The Last Romanovs: Intertwining Family and Reign

In the course of researching the story of Grand Duchess Anastasia of Russia and her various impostors, I found a lot of information on her family. Before I started looking into this, I had no idea just how large her extended family was and what famous historical figures she was closely related to.

With this information, rather than the Anastasia claimants who have been discussed at length to no definitive conclusion, the family dynamic became more interesting. I had presumed that personal family life had little or no effect on government and politics. A royal life is something very few people live and I assumed that kind of environment would breed people able to easily separate personal life with business, particularly in Imperial Russia, where the leader was an autocrat. On the other hand, when you take away the fancy titles and palaces, there remains a human being just like the rest of us. Family can permeate all parts of one's life, and so family had to be a factor, even a small one, in some part of the autocratic government, whether it was public opinion, foreign policy, or something else.

Initially when I heard the title “Tsar of Russia” I thought of an evil, self-centered man who thought little of others, and I assumed his family had to be the same way. Until fairly recently the Soviets were still in power, so Russian history in the twentieth century was seen through Soviet filters -- the very people who usurped the power from Tsar Nicholas II and killed him. Most of what I found about the Romanovs of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries showed only a close, loving family. Queen Marie of Romania, who was the oldest daughter of Grand Duchess Maria Alexandrovna of Russia, the only daughter of Tsar Alexander II and sister of Tsar Alexander III, has fond memories of large family gatherings of Romanov relatives, closely and remotely related, coming together from near and far. In her autobiography she recalls one of her uncle’s games with her and her young cousins:

*There was Uncle Sasha, Emperor Alexander III, a giant of a man, broad, powerful, good-natured, kindly, less terrible than some of the uncles in spite of his crown and of his ‘over-life-size.’ He had a chestnut beard and kindly blue eyes, his way with us children was jovial and encouraging, and I remember him particularly in connexion with some special fun he imagined would amuse both the young and the grown-ups.*

*In the garden stood a mast on which his sons learned how to climb and handle ropes and sails, still an essential part of ships in those days. To guard against bad falls a net had been stretched beneath this mast.*

*Uncle Sasha loved a good laugh, so he had come upon this absurdly delightful idea of taking his guests out after lunch to this net and making them run and jump about on it. I can remember no game that ever made us laugh as much as this one, and the fun reached its climax when giant Uncle Sasha, whose weight was formidable, climbed on to the net himself. This was the superlative moment of excitement that we children always waited for with a delight not unmixed with fear. Uncle Sasha would pursue us over this net, and when he had cornered you he would jump up and down and his weight made you bounce like a ball. Higher and higher you bounced as though you had no weight at all, and you had hardly come down to your feet than there you were, up in the air again, up and down, up and down, shrieking and laughing, terrified and enchanted; a game for the gods.*

*That was Uncle Sasha as we saw him; I leave it to history to make whatever other portrait it chooses.* (Marie 83)

What I found about the family of the last Empress of Russia showed only a kind and loving family as well. Empress Alexandra’s large family was centered around her grandmother Queen Victoria. I had heard of Queen Victoria, but I didn’t know she was Alexandra’s grandmother, and I was especially surprised to learn who her children and other grandchildren were. Also interesting is that Queen Victoria wasn’t even supposed to be born -- she was a result of a government sponsored royal baby boom.

That story begins with Princess Charlotte of Wales. Born in 1796, Princess Charlotte was the only legitimate child of Prince George, the Prince of Wales, and the only legitimate grandchild of King George III, even though he had fifteen children; she was expected to become Queen Charlotte in time. At twenty-one, Princess Charlotte and her husband, Prince Leopold of Saxe-Coburg-Saalfeld (future King Leopold I of the Belgians) were expecting their first child. Charlotte gave birth to a stillborn son and died a few days later. This tragedy left no legitimate heirs to the British throne. The government urged the aging unmarried princes to find suitable wives and agreed to pay off their debts if they did so. One of the princes, Edward, the Duke of Kent, married Prince Leopold’s sister, Princess Victoria of Saxe-Coburg-Saalfeld, widow of the Prince of Leiningen, in 1818. Already a mother of two children, she had proven herself able to learn who her children and other grandchildren were. Also interesting is that Queen Victoria wasn’t even supposed to be born -- she was a result of a government sponsored royal baby boom.

School history classes. To appeal to my audience, I tried to make it more of a story than just fact. I know how boring many people my age think history is, so I tried to make it interesting.

*Princess Victoria* ("Vicky," aka the Empress Frederick after her husband’s death), Princess Royal of Great Britain and Ireland, Queen of Prussia and Empress of Germany, in 1840;
This genealogy was very interesting; I recognized some of Victoria’s children’s names, so I decided to explore the Descendants of Queen Victoria website. Going further into each of her children’s individual family trees one can see that Queen Victoria’s descendants reigned in Germany and Greece through Vicky, England and Norway through Bertie, Russia through Alice, Romania and Yugoslavia through Affie, Sweden through Arthur, and Spain through Beatrice, not including various consorts and sovereigns on minor thrones.

This expansive family tree was interesting, but it wasn’t what I had initially begun looking for. I went back to researching Anastasia, and naturally I found more information on Imperial Russia and in the process lots of references to hemophilia. Looking into that, again I was led to Queen Victoria. It was through her that hemophilia was passed into the royal families of Europe. I found newsgroups where many people were discussing theories that her father passed on a mutated gene at her conception or that he wasn’t her biological father at all. Posting in the newsgroups cited cases of young males dying mysteriously in Victoria’s mother’s family and also among the descendants of her half-sister, and speculation these deaths could be related to hemophilia, though there isn’t any proof. Two of Victoria’s daughters, Alice and Beatrice, were carriers, though Louise didn’t have any children and neither did Helena’s two daughters, so it’s unknown if they were carriers too.

Of Victoria’s sons, only Prince Leopold was a hemophiliac. He was fragile and ill for most of his life, but he did marry, Princess Helena of Waldeck-Pyrmont, and had two children. His son Charles Edward was born posthumously, as Leopold died from internal hemorrhaging after a fall down a flight of stairs in 1884. Charles Edward was not a hemophiliac, but his sister Alice was a carrier. There was no question about this because hemophilia is transmitted through the X chromosome, of which females have two and males one. A hemophilic male (XY) and a normal female (XX) will have carrier daughters (XX) and normal sons (XY), since the male passes either the X or Y chromosome to the child. A healthy male (XY) and a carrier female (XX) have the chance of a hemophilic son (XY) or a healthy son (XY), and likewise, a normal daughter (XX) or a carrier daughter (XX), depending on which X chromosome the mother passes on. Hemophilic females (XX) are rare, since both X chromosomes have to be affected, but they are possible with a hemophilic father (XY) and a carrier mother (XX). (Aronova-Tiuntseva)

Queen Victoria’s youngest daughter Beatrice passed the gene to the Spanish royal family through her daughter Princess Victoria Eugenie (“Ena”), who married King Alfonso XIII of Spain. Two of Queen Ena’s brothers were hemophiliacs, as were two of her sons. Her son Juan, the father of the current King Juan Carlos, was not a hemophiliac, so there is no more hemophilia in the Spanish royal family. (Aronova-Tiuntseva)

Queen Victoria’s second daughter Alice passed the gene to the imperial families of Germany and Russia. Princess Alice’s daughter Irene married Prince Henry of Prussia, a brother of Kaiser Wilhelm II (both sons of Alice’s sister Victoria). Two of Irene’s sons were hemophiliacs though one, Prince Waldemar, lived to be fifty-six years old. (Aronova-Tiuntseva)

From this point I explored probably the most notable hemophilia carrier of recent history, Princess Alice’s daughter and Grand Duchess Anastasia’s mother: Princess Alix Victoria Helena Louise Beatrice of Hesse and by the Rhine (named for her aunts and Alix for her mother, Alice: “They murder my name here, Aliice they pronounce it,’ her mother said.” [Massie, Nicholas and Alexandra 27]). “Alicky” or “Sunny,” born the sixth of seven children on June 6, 1872, was the last Empress of Russia. Her siblings were:

- **Princess Victoria** (Princess Louie of Battenberg), born in 1863;
- **Princess Elizabeth** (“Elia,” Grand Duchess Serge of Russia), born in 1864;
- **Princess Irene** (Princess Henry of Prussia), born in 1866;
- **Prince Ernst Ludwig** (“Ernie,” Grand Duke of Hesse and by the Rhine), born in 1868;
- **Prince Frederick William** (“Frittie”), born in 1870;
- **Princess Marie** (“May”), born in 1874. (compiled from Steinberg)

Of Princess Alix’s two older brothers, Frittie was a hemophiliac. He died at three years old from internal hemorrhaging after falling out his mother’s bedroom window. When he was three years old he and his five-year-old brother, wanting to play, “came romping into their mother’s room one morning while she was still in bed,” according to Massie. “The windows which reached to the floor were open. Frittie tumbled out and fell twenty feet to the stone terrace below. No bones were broken, and at first he seemed only shaken and bruised. But bleeding on the brain had begun, and by nightfall Frittie was dead” (Massie, Nicholas and Alexandra 142).

In 1878 a diphtheria epidemic swept through the Hesse family. Ella, the only healthy one besides her mother, was sent to live with her grandmother for the duration of the illnesses. Princess Alice nursed her husband and children through their illnesses, until her youngest daughter, May, died. When consoling her son Ernie, who was still sick, she hugged and kissed him. Princess Alice caught the disease and died, at only thirty-five years old, soon after on December 14, 1878, the seventeenth anniversary of her father Prince Albert’s death from typhoid. According to biographer Carolly Erickson, “December 14 was feared as a fateful day, and though Alice herself was unaware of the date, or of much else, she did rave in her delirium that she saw her dead father, along with May and Frittie, standing together in heaven welcoming her in” (Erickson 4).
Queen Victoria sent a letter from Windsor Castle:

"Poor Dear Children," Queen Victoria wrote, "you have had the most terrible blow which can befall children -- you have lost your precious, dear, devoted Mother who loved you -- and devoted her life to you and dear Papa. The horrid disease which carried off sweet little May and from which you and the others recovered has taken her away from you and poor old Grandmama, who with your other kind Grandmama will try and be a mother to you." (Erickson 5)

Since I was focusing on the family aspect this letter said a lot. Queen Victoria did in fact look after her Hesse grandchildren and also kept tabs on her son-in-law, Grand Duke Ludwig IV. She asked for and got regular reports about the children's progress and offered lots of advice to tutors and governesses. The children and their father also spent a lot of time on vacations in England.

As I later found out, Queen Victoria was a major influence in Princess Alix's life. Her attitudes and beliefs were wholly English, and even her rooms in the Russian palaces were Victorian in style. This I hadn't anticipated, since I knew she was ostracized in Russia during World War I for being German. I didn't know much about the Empress of Russia until I started researching her daughter. All these new things started building on each other and making each new piece of information make more sense.

After I learned about Princess Alice's death, I wondered if that had affected Princess Alix so much that it contributed to her attitude later in life. I assumed it did, but she was only six at the time, so perhaps she was just another stereotypical haughty princess. As it turns out, her mother's death did have a profound and lasting effect on six-year-old Princess Alix. In addition to the loss of her mother, everything, even her toys, were brand new; everything had been burned as a precaution against disease. According to biographer Robert Massie, Alix had been a "merry, generous, warm little girl, obstinate but sensitive, with a hot temper" (Massie, Nicholas and Alexandra 30). After her mother's death, she became aloof and sealed herself off from people. She rarely smiled and disliked unfamiliar places and people, as is shown by her discomfort at her and Nicholas' coronation as Emperor and Empress of Russia. Queen Marie of Romania, then Crown Princess, attended with her husband, then-Crown Prince Ferdinand, representing Romania. She recalls:

[Alexandra's] face was flushed, her lips compressed; even at this supreme hour no joy seemed to uplift her, not even pride; aloof, enigmatic, she was all dignity but she shed about her no warmth. It was almost a relief to tear one's gaze from her to let it rest upon the Emperor, whose caressing eyes and gentle expression made every man feel his friend. (Marie 332)

According to Massie, "only in cozy family gatherings where she could count on warmth and understanding did Alix unwind. There the shy, serious, cool Princess Alix became once again the merry, dimpled, loving 'Sunny' of her early childhood" (Massie, Nicholas and Alexandra 29).

It really surprised me just how closely all the royals are related, but I had thought because of its location Russia would be more separated from the European royals. That wasn't the case: most Russian grand dukes married princesses from minor German duchies and principalities. In fact, Princess Alix first met Tsarevich Nicholas at the wedding of her sister Ella and his uncle Grand Duke Serge Alexandrovich in 1884 when she was twelve and he was sixteen. He gave her a small brooch at a children's party, which she at first accepted, but then "shyly pressed it back into his hand... Nicholas was offended and gave the brooch to his sister Xenia, who, not knowing its history, accepted it cheerfully," wrote Massie (Massie, Nicholas and Alexandra 30). They met again in 1889 when Alix was visiting Ella in St. Petersburg. Reading about Nicholas and Alix's courtship was very interesting -- they were truly in love. They spent time together at receptions and balls, and went skating and tobogganing. When she visited Ella again the next year, she was becoming increasingly sure that she was in love with him. She turned down various marriage proposals, including King George V's older brother Prince Albert Victor of Wales, destined to be King of England if not for his untimely death in 1892.

I had thought royalty always married for dynastic and political reasons, but that wasn't the case with Nicholas and Alix. Nicholas's parents, Tsar Alexander III and Tsarina Maria Feodorovna thought Princess Alix unsuitable. They wanted better for him, the future tsar, than a minor German princess -- Russia had nothing to gain from such a marriage. Nicholas told them he would marry her or no one at all. He was finally allowed to propose, as his father's illness was becoming more serious and it was obvious that Nicholas needed to marry and produce a son. To everyone's surprise Alix turned him down. Why would she turn him down if she loved him? Since I had the prejudice of princesses being extremely conceited, I thought it might be pride, since his parents had been forbidding their marriage until heirs became necessary. But it was a more personal reason, one many regular people could identify with: religion. Princess Alix was devoutly Lutheran, and an Empress of Russia had to be Orthodox and raise her children Orthodox. According to Erickson,

The thought of having to abjure the confession in which she had been raised in order to embrace Orthodoxy stung her conscience, and she had not been able to bring herself to see the merits of Nicky's church. In 1890, Serge had sent her a book about Russian Orthodox belief and for three years she had kept it, and no doubt studied it. It was not ignorance about the Orthodox creed that led to her attitude, rather it was a very deep going loyalty to Lutheranism. Leaving the Lutheran church felt, to Alix, like abandoning a dearly loved childhood companion, like "a wrongful thing," as she told Nicky in a letter. (Erickson 41)

I was surprised at how open and affectionate their letters were to each other. "Oh! Do not say 'no' directly, my dearest Alix, do not ruin my life already!" was his closing plea. "Do you think there can exist any happiness in the whole world without you! After having INVOLUNTARILY! kept me waiting and hoping, can this end in such a way?" (qtd. in Erickson 42). Other people also wrote accounts of how obviously in love they were. After much convincing and eventual begging on Nicholas's part, Princess Alix accepted his proposal in 1894 at the wedding of her brother Ernest, the Grand Duke of Hesse, and their mutual cousin, Princess Victoria Melita of Edinburgh, a sister of Queen Marie of Romania, both daughters of Alix's uncle Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh, and his wife, Nicholas's aunt Marie, former Grand Duchess Maria Alexandrovna of Russia. Alix relented and converted to Orthodoxy, becoming "the truly believing Grand Duchess Alexandra Feodorovna" on her Orthodox baptism (Massie, Nicholas and Alexandra 29). Shortly after her engagement and subsequent conversion, Nicholas's father, Tsar Alexander III, died, and Nicholas became His Imperial Majesty Tsar Nicholas II of All the Russias at
As an Empress consort, her main duty was to provide heirs to the throne. The Russian throne could only pass to males, through males. If the Empress failed to give the country a son, the throne would go to the Emperor's brothers and their sons, then to the uncles, and so on. The only way a female could become an Empress regnant was if there were no more males, either because of death or illegitimacy based on unequal marriages, crimes, or something else. Alexandra gave birth to four girls in the first six years of marriage, making her a dismal failure as an Empress in the eyes of many Russians. In November 1895 Grand Duchess Olga Nikolaevna was born. After Olga's birth, while most others were disappointed, Nicholas was happy. On the day Olga was born, he wrote in his diary “At exactly 9 we heard a baby's squawk, and we breathed freely! A daughter sent by God, in prayer we named her Olga. When all anxiety was over, and the terrors had ceased, there was simply a blessed feeling at what had come to pass!” The next day he wrote “I can hardly believe it's really our child! God what happiness!!!” (Olga Nikolaevna - Grand Duchess of Russia). Three more girls followed: Grand Duchess Tatiana Nikolaevna in June 1897, Grand Duchess Maria Nikolaevna in June 1899, and Grand Duchess Anastasia Nikolaevna in June 1901. Though she loved her girls, Alexandra became despondent and determined to have a son. She had at least one false pregnancy, but in 1904 she became pregnant. At the same time, Nicholas, at the urging of Kaiser Wilhelm II (Alexandra's first cousin; their mothers were sisters), provoked Japan and they were responded by sending a large part of the Russian Far Eastern Naval Fleet. I found it interesting that Nicholas was intimidated by Wilhelm; Nicholas's family had been in power for 300 years in a much larger nation, while Wilhelm was only the third leader of a newly unified Germany. "Cousin Willy" took advantage of their family connection using personal letters and references and flattery to influence "Nicky" to act in ways that would be advantageous for Germany. Between 1894, the year Nicholas became tsar, and 1904, "the Kaiser manipulated Russian foreign policy by influencing the youthful, susceptible Tsar," according to Massie (Massie, Nicholas and Alexandra 80).

This proved to me that family could definitely influence the government. But this relative was a reigning emperor; there was more than just a familial tie there. I wanted to know if the hemophilia that I had read about had an effect on Russia, or if it was merely a story of a child with a disease. I also wondered how much influence Alexandra had in Russia, if her personality was a factor in anything, and especially her German ties around the time of World War I.

After the initial naval battle, Nicholas ordered the Baltic Fleet to sail around the world to the North China Sea, where another confrontation with the Japanese led to the destruction of more of the Russian Navy and the death of the commander aboard the ship Tsarevich (Stevens). In the midst of this crisis, Alexandra gave birth to her long-awaited son, His Imperial Highness Alexei Nikolaevich, Sovereign Heir Tsarevich, Grand Duke of Russia, in August 1904. As Erickson recalls:

"Alix, slow to recover from the effects of chloroform, came sleepily awake. "When she opened her eyes," [Martha] Mouchanow [Alexandra's chief waiting maid] wrote, "she looked so weak that no one dared to tell her the good news, but she seemed to read it in the face of her husband, because she suddenly exclaimed, "Oh, it cannot be true; it cannot be true. Is it really a boy?" (Erickson 146)

The family was very happy and satisfied. Alexei was eleven pounds, large and sturdy. "He's an amazingly hefty baby,' [Grand Duchess] Xenia [Alexandrovna, Nicholas's sister] wrote of Alexei, 'with a chest like a barrel and generally has the air of a warrior knight’” (Erickson 147).

The joy of the people of Russia was only outdone by the elation of the parents. Nicholas and Alexandra made every soldier in the Russian army a godfather of the baby Tsarevich, as well as their cousins Willy and Georgie (the Kaiser and the Prince of Wales, future King George V of England, the son of Alix's uncle King Edward VII and Nicholas's aunt Queen Alexandra [formerly Princess Alexandra of Denmark, sister of Nicholas's mother the Dowager Empress Maria Feodorovna, formerly Princess Dagmar of Denmark]) (Erickson 147). Also present at the baptism was Alexei's eighty-seven year old great-grandfather King Christian IX of Denmark. The only people absent among the large gathering of family were, according to custom, the baby's parents. (Massie, Nicholas and Alexandra 106)

Because of my previous misconceptions about the Romanovs, and also because I knew how their story ended in the Russian Revolution, I was surprised and a little glad to read that the family was extremely close. They took regular vacations and spent lots of time outdoors in the sun and swimming, and being like any normal family. On one occasion Nicholas went swimming in the sea with his four daughters. As a wave crashed down, Nicholas, Olga, Tatiana, and Marie jumped up and met it, but five-year-old Anastasia disappeared:

"Little Alexis [aged two] and I saw it from the beach," wrote the Tsar's sister Olga Alexandrovna. "The child of course, didn't realize the danger, and kept clapping his hands at the tidal wave. Then Nicky dived again, grabbed Anastasia by her long hair, and swam back with her to the beach. I had gone cold with terror." (Massie, Nicholas and Alexandra 164)

This story especially made me see the Romanovs as a real family. Take away the titles and the servants, there is only a scared father rescuing his drowning daughter and a helpless, terrified aunt looking on. There are also other small anecdotes that bring out the closeness of the family. When Nicholas was writing a letter to his mother in 1909, he interrupted himself to write, "Just now, Alexei has come in after his bath and insists that I write to you that he kisses his 'Granny' very tenderly. He is very sunburned, so are his sisters and I” (164).

It wasn't just their children that Nicholas and Alexandra were close to. They also worried about Nicky's sister Grand Duchess Xenia and her husband Grand Duke Alexander's ("Sandro") daughter Irina's attachment to Felix Yusupov ("I would never let a daughter of mine marry him," Alexandra said.), Nicky's sister Olga's divorce, and the illness and invalidism of one of Alexandra's maids of honor. In addition, their daughter Anastasia's efforts to "breed worms" irritated them, just as similar projects have irritated many other parents who don't have the extra burden of running a large country. (Erickson 215)
Along with the lost battles and sunken ships, the bombs, the revolutionaries and their plots, the strikes and revolts, Imperial Russia was toppled by a defect in the body of a little boy. Hidden from public view, veiled in rumor, working from within, this unseen tragedy would change the history of Russia and the world. (Massie, Nicholas and Alexandra 107)

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Alix was distraught and guilt-ridden with the knowledge that she had passed this disease to her son. Many mothers of hemophiliacs feel this but in Russia “the people regarded any defect as divine intervention. The Tsar, as head of the Church and leader of the people, must be free of any physical defect, so the Tsarevich’s hemophilia was concealed. The family retreated into greater isolation and were increasingly dominated by the young heir’s affliction” (Stevens).
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Alexei’s hemophilia crippled him from bleeding into the joints. Blood in an elbow, knee, or ankle put pressure on the nerves and gave him intense pain. At first there wasn’t much pain, but as the joint filled with blood it got worse. “When the pain obliterated everything else from his consciousness, Alexis was still able to cry, ‘Mama, help me, help me!’ Doctors were summoned, ice packs applied, prayers offered. Nothing helped. Then Gregory Rasputin, the Siberian peasant reported to have miraculous powers of faith healing, was brought to Alexandra” (Massie, The Romanovs 160).

I knew a little about Rasputin. The name always made me think of a mystical creature, sort of a magician. I had no idea he was just a traveling peasant. Alexandra met Rasputin through Grand Duchesses Militsa and Anastasia (Stana), daughters of King Nicholas I of Montenegro and married to cousins of the Emperor. At first his presence caused little comment and he had the respect of church elders. He referred to Nicholas and Alexandra “not as ‘Your Majesty’ or ‘Your Imperial Majesty’ but as Batsushka and Matushka, the ‘Father’ and ‘Mother’ of the Russian peasants” differing himself from the sophisticated court and high society that made Alexandra uncomfortable (Massie, Nicholas and Alexandra 189). He had the confidence of Nicholas and Alexandra, both of whom spoke freely to him, but most of all he seemed to be able to help Alexei. “Rasputin’s presence in the palace was intimately connected with the prince’s illness. She [Alexandra] believed she had no choice. Rasputin was the intermediary between her and God. Her own prayers went unanswered but his seemed to be,“ wrote Pierre Gilliard, the children’s French tutor (Massie, Nicholas and Alexandra 189). With his acceptance into St. Petersburg society and his patronage of the aristocracy, the excesses that came with that he indulged in heavily. According to Baroness Sophie Buxhoeveden, one of Alexandra’s ladies-in-waiting, “[Rasputin’s] soul seemed to be divided into two parts: the one a kind of heaven and the other a kind of hell, in each of which he seemed to dwell in turn. His lapses caused his ecclesiastical patrons, the Archbishops Hermogene and Theophane, to renounce him” (Buxhoeveden, Chapter XV). Militsa and Stana also stopped seeing him and warned the Empress about him, as did many other family members. Alexandra ignored their warnings and only became angry with them. She believed that Rasputin had saved her son’s life. When he bled, the doctors were helpless, but Rasputin only had to come in and pray and the bleeding subsided. The modern belief is that frantic doctors and a terrified mother only made the boy anxious, increasing blood flow. Rasputin was calm and confident, and put Alexei at ease, slowing the blood flow. Whatever it was, Alexandra had complete confidence in him. This trust was starting rumors in society, who had no idea about Alexei’s illness and the reasons for Rasputin being summoned to the palace.

I sympathized with the family, and especially with Alexandra, seeing her as a desperate helpless mother. If only the people of Russia could have known about Alexei’s illness, maybe there would have been more understanding and compassion for the Empress. At a ball held at the palace the Empress was especially aloof and anxious, and the Emperor seemed preoccupied. According to the children’s French tutor Pierre Gilliard, who attended the ball and also had a behind the scenes view because of his relationship with the family, Alexandra was near tears all night and kept leaving to check on Alexei, who was very sick. “But I noticed that the Tsar, even while engaged in conversation, had taken up a position from which he could watch the door, and I caught the despairing glance which the Tsaritsa threw him as she came in. The scene … suddenly brought home to me the tragedy of a double life,” Gilliard wrote (Massie, Nicholas and Alexandra 174-175). Knowing that these were two parents concerned about their sick child, I felt sorry for them. But since most didn’t know that, I can see where the opinion of haughtiness and snobliness came from. Speaking with and observing people who were never paying full attention to their guests and were always preoccupied could lead one to assume they were self-absorbed and aloof. As no one else seemed to be able to help her son, I also could see why Alexandra was so dependent on Rasputin.

Letters from the Empress to Rasputin were published that gave the impression he had a far greater influence than he did. People came to him hoping to contact the court, which didn’t happen, but the harm was done. Baroness Buxhoeveden wrote:

“I was told that he was a great boaster and would interrupt an interview in order to answer a pretended telephone call from the Palace. General Ressine, who had all the Palace telephone conversations noted down in his police reports, told me that Rasputin did ring tip Tsarskoe Selo [the imperial family's residence outside St. Petersburg] on occasions, but spoke to his private friends there, while his listeners believed him to be talking with some member of the Imperial Family.” (Buxhoeveden, Chapter XV)

After the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary, by a Serb, Austria demanded concessions from Serbia. Briefly summarized by Stephen Dalziel in a BBC News article, World War I started because:

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Germany supported Austria; Russia sided with the Serbs. Austria declared war on Serbia; Russia announced a general military mobilisation. Germany then declared war on Russia. Russia had almost accidentally tumbled into something which was to lead to the downfall of tsarism; the failure of an attempt to create a democratic state; and the imposition of a totalitarian system which was to repress the Russian people and millions of their neighbours for most of the century. (Dalziel)
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the cellar on the night of July 17-18, 1918, and told that they were to have their picture taken to prove to the people of Moscow, who

World War I for Russia was little more than a backdrop from which the Russian Revolution was easily drawn. "Ultimately, a combination of low morale in the army, a general dissatisfaction with the conduct of the War and Nicholas' gross incompetence saw tsardom swept away to be replaced by a provisional government in March 1917," Dalziel wrote (Dalziel). By the end of the war in November 1918 Russia was too deep in civil war to pay much attention.

This was what I was wondering most about. What role did the family have in the Revolution? It seems that the family were major players. The chief that a peasant was essentially running the country, along with Nicholas' and Alexandra's anxiety (which no one but the immediate family knew was about Alexei's illness), and Alexandra's natural inhibitions and shyness (seen as haughtiness) added to the general lack of confidence heading into World War I and helped the Bolsheviks overthrow the tsar, as the people were disenchanted with their Emperor and Empress.

The Revolution began in 1917. Earlier that year Rasputin had been murdered by members of the Imperial family. Nicholas was pressured to show leniency toward the murderers, and people rejoiced in the streets. "The Nameless One! The Unmentionable! He is dead!" they told one another, clapping and laughing" (Erickson 267). Troops had mutinied, there were violent demonstrations in front of the palace, and there was open hostility whenever a member of the imperial family or their staff went out in public. Eventually rebels cut off water and electricity to the palace. On March 16, 1917, Tsar Nicholas II abdicated for himself and his minor son, in favor of his brother Grand Duke Michael Alexandrovich so that Russia would be ruled by a stronger tsar and win the war. On March 17, Michael too, abdicated, realizing that it was revolutionaries, not his subjects who had put him on the throne. He believed if the people didn't want him, it would lead to further violence, and so he ended 300 years of Romanov rule in Russia.

On March 21 Nicholas and Alexandra were placed under arrest. The family was imprisoned at Tsarskoe Selo, which they were told was a "precautionary measure" and that soon the family would be in Murmansk, on their way to a new life in England" (Erickson 283). The family had plenty of money and belongings to live off of, as well as Alexandra's collection of priceless jewels. Exile seemed a good and entirely possible option. After learning about who and where their cousins were, I was surprised that they weren't exiled. After reading so many stories about their family and the good relationships they had, it seems a shame that none of them stopped in to help until it was too late. England was assumed to be where they would go, as they had a good relationship with their cousin King George V and his wife Queen Mary. Nicholas and George, who looked so much alike they were mistaken for each other at George's wedding, were especially close. There were also cousins on the thrones of Greece (Nicholas's cousin King Constantine I and Alexandra's cousin Queen Sophie, the Kaiser's sister), Denmark (Nicholas's cousin King Christian X), Norway (Nicholas's cousin King Haakon VII and their mutual cousin Queen Maud, King George's sister), Sweden (Alexandra's cousin Crown Princess Margaret), Spain (Alexandra's cousin Queen Victoria Eugenie), and Romania (their mutual cousin Queen Marie, the sister of Victoria Melita, at whose wedding Nicholas and Alexandra became engaged), as well as countless minor principalities and dukedoms throughout Europe. (Tompsett)

There were proposals made for Nicholas to leave Russia via Finland, but the children were sick with the measles, and the ex-Emperor wouldn't leave without his family. There were more tentative proposals for exile, and Alexandra, if they had to leave, preferred Norway; she thought the climate would be good for her son and they could live quietly. Even in the most dire of circumstances, Nicholas and Alexandra put their children first, like many regular people do. During their house arrest they were cut off from the outside world. As they slowly started to realize the gravity of their situation, Alexandra started burning her letters she had saved over the years from her father, as well as countless other letters. The family had plenty of money and belongings to live off of, as well as Alexandra's collection of priceless jewels. Exile seemed a good and entirely possible option. After learning about who and where their cousins were, I was surprised that they weren't exiled. After reading so many stories about their family and the good relationships they had, it seems a shame that none of them stopped in to help until it was too late. England was assumed to be where they would go, as they had a good relationship with their cousin King George V and his wife Queen Mary. Nicholas and George, who looked so much alike they were mistaken for each other at George's wedding, were especially close. There were also cousins on the thrones of Greece (Nicholas's cousin King Constantine I and Alexandra's cousin Queen Sophie, the Kaiser's sister), Denmark (Nicholas's cousin King Christian X), Norway (Nicholas's cousin King Haakon VII and their mutual cousin Queen Maud, King George's sister), Sweden (Alexandra's cousin Crown Princess Margaret), Spain (Alexandra's cousin Queen Victoria Eugenie), and Romania (their mutual cousin Queen Marie, the sister of Victoria Melita, at whose wedding Nicholas and Alexandra became engaged), as well as countless minor principalities and dukedoms throughout Europe. (Tompsett)

Nicholas, Alexandra, and Marie then left for Ekaterinburg along with a few loyal servants who had stayed with the family even after they were informed they would be arrested for doing so. At the end of May, Olga, Tatiana, Anastasia, and Alexei joined them at the Ipatiev House, also known as the House of Special Purpose.

Although I knew what happened to the family of the last tsar, reading the specific details was horrifying. The way the family was treated and the humiliations they had to endure weren't fair, especially to Olga, Tatiana, Marie, and Anastasia. Imprisoning the ex-Emperor and ex-Empress can be understood because of their exalted positions and the role they played in the government. Even Alexei's treatment can be somewhat understood, as he was the heir to the throne. But treating the girls, who had no succession rights and no official role in the government, the same way is inexcusable. After a harsh seventy-eight day imprisonment, the family and their servants were led into the cellar on the night of July 17-18, 1918, and told that they were to have their picture taken to prove to the people of Moscow, who
were afraid that they had escaped, that they were still alive. The family took a few pillows with them, which they kept close by at all times. Sewn inside were priceless jewels intended to help them get to freedom. Many more jewels were sewn inside the corsets of Alexandra and her daughters. Instead of a picture, they were lined up and killed. Nicholas was killed first, shot in the head. Alexandra and Olga tried to cross themselves, but didn’t have time. According to Massie:

Alexandra died immediately sitting in her chair. Olga was killed by a single bullet through her head. Botkin [the doctor], Trupp [Nicholas’s valet], and Kharitonov [the cook] also died quickly... Bullets fired at the daughters’ chests seemed to bounce off, ricocheting around the room like hail because of the jewels later found in their corsets. Mystified, terrified and almost hysterical, the executioners continued firing. Barely visible through the smoke, Marie and Anastasia pressed against the wall, squatting, covering their heads with their arms until the bullets cut them down. Alexis, lying on the floor, moved his arm to shield himself, then tried to clutch his father’s shirt. One of the executioners kicked the tsarevich in the head with his heavy boot. Alexis moaned. Yurovsky [chief executioner] stepped up and fired two shots from his Mauser directly into the boy’s ear. (Massie, The Romanovs 5)

Demidova, Alexandra’s maid, survived the first round of shots. When the executioners ran out of bullets, they grabbed rifles from the next room and pursued her with bayonets. When she finally fell they stabbed her more than thirty times.

When the smoke cleared, the bodies were loaded in a cart, stripped, burned, and buried in a mass grave in a remote forest.

The ending to the lives of the last Imperial family of Russia was a tragedy. It becomes even sadder when one learns that the events were helped along by the effect of a mother’s death on her small daughter who grew up to be an Empress, and the effect of a little boy’s disease on his parents and an entire nation. The family of Tsar Nicholas II certainly had major roles in his government, not the minor ones I had previously assumed, whether by the direct intervention of his cousin the Kaiser in his foreign policy, or by his son Alexei’s illness and the preoccupation and anxiety it caused him and his wife. It was a tragic end for this family who were so close while living, and maybe a small comfort that they died together.

Works Cited


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Romanov dynasty: Romanov dynasty, rulers of Russia from 1613 until the Russian Revolution of February 1917. Descendants of Andrey Ivanovich Kobyla (Kambia), a Muscovite boyar who lived during the reign of the grand prince of Moscow Ivan I Kalita (reigned 1328â€“41), the Romanovs acquired their name from Roman Yurev.Â After Fyodor I (the last ruler of the Rurik dynasty) died in 1598, Russia endured 15 chaotic years known as the Time of Troubles (1598â€“1613), which ended when a zemsky sobor (â€œassembly of the landâ€) elected Nikitaâ€™s grandson, Michael Romanov, as the new tsar. Read More On This Topic. Russia: Romanov Muscovy.Â â€œImperial eggs created for the Romanov family and given as Easter gifts.â€ Yakov Mikhaylovich Sverdlov. The last Romanov Tsar, Nicholas II, began his reign in the autumn of 1894, when as the second Russian emperor by that name and a direct descendant of Empress Catherine the Great, he ascended the throne. His accession occurred much sooner than anyone had expected. Nicholasâ€™ father, Tsar Alexander III, died unexpectedly at the relatively young age of 49. The Romanov family in mid-19th century: Tsar Alexander II, his Heir â€œthe future Alexander III, and baby Nicholas, the future Tsar Nicholas II.Â An obituary to announce the passing of the heir to the throne had already been prepared by the Romanov family, and the imperial doctors had all but given up on the seemingly dying boy. But amazingly, Alexei slowly recovered after Rasputinâ€™s telephone call. The last female Romanovs were his aunts, Empresses Anna Ioannovna (1693-1740) and Elizabeth Petrovna (1709-1762), who reigned successively for most of the period from 1730 to 1762. As neither Anna nor Elizabeth produced a male heir, the succession could devolve either on a Brunswick grand-nephew of Anna (Ivan VI of Russia) or on a Holstein nephew of Elizabeth (Duke Karl Peter Ulrich of Holstein-Gottorp), who was also an heir presumptive to the throne of Sweden.Â When the Romanov family celebrated the tercentenary of its rule, in 1913, the solemnities were clouded by numerous bad omens. The face of Our Lady of St. Theodore, the patron icon of the family, became badly blackened.