Act I

Red Square in Moscow.

In the middle rises a column, erected to celebrate the atrocities committed by the Streltsy guards. In times of rioting and complicated dynastic successions, these soldiers perpetrate all manner of violence under the pretext of maintaining public order (following the death of Tsar Fëdor Alekseevič, two heirs right to succeed him: the son of the Tsar’s first wife, Ivan, and the son of his second wife, Peter, who eventually prevails to become Peter the Great.) It is dawn. The Streltsy Kuz’ka is on guard duty, humming a military tune to himself. He dozes off. Meanwhile from inside the Kremlin the sound of Streltsy bugles is heard. A patrol enters and two of the guards describe their exploits of the previous day, when they murdered a scribe of the Duma and a German man. Kuz’ka wakes up with a start and his companions mock him. A scribe enters and prepares his desk for the day’s work. He is afraid of the Streltsy and curses the hard times that Russia is going through. The Boyar Šaklovityj now enters hurriedly. At first with threats, then with a handsome tip, he compels the scribe to write a declaration, which is to be anonymous, accusing Prince Ivan Chovanskij, leader of the Streltsy, and the prince’s son Andrej, of fomenting disorder and seeking to seize power with the backing of the Raskol’niki (or Old Believers, enemies of the religious reform imposed some years earlier by the patriarch Nikon and which led to the schism now tearing the orthodox church apart). As Šaklovityj goes off, a group of Muscovites ask the scribe to read the notice on the column to them. Written on it is the grim list of executions, ordered by the Streltsy, of Boyars who refused to obey their commands. The arrival of Ivan Chovanskij is announced and received with cheers from the populace. Chovanskij delivers a speech declaring himself to be the defender of the adolescent Tsars Ivan and Peter and of social order, against the plotting Boyar rebels. They should be grateful to him and his Streltsy guards if the situation in Moscow is now under control. Exit Chovanskij acclaimed by the crowd. His son Andrej now enters, determined to rape the beautiful Emma, a young Lutheran. Andrej has already killed her father and banished her fiancé. But Emma rejects his arrogant advances and is aided by Marfa, a follower of the Raskol’niki, who was loved and jilted by Andrej. Marfa reproaches Andrej for his infidelity but he is irritated by her jealousy and attempts to stab her. She manages to dodge the blow just as Ivan Chovanskij re-enters with his Streltsy. Struck by Emma’s beauty, he orders his son to drag the girl to his palace. Andrej rebels and, rather than let his new love be carried off, he raises his dagger to slay her too. At this point the monk Dosifej, head of the Raskol’niki, intervenes. Indignant at the violence used by the princes and the Streltsy, he exhorts them to rally to the defence of the old faith now threatened by Nikon’s reform.
Act II

Summer pavillion of Prince Wasilij Golicyn. The prince is a favourite of Tsari-
na Sofia, the older sister of Tsarevich Ivan and enemy of her half-brother the
future Tsar Peter.

Golicyn reads a love letter from the Tsarina and despite its passionate tone,
fears his lover’s ambitions and thirst for power. A Lutheran pastor enters
and begs justice for the beautiful Emma, whom Andrej Chovanskij has tried
to rape. But Golicyn refuses to meddle in the Chovanskijs’ private affairs. His
secretary Varsonofev brings in Marfa, who has been summoned by Golicyn
for her gifts as a fortune-teller. Marfa reads the prince’s future. Grave mis-
fortunes await him: loss of power, exile, poverty. In a rage, the prince orders
that the fortune teller be eliminated, so that no one shall ever know about
the ill-luck hanging over him. But Marfa overhears his order and manages to
get away in time. Alone, Golicyn gives himself up to gloomy thoughts.
Aware of the vanity of his warmongering, he sees his dreams of glory col-
lapse, along with his hopes of building a happy Russia. Ivan Chovanskiij en-
ters for a meeting with Dosifej about the future of Russia. While waiting for
the friar to arrive, the two princes exchange aggressive and violent accusa-
tions concerning each other’s political behaviour. Dosifej (who before taking
monastic orders was himself a prince) enters and tries to restore peace, urg-
ing the princes to defend the ancient orthodox traditions against Nikon’s re-
forms. While Golicyn bluntly refuses, Chovanskiij declares himself ready to
back the Raskol’niki, in the hope that they may support his schemes to seize
power. A procession of Raskol’niki goes past in the background, followed by
a large crowd. Dosifej and Chovanskiij applaud, Golicyn disapproves. Sud-
denly Marfa appears and tells them she was attacked near the Belyj gorod
marshes by one of Golicyn’s servants. She owes her life to the intervention
of Peter’s guards, who happened to be passing. Šaklovityj arrives unexpec-
tedly, saying that a notice has been put up at Izmaïlov denouncing the
Chovanskijs, whose plot has been discovered. Tsar Peter has decried it as
“the Chovanskiij affair” and has ordered their arrest.
Act III

The Streltsy district in front of Belyj gorod, behind the Kremlin.
It is midday and the Raskol’niki, with Marfa among them, pass by in a procession chanting prayers for victory over the reformist heretics. Alone now, Marfa sings her love of Andrej, who has betrayed her. Using her gifts as a clairvoyant, she foresees death by flames for them both. Susanna, an old Raskol’nica, listens to her song and inveighs against Marfa, accusing her of obscene intentions and diabolical liaisons. Dosifej chases out Susanna with indignation and comforts Marfa, who begs forgiveness for her passion unspent. Again she has a vision of purification by death at the stake. They go out and Šaklovityj enters, meditating sadly on his country threatened by external enemies and internal strife. He implores God to bring peace to Russia and to choose a leader capable of quelling the violence. The Streltsy enter, drunk and singing an insolent song, pursued by their irate wives who scold them for neglecting their families and children. The Streltsy Kuz’ka calms the general agitation by launching into a song about slander. A breathless scribe arrives bringing bad news: the Streltsy quarter has been besieged by the Ulans who, with the aid of Peter’s soldiers, have routed and captured the inhabitants. Seeing everybody’s dismay, Kuz’ka proposes that they turn to Chovanskij, head of the Streltsy; let him decide on their best course of action. Chovanskij appears but refuses to lead them to battle; the time for fratricidal strife is over. Pending new orders, the will of Peter must be obeyed. He accordingly invites everyone to go home and wait. The dejected Streltsy guards invoke the Lord’s protection.

Act IV

Scene one

Prince Ivan Chovanskij’s dining room.
While the prince dines, peasant women intone a song of love, but Chovanskij finds it sad and calls for something livelier, more cheerful. The women strike up the gajdučok and the prince, satisfied, claps his hands to its brisk rhythm. A messenger from prince Golicyn enters and informs Ivan that he is in grave danger. Irritated and incredulous, Chovanskij dismisses the man and gives orders for him to be whipped. He then summons his Persian slaves to dance for him. Šaklovityj arrives and the Tsarina, who is worried about the future of Russia, has convened the Grand Council. She deems Chovanskij’s presence indispensable. After some hesitation, the prince accepts, has his finest clothes brought to him and asks the peasant girls to sing a song in his honour. But as he leaves he is stabbed by a hired assassin. Šaklovityj stoops over the corpse and repeats the last verse of the song.
Scene two

A square in front of St. Basil’s church in Moscow.
On a cart escorted by Ulans, prince Golicyn is led into exile and the people bid him a mournful farewell. Dosifej also watches this departure and ponders sadly on the fate of the powerful: Golicyn in exile, Ivan Chovanskij assassinated, his son Andrej hunted by Peter’s soldiers. Marfa brings Dosifej tragic news of the fate of the Raskol’niki: the Grand Council has ordered the soldiers to exterminate them without mercy. The time has come for martyrdom: Dosifej advises Marfa to save Andrej from the fury of Peter’s soldiers and to take him to the hermitage where the Raskol’niki have gathered. Andrej arrives in a rage and accuses Marfa of having deprived him of Emma. She retorts that Emma is far away and will soon be returning to her homeland to rejoin her exiled fiancé. In the face of Andrej’s fury, Marfa reveals that his father has been murdered and lies unburied, and that his own hours, too, are numbered. Overcome with wrath, Andrej assembles the Streltsy: Marfa is to be condemned to the stake as a witch. Andrej’s trumpet is answered by the chimes of the cathedral bells. The guards have been condemned to death and they enter, followed by their wives, with blocks and axes for their execution. In despair, Andrej begs Marfa to save him and she leads him away to the hermitage. In the square the Streltsy kneel and beg for clemency. A herald announces that the Tsars Ivan and Peter have granted pardon; let them now all return to their homes and give thanks to God.

Act V

The hermitage of the Raskol’niki in a wood outside Moscow.
A moonlit night. In a sad, majestic monologue, Dosifej prays for the fate of martyrdom for the Raskol’niki. The will of God is about to be done, the sacrifice by now inevitable. The Raskol’niki confirm the unshakeability of their faith and their resolve to face the supreme ordeal. Intoning the prayer of purification, they move towards the hermitage. Marfa lingers, savouring memories of her moments of happiness and love with Andrej. With death now approaching them both, she embraces him for the last time and intones a Hallelujah. In the distance the trumpets of Peter’s soldiers can be heard. Dosifej and the Raskol’niki come out from the hermitage, dressed in white and bearing sacred candles. As they reach the pyre, Marfa lights it with her candle and they all immolate themselves in the name of their true faith.

(Traduzione di Rodney Stringer)