

KHOVANSHCINA

MODEST MOUSSORGSKY

Moscow, 1682. On his death Tsar Fyodor III left no legal heir. His mentally defective brother Ivan and his half-brother Peter – later to become Peter the Great – both become tsars, but under the regency of Ivan's sister Sofia. Prince Ivan Khovansky has made Sofia's seizure of power possible by provoking an uprising with his armed guards, the 'Streltsy'. In the chronicles of Russian history this revolt is called 'the Khovansky affair' (or 'Khovanshchina'). With the Streltsy, an elite army corps, Ivan Khovansky initiates a reign of terror. Opponents of the regent, Sofia, are mercilessly eliminated and treachery is punished. But the overconfident Khovansky and his son Andrei are guilty of abusing their power, made clear in their conflict over Emma, a German prisoner-of-war. Marfa, Andrei's fiancée, feels cheated by him and takes the girl into her protection aided by Dosifei, the leader of the Old Believers (the Old Believers are a religious sect who, unhappy with religious reforms, have broken away from the Russian Orthodox Church).

Khovansky and his son, who are becoming an increasing threat to imperial power, have in the meantime been shown up in a bad light by Shaklovity, a boyar (and thus a representative of the Russian nobility) who, incognito, has had an indictment drawn up and distributed in which he accuses the Khovanskys of a plot against the throne. This gives rise to a bitter struggle for power involving the Khovanskys, Shaklovity himself, and Prince Golitsyn. Golitsyn, Sofia's Prime Minister and formerly her lover, negotiates with Ivan Khovansky over the rights to power, though to no avail, while Dosifei continues to remind them of the well-being of Russia. Shaklovity's message that Peter the Great has himself taken the reins of power and intends to polish off the Khovanskys turns the whole situation upside down. Peter's troops fight the Streltsy and Ivan Khovansky is lured into an ambush and killed by Shaklovity. As Marfa had previously predicted in her role as a fortune-teller, Golitsyn is banished. The opponents of the new tsar are thereby eliminated, but Peter unexpectedly grants the Streltsy a reprieve while they are on their way to the scaffold. The Old Believers have heard that Tsar Peter wants to massacre them all. Surrounded by Peter's troops, they commit mass suicide. This brings an end to a chaotic period in which every attempt at political and social change was doomed to failure.