

The Last Tsar

The Life and Death of Nicholas II

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November 14-18, 2020

I must have bought the book for my mother some twenty years ago, maybe even longer. I doubt that she ever read it, although I thought she might enjoy it, if 'enjoy' is the word, after all she shared the gossipy interest in royalty with most of her contemporaries, however, after reading the book I am not sure that she would have enjoyed it. It is a book that caters to the lower common denominator of historically interested readers. Ostensibly about the life and death of the last Russian monarch, but really much more about his death than his life, the former being so much more interesting than the latter. Had he and his family not met with such a gruesome ending his fate would have held much less interest. Say that if he had escaped to his look-alike cousin George V in 1917 and lived in comfort and irrelevance say into the fifties at the Riviera one might have found it rather sordid. His life was boring, his death was dramatic, but when it comes to happiness boredom is far more conducive to that end than drama; cursed indeed are those who live in exciting times, as the Chinese remind us of.

The spectacle of European royalty is in many ways quite fascinating. One would think that the monarch should embody the national spirit and be its ultimate manifestation - 'for King and Country' (fr kung och fosterland); however monarchies are older than romantic ideas of nationhood and people. The notion of a dynasty in search of a realm more accurately describes what it is all about; as kings do not emerge out of a country but are imposed on them; the Hapsburg dynasty being an example, managing to be in charge of both Spain and Austria (unrelated except by their common Catholic faith playing a reactionary rôle when that lost its universality in Christendom), eventually splitting into two branches where the Austrian would eventually dominate. Austria was never a nation, predating the liberal idea of nationhood, but as the German name reveals a 'Reich' (realm) of the East. Essential to the idea of Royalty is the powerful myth of Royal blood, an extended family with the right to rule. A king determined a country, i.e. the territory under his rule (and taxation), and was thus above and separate from the ruled. In this context notions such as ruling by the grace of God and only being responsible towards him were quite natural. One may somewhat provocatively ask what is the difference between being responsible to God or to the People, the latter is also an abstraction whose will may be even harder to divine than that of divinity itself. Modern democracy has an answer to that question, namely its representative component implemented through the spectacle of elections. Just as the submission to the will of God could be abused so can the submission to the will of the people be subverted. In a feudal system there are also checks and balances and a feudal society is held together by a common morality, ostensibly for the church to

uphold and interpret¹; thus the notion of a benevolent monarch that rules according to divine principles, whether those are literally divine or simply a projection of a collective moral subconsciousness is moot. On purely rational and moral grounds there is nothing wrong with that, most people indeed would be happy with it, and as to the past it is certainly safe to assume that many rulers of the past enjoyed wide popular support, even if they were never elected by the same. A large part of that support may admittedly have been due to convention and obligation, you are expected to honor a ruler by virtue of he or she being a ruler; but this is not that different from modern democracy in which name recognition is of fundamental importance². The notion of revolt and rebellion against an unfair and tyrannous ruler is clearly nothing modern and is based on this common morality, if a ruler sins against it, he or she also sins against God and thus forfeits legitimacy. Although historically successful rebellions have been fairly rare, the potential has always been there serving as a useful reminder and check on the will of a monarch. The question of change of ruler i.e. the question of succession is fundamental be it so in a medieval feudal society or a modern technological one. Ultimately any change, including the change of the rules of change, is a matter of force not convention. To regulate it you need rules (following the rules is another matter) and the point of rules is to remove certain decisions (remember that in a game the point of rules are not to tell the players what to do, but setting limits to what they can do) from the wills of the participants, in other words to let God decide; this is why there in principle is not that much difference between letting a general election decide or having a coin tossed, the main thing is to let the outcome be independent of the players wills. Thus the rule of hereditary ascension is not as undemocratic as people often make it out to be, one of the mainstays of democracy is to respect the rules of a game. The notion of inheritance reduces the question of succession to an objective calculation as the rules clearly point out who is the legitimate heir. Thus in particular a succession can proceed without bloodshed and dispute, just as an arithmetical calculation obliges consensus without coercion. On the other hand the basis for a calculation can be disputed as opposed to the calculation itself, and in the same way the wisdom of blood-succession can be questioned, and in fact throughout history it has produced ill-fitted rulers. On the other hand people unfit to rule normally end up not ruling at all and real power migrates elsewhere, and this is the stuff of which political history is made. What happened was that as society evolved and became more complicated ruling dynasties degenerated and became more and more irrelevant³ but at the same time the mystique increased as the tradition accumulated. By the 19th century kings and queens acquired fairy-tale status which was very useful for their more and more ornamental status. And indeed it is this quality of fairy-tale that accounts for the soap-opera appeal they exercise on the modern imagination.

¹ The reformation challenged the power of the Catholic church which had some deep-going political consequences as we all know.

² Especially in an individual-fixated democracy as the US has evolved into. The tendency to establish dynasties driven by the need of name recognition has been recently apparent, The Kennedys, the Bush and the attempted Clintons are examples of that phenomenon.

³ An example is the dynasty Bernadotte where there was undeniable talent (maybe not necessarily to rule) during the first generations which was soon replaced by unremarkable mediocrity

From an almost forensic perspective part of the fascination of royalty is the way their progenitors have been faithfully⁴ documented over the centuries, providing some material for genetic studies⁵. One fascinating aspect (or maybe the only one) is the degree of inter-relatedness between the different Royal houses. In fact in Europe one can speak of a single Royal House which occupied the Royal seats of all European monarchies, all based on various princely courts in Germany and the Danish court, the oldest Royal court in Europe. At the beginning of the First World War the head of States of the belligerent were all related, and the British King, the Russian Tsar and the German emperor were all first cousins with close social ties. Was the First World War a family quarrel which went out of hand? They all were fiercely patriotic, especially the German 'Kaiser' but their influence on the events, including that of the much maligned Kaiser, should not be over-estimated; it all, if anything, testified to their personal irrelevancies, they were not rulers in any meaningful sense, but of course very useful to real rulers⁶. The cataclysm of the First World War swept them away, with the exception of the British one, as Britain did not suffer defeat and concomitant social upheaval and trauma. In a sense it was all overdue, but the magic remains.

Nicholas II was the last Tsar in the Romanov dynasty which had been in power since 1613 with its tricentennial being celebrated in the last years of his reign. Russia was at that time of ascending to power a vast primitive wilderness in the outskirts of Europe (and would so remain even during its period of military glory). Three hundred years is not a remarkable long reign for a dynasty, the Hapsburg goes far further aback. Three rulers of the dynasty stand out Peter I, Catherine I and Alexander I, the first two usually with the epithet the Great⁷. Peter the Great brought Russia out of Medieval times and made it a major player in European politics replacing Sweden, Catherine the Great was a German princess and not a Romanov⁸ and consolidated the work of Peter the Great greatly expanding Russian territory⁹ and influence and her son Alexander stood up to Napoleon invaded Paris and established Russia as the pre-eminent military power. But it was, as Sweden was back in the 17th century, a colossus with feet of clay, and on a vastly grander scale to boot. The elite, politically, commercially and culturally was very thin, and it was mainly concentrated to an artificial city - St.Petersburg - recently erected on a

⁴ The documentation may have been faithful but not necessarily its subject, thus as a genetic record only maternal lines can be pursued; on the other hand lack of proof of faithfulness does not preclude faithfulness as such, many sons show striking similarities to their fathers

⁵ The inheritance of hemophilia is a case in point, it can be traced from the unfortunate tsar-in-heir Alexei back to his great grandmother Victoria, the British queen.

⁶ The belligerency of the German Kaiser is well documented, but it is easy to be so if you do not really have to take responsibility; the Kaiser talked tough but when push came to shove he tended to chicken out. The Russian Tsar on the other hand tried to avoid a war but he was of course ineffectual. And even if would have had the power to say No, this would, given the circumstances, taken a lot of moral courage, which he has showed little sign of possessing.

⁷ For obvious reasons the name of the third excluded such a honorific

⁸ except by marriage, but like Mary Stuart she quickly and brutally got rid of her husband and usurped the throne

⁹ She was the major player in the partition of Poland.

swamp while the latter was still part of Swedish territory. By the 19th century modernity was seeping into contemporary societies in the form of scientific and technological progress profoundly changing them in an unprecedented way. Common morality for societies were being questioned, industrialization fundamentally changed the traditional fabric of social relations, and although Russia itself was relatively unaffected it nevertheless spurred the emergence of a thin layer of an intelligentsia more interested in social reform and upheaval than personal careers. It appropriated advanced Western ideas about socialism and class warfare and in some cases even assorted to terrorism¹⁰. Nicholas I turned out to be a rather autocratic tsar with undeniable power intent on ruling with an iron fist, his successor Alexander II was of a more modern bent and effected some overdue reforms such as the liberation of the serfs but suffered death at the hands of some radicals. He was succeeded by Alexander III who, as might have been expected, pursued once again a more autocratic rule as a reaction. He died relatively young (just before fifty) and Nicholas II was given the reigns in 1894 in his mid-twenties. He was a weak and ineffectual character, but as such usually are, quite sympathetic, and singularly unequipped to be at the helm at such times. We are allowed to get a glimpse of the family life of the Tsar married to his teenage sweetheart, a German princess Alexandra, grand daughter of Queen Victoria and cousin to Wilhelm III the German Kaiser. Four daughters were born and finally a son, a heir - Alexei, suffering from hemophilia. Clearly it was a life of idleness and luxury, to which modern consumer society strives, and thus easy to identify with for modern readers¹¹. In photos the young tsar comes across as a neat and sympathetic man, uncannily alike in appearance to his British cousin George V, devoid of will and the cruelty that comes with it. He took no particular interest in politics, let alone any interest in guiding and developing it, but trusted his ministers; yet he certainly felt the obligations on his shoulders with a mixture of pride and fear. Like most modern monarchs he would have preferred to live a quiet life of private happiness.

However, the idyllic family life was deeply affected by the tragic fate of the heir, whose disease prevented him to play with other children; as a consequence the adventurer Rasputin got admittance to the family circle on the excuse of providing help and healing to the young son. This influence, made possible by the hysteric personality of the empress and only perfunctorily opposed by the Tsar, reluctant as he was to upset his wife, greatly damaged the reputation of the Royal family, and although it led to the brutal murder of the monk, seen by the family as an embodiment of the people, perpetrated by members of the Romanov family, his spell never left them, all the female members carrying to their deaths amulets with his pictures around their necks.

¹⁰ Parallels with modern radical Islamism are inevitable, but although there may be strong psychological similarities the ideologies and origins are profoundly different being part of a modernistic surge rather than a reaction. Then the terrorism of the revolutionaries was directed at the top and not indiscriminate as modern terrorism

¹¹ The gadgets available to the denizens of the court fall far short of modern digital ones, and many modern children travel more wildly; but what was most significantly different was the attendance of servants and the concomitant deference which came their way, and would make spoiled brats of anyone, although I suspect that many modern children are even more spoiled than the Royal ones, on whom virtues such as industry and obedience were no doubt impressed.

The author tries to endow the narrative by a sense of authenticity by generously quoting from letters interchanged by the spouses, and from the diaries they kept, much of them miraculously having been preserved. While the Tsar was content with putting down a terse documentation of the trivia of the day, in the end filling over fifty notebooks, the empress was more voluble including also comments. She did not know Russian when she arrived in Russia but was of course taught it but never achieved mastery. Husband and wife communicated with each other predominantly in English (and the diary notes by the son Alexei was also in English) and it is not clear in what language the Tsar himself had been brought up, but although royalty may have been intellectual mediocrities it seems clear that they had working commands of a variety of languages something to which circumstances forced them¹².

The Tsarist regime weathered through the attempted and aborted revolution of 1905, which was seen as a dress rehearsal for the one in 1917, but its days were numbered, and it did not enjoy large popular support, after all the empress was German and here Russian patriotism was doubted, in spite of her valiant attempts to flag herself into Russian hysteria. And with the Tsar's abdication the book starts in earnest, and after all this tragic end is what will engage the imagination of potential readers.

The events can be readily summarized. The Tsar is more or less forced to sign a declaration of abdication, he decides to formulate it himself and produces a document superior to that presented to him by the Revolutionaries in which he vainly tries to preserve the dynasty by abdicating first for the benefit of his son then for his younger brother Michael¹³. Thereafter he was taken to Tsarskoe Selo and joined by his family in the private family residence of the Alexander Palace. He was accompanied by Kerensky and supplied by a guard whose service was not primarily to protect him but to imprison him, however gently. In other words a classical so called house arrest. Their life continued as usual, the same resplendent routines, but their freedom of movement outside the Palace was constricted. But what to do with him? This was dilemma for the new government. A natural solution would have been emigration to his Royal relatives abroad, i.e. to his British cousin and look-alike - George V, but this would have been politically too sensitive for Britain¹⁴, and he was to remain in Russia. After a while it was decided that the most fitting thing would be to expel him to a Siberian exile, just as the Tsars traditionally expelled revolutionaries. They were taken by train and steamer and settled in a fairly comfortable house - the Freedom House - in Tobolsk, along with a contingent of guards. The family adjusted to their new routines which did perhaps still not differ that much from

¹² To a predominantly monolingual English speaking population this seems remarkable, and most people with a different Native tongue than English only add a modicum of English to their repertoire, people speaking three languages fluently (which should not be confused with multilingualism) are rather unusual and four is considered exceptional, but I suspect the latter was not that unusual in European courts brought up by tutoring nannies.

¹³ Bringing to mind the vain efforts of the Swedish king Gustav IV to appoint his heir after being forced to step down after the catastrophic loss of Finland in 1809. In that case monarchy itself was saved by the succession of his uncle - Charles XIII - and as the latter had no legal issue, the election of the French marshal Bernadotte.

¹⁴ In fact Labor put a lot of pressure to have an original invitation rescinded, citing workers opposition.

the old ones, except that their freedom of movements were even more curtailed. Not only no more fancy balls or cruises in the Finnish Gulf, but also most irksome for the former Tsar no extended walks around Tobolsk, which he had visited in his youth, ostensibly due to reasons of his personal safety as he was quite unpopular and was painted as the tyrannical Tsar with blood on his hands. The Tsar and his family was a nuisance to the regime and the question remained what to do with him. The Bolsheviks took power and there was predictably a change of guard. The new power thought of him as a useful bargaining chip for the future so in their interest to keep him unscathed. After some time it was decided to move him and his family to Yekaterinburg as a result of internal intrigues in which the leading Bolshevik Sverdlov was active¹⁵. This was done in secrecy and with some drama, as three different initiatives were involved and partly clashing with each other¹⁶. First only the former Tsar and his wife were moved, later they were joined by their children, in whose clothing the coveted family jewels were sewn in. The quarters were now more cramped and the house was surrounded by a fence actively blotting out all view. Allowances were drastically cut, what previously had been taken for granted, such as coffee, were now luxuries. The Tsar was able to rely on some private resources mitigating the hardships somewhat. Yet the family adapted Nicholas more meekly than his wife who was reserved not to say haughty and made their guards fear her. A Civil War was raging and the Whites were attacking the city along with the Czech Legions and it was only a question of time before it would fall. It was a nightmare to the regime would the family be liberated by the Whites. A decision was made on the highest level, supposedly involving Lenin himself, although I do not know of any documentary evidence, maybe he was careful not to leave a paper trail. It was decided that the family should be liquidated along with their closest staff, including the family doctor. Hours before a decree was stated and posted to that effect, purporting that the people was to take measures against its enemy. The family was ushered into a cellar of the house, ostensibly for their own safety and also to have their picture taken. When down there their doom was read out aloud, the Tsar asking for clarification, and then they started to shoot using their revolvers. The first one to go was the Tsar, there being a race to the distinction of being his killer; then when it came to the daughters, bullets bounced from their corsets studded with diamonds, and they had to finish them off by bayonets. Then they had to get rid of the bodies as soon as possible, the Whites were coming into the city, but before that they had to be looted, the jewels collected. It all had the makings of a sordid robbery through murder. The bloody corpses wrapped in the bed clothes of the family, were put on a truck and driven into a forest to be dumped into an abandoned water-filled mine shaft, but before that the bodies had been stripped and searched for further valuables and treated by sulfuric acid, and all traces of clothes eliminated by being doused with kerosene and put on fire. Into the mine shaft with the dumped bodies, grenades were thrown for good measure. It being summer the night was short and everything had to be done in great haste. Soon thereafter the Whites entered and made some investigations but were unable to find the remains of the

¹⁵ Yekaterinburg would later change name to Sverdlovsk

¹⁶ In fact the actual escort was to take him to Moscow, and tried to do so via a detour via Omsk. That was discovered and the 'luggage' had to be returned to Yekaterinburg. There were some thought of executing the family while in transit and getting rid of the problem blaming an attempt to escape.

victims, only in the early 80's was a grave containing the remnants of nine, not eleven, people found¹⁷. And here the story ends, as the book was written just after. One expects that this is not the last word. Anyway a most sordid story perhaps more indicative of the confusion of a Civil War and the lack of authority of the regime, which caught up in the chaos paid little heed to the details pertaining to a rejected Royal family. If anyone really has to be blamed it would be the British government who had it in their power, as allied to the initial provisional government, to demand an extradition of the family; but as noted that was considered not politically opportune. Yet, the story does not reflect well on the Bolsheviks, after all they headed a country in which such a crime was hailed as an heroic deed, obviously it never took any measures of investigating what had happened and take the guilty to trial; but of course they had too much on their plate. As opposed to the transfer to Yekaterinburg with its tragic ending, there were also orders to take them to Moscow instead¹⁸, where Trotsky was eager to put the Tsar on public trial exposing the crimes and misdeeds of his reign¹⁹. Such a show probably would have ended in his execution, something he seems to have faced with some stoicism, but probably saved his family. But history wanted otherwise.

The book is written by a Russian playwright and TV personality and amateur historian (with some academic credentials according to the flap). In it he reports on his hunt to find the truth through diligent searches in archives, some of which only recently had become available. Thus the book is riddled by repetitions, good maybe to drive home the story, but definitely a drawback when it comes to dramatic verve. It is not a scholarly work, the author being too eager to be sensational making it hard to distinguish between what is fact, more or less indisputable, and what is pure speculation and wishful thinking. On the other hand it does not make up for it by any literary qualities that a dry scholarly presentation would have prevented. Instead it is written at the level you expect in a ladies magazine catering to a wide public. A spurious emphasis is made on the unluckiness of the number 17, and how the misfortunes of the family can be connected to this, even if done in jest it has an unfortunate distracting effect. The author seems not to reject out of hand the putative miracles performed by Rasputin but lends a sympathetic ear to them and makes some puzzling reference to modern para-psychological research. More seriously is that the author gives uncritical vent to stories that one daughter - Anastasia - and the heir-apparent - Alexei - somehow miraculously survived the murder attempts in the cellar, in spite of being shot at and stabbed with bayonets. Moaning they were packed on the truck and then removed to a safer place before burial and taken care of. A year later some confused lady turned up in Berlin with a story that she was a survivor, and in the early 40's a man was admitted to a psychiatric institution from a work camp and likewise gave evidence that his knowledge of the court was far more intimate than what he could have received from books. Also that he looked very much like the tsar and even had the

¹⁷ If fact an amateur archaeologist found them already in 1979, but they were not officially acknowledged until 1989.

¹⁸ As indicated in a previous footnote, but those were aborted

¹⁹ According to the book Trotsky was not involved in the murder but was informed about the execution of the Tsar and reassured that the family had been taken to a safe place, a phrase involving a variety of interpretations.

remains of a birth mark at the right spot. According to his camp mates he would have openly claimed that he was the heir to the throne. Now one may always find incidental evidence for any kind of claims, but as far as I can tell there is none except vague hearsay, which if corroborated would have been sensational enough. Yet the whole story appears totally unbelievable to have happened to a hemophiliac, who as a child was so fragile that he was not allowed to play, as the smallest bruise would cause life-threatening internal bleeding. Thus this cavalier attitude sows suspicion on the veracity of the story unearthed even if there is no reason to doubt the great outline of what happened.

Postscript: According to the English Wikipedia article on Nicholas II, after having been identified through a DNA-analysis, the remains of the family found in the shaft were buried in St.Peter and Paul Cathedral in St. Petersburg on July 17 1998 (the 80th anniversary of the execution). The ceremony²⁰ was headed by the Russian President Boris Yeltsin who expressed his satisfaction that the truth of this monstrous crime finally was officially spoken. A few years later they were canonized as saints by the Russian Orthodox church but not as martyrs but as passion bearers, meaning that unlike martyrs they were not killed because of their Christian faith, but approached their deaths with Christian dignity, just like Christ himself. The two missing bodies were later found (2007) and DNA-identified as the Tsarevich - Alexei- and one of his sisters²¹. This settles once and for all

²⁰ attended by many ambassadors to Russia, the British Royal family being content by sending a low ranking member - Michael of Kent. It must be a source of embarrassment.

²¹ A DNA-analysis can only indicate close relationship between individuals, not identities. More specifically gender can be determined because of the sex-chromosomes, and Nicholas himself would be distinguished as a male related to others of the victims, which would rule out the Dr. and other males in the entourage from which we could conclude that the related females were his daughters. Their relation to another female, unrelated to the Tsar (at least with no close one, they being relatives may have shared some chromosomes) identifies the empress from the female companion. When the other two bodies were found, identification as children of the Royal couple would be straightforward and Alexei distinguished as a male. But this begs the question of how to know that the parents (identified on internal evidence) actually correspond to the Tsar and his wife. This is the tricky part. For that you need DNA-samples either from living relatives, which will be fairly remote and thus lower the chance of common chromosomes, or from certified closer relatives, which would have to be exhumed. Maybe the most reliable source would be living relatives sharing the mitochondria of either the empress or her husband. One candidate for the latter could be found among the descendants of his sister Xenia Alexandrovna (1875-1960) who had seven children, one of them being Andrei Alexandrovich (1897-1981) whose second son Andrew Andreevich (b. 1923) is now the head of the Romanov family, but does not share the mitochondria of Nicholas II. Now of Xenia's seven children only one was a daughter - Irina Alexandrovna (1895-1970), she had a daughter Irina Felixovna (1915-1983) who had female issue Xenia Nikolaevna (b. 1942) who had female issue Tatianna Sfiris (b. 1968) who had two female issues, Marilla Vamvakidi (July 7, 2004) and Yasmine Xenia Vamvaikidi (May 17, 2006), The last four would be living with the mitochondria of the Tsar, the last two not being available at the time of initial testing, but their mother certainly. This is how far a search on Wikipedia has yielded. One should add that in 2015 the Tsarist couple was exhumed, on the insistence of the Russian Orthodox church for further testing.

speculations of survival of any of the victims. Finally in 2008 the supreme court of Russia ruled that Nicholas II were victims of political persecution and should be rehabilitated. This statement by itself is of course political and signifies a wish of distancing society from its Bolshevik past.

So why does the tragic fate of this particular and very privileged family earn so much attention, in view of the fact that during the tumultuous times of Russia, so many families have met with as tragic ends but in anonymity? As noted royalty is part of fairy tales and thus in the public eye, making it much easier to engage imaginatively with them. Their fate being amply documented, as indicated in the book, and thus not only a statistical abstraction. In particular the very discontinuity of their life, falling from an exalted position to the very low, is the kind of fate that is bound to grip us psychologically.

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