke" having several different forms: the first two Cyrillic letters (KH) are invariably the same, however, regardless of the other letters.

The last point to look for is the name of the ruler. The table with this article shows the commonest form of the names for Ivan IV (as czar, 1547-1584) and Fedor (1584 - 1598). Ivan IV did not use his patronymic on the silver coinage after 1547, but Fedor did, the name sometimes appearing as Fedor Ivanovich (Fedor, son of Ivan).

The phrase "of All the Russias" appears at the end of the kopeck inscription though not normally on that of the denga for 1547-1598. As with other parts of the legend, there is some variation in the spelling of the two words involved.

Russian	English
ІВАНЪ	Ivan
ѲЕОДОР	Fedor
ІВАНОВИЧЪ	Ivanovich

Names of rulers.

ЦРЬ И ВЕ
ЛИКИ КНЗ
ѲЕОДОР ІВА
НОВИЧ ВСЕ
АРҮСИ

Reverse inscription on a silver kopeck of Fedor reading "Czar and Grand Duke Fedor Ivonovich of All the Russias."

Russian	English
ЦРЬ, ЦАРЬ, ЧЪ	Czar
И	and
ВЕЛИКИ, ВЕЛИКИ	Grand
КНСЪ, КНЗ, КНЗ, КНА	Duke
ВСЕА, ВСЕА, ВСЕА, ВСЕЯ	of All
РУСИИ, РҮСИ	the Russias

Variations in spelling for the Russian words.

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