Russia has had one of the most brutal political regimes in history as shown in the play *Boris Godunov*, and Boris Godunov himself was one of the most notorious tsars during that time. While the whole government was corrupt, Boris proved that he was the bad company of the leaders during his reign with ruthless and oppressive methods. Boris struck fear into his subordinates and the people of Russia, and while it may have seemed successful as first, it ultimately led to his downfall. To gain his power, Boris went to extreme lengths such as killing the rightful heir of the throne, and once he was in a position of power, he was willing to murder his own subordinates to maintain it. His methods weren’t any better, as he imposed expulsions and beheadings among his own people to keep them oppressed and fearful of him. While Boris’s political influence and oppressive and cruel methods helped him reign as tsar, it ultimately led to his downfall as ruler of Russia by turning his own subordinates against him.

When it comes to Boris obtaining a position of power, there’s nothing he wouldn’t do as shown in the opening scenes of the play. It begins with two of Boris’s boyars, Shuisky and Vorotynsky speaking in private about the young heir Dimitry who was killed years ago. It is made clear that Boris had ordered the young prince to be killed when Vorotynsky asks, “But is it true, Boris gave orders for the prince’s death?” (Pushkin 10), to which Shuisky replies, “Who else? Who sought to bribe young Chepchugov? Who sent the Bityagovskys and Kachalov upon a
secret mission?” (Pushkin 10). For Boris’s own boyars to believe that he was responsible for Dimitry’s death shows that they are aware that he is capable of some very horrible deeds and that they could be victims of his ruthless command.

Shuisky also knew better than to try and reveal Boris as the murderer, as he knew Boris would still manage to turn things around in his favor, as shown when Shuisky says, “And what if I’d convinced him of the facts? Boris would just have turned him round again, and off to some dank dungeon I’d have gone,” (Pushkin 11). This is important, because it emphasizes the power that Boris has over others and how fearful they are of that power by showing that nobody, not even a boyar, is willing to stand up to him because of what he might to do them. Boris will take any means necessary to get what he wants, and Shuisky knows that. The two boyars are also very careful to speak in hushed tones in private, as they are afraid that somebody might hear them and reveal them to Boris as traitors.

Boris’s brutal nature is also shown when Shuisky informs Boris of the man who claims to be the slain prince Dimitry coming back to claim his throne. When Boris hears about this, he asks Shuisky if it is truly him, then tells him, “But if you lie today... I swear, that you shall suffer such a death, so foul a death, that dread Ivan himself will shudder in his grave to see such horror” (Pushkin 46). This shows Boris to be very controlling as he demands the loyalty of his subordinates and will show no mercy if they are not. Shuisky knows this, so he says, “It isn’t death I fear, but your disfavor” (Pushkin 46). While Boris believes that he said this out of loyalty, Shuisky really said it because he refuses to die for such a simple lie. In the opening scene, Shuisky says, “I am not a coward... but I am not a fool to put my neck inside a noose for nothing” (Pushkin 11), which proves that Shuisky is smart enough to realize what he must do
stay alive when his life is at risk. This goes to show that the brutal and ruthless methods that Boris once used had grown unpopular among his boyars, and now Shuisky is doing what he must to stay alive, not because he is loyal to Boris. This foreshadows the downfall of Boris at the end of the play, as it is his own boyars who turn against him over time.

While Boris’s reign was brutal and ruthless, it may not have started out as such. When Boris is on his death bed, giving his last words to his son Feodor, he gives his son advice on how to rule like he did. Boris says to his son, “Events have forced me lately to reinstate beheadings and expulsions- abolish these for now, and they will bless you” (Pushkin 83), then goes on to say, “And then, in time, you can, by slow degrees, retighten once again the reins of power” (Pushkin 83). Boris essentially tells Feodor to gain the trust of the people by getting rid of the cruel punishments he had put in place, but once he gained their trust, to reestablish those same punishments. By doing this, Boris establishes his power even further by seeming to be a good tsar at first, but in the end showing his ruthless nature by bringing back beheadings and expulsions. His need for control and power goes far beyond his boyars and on to the people of Russia as he imposes fear into them with cruel punishments.

While this may have worked for Boris for a little bit, it led to his fall in the end as well, as his boyars opposed his cruel methods, which is shown by the double crossing of Basmanov. In this scene, Pushkin talks to Basmanov on page 87, from line 27 to line 51, mainly talking about why Dimitry would be such a better ruler than Boris. He says that it’s not in their troops, but rather, “in men’s minds, in what the people prize!” (Pushkin 87). Pushkin explains the clear difference in Dimitry and Boris, and how that difference has help Dimitry win battles with ease. Pushkin then goes on to say, “And was it willingly your troops went forth to fight against him?”
(Pushkin 87), showing how the troops don’t truly fight for their tsar Boris. Pushkin emphasizes that Dimitry is a good leader who leads troop who will fight for him because they like him. This scene shows how Pushkin was able to turn Basmanov against Boris by showing him how awful of a ruler Boris already is, and that Dimitry was a great leader who led his men and they fought for him. This pivotal moment shows when Basmanov double crosses Boris and end his reign as tsar of Russia.

Boris Godunov’s reign as tsar was riddled with cruel and ruthless behavior, but this was what ultimately led to his demise as it turned his boyars against him and led to his death. Boris’s power was unrivaled in Russia at the time, making his power absolute and nobody dared questioning him. Once Dimitry came back to reclaim his throne, Boris’s boyars realized just how horrible of a leader Boris was and turned on him. Boris seemed to be a good leader since he ruled for some time, but in reality, his oppressive and abusive nature was what kept the people and his subordinates silenced and him on the throne. Boris Godunov goes to show that absolute power corrupts absolute, and his was this absolute power that led to Boris’s subordinates to turn against him.
Works Cited