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The Last Tsar

The Life and Death of Nicholas II

Edvard Radzinsky

THE
LAST
TSAR

*The Life and Death of
Nicholas II*



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RADZINSKY

Translated from the Russian by
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Though thou exalt thyself as the eagle, and thou set thy nest among the stars, thence I will bring thee down, saith the Lord.

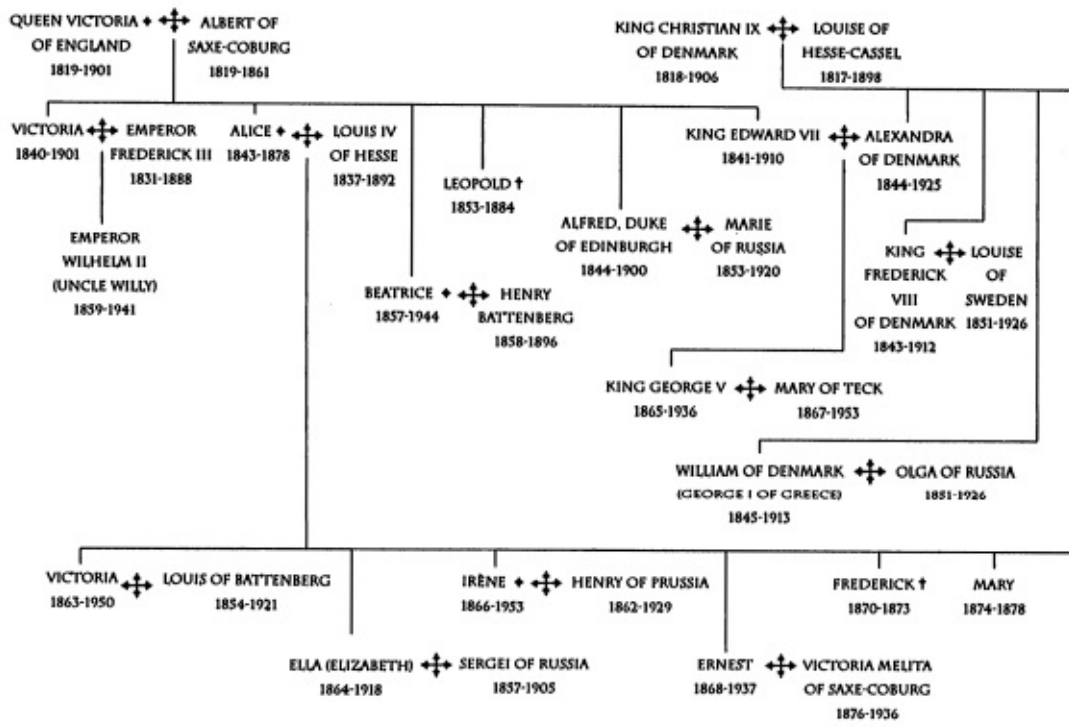
—OBADIAH 1:4

“Lord, save Russia and bring her peace.”

—TSAR NICHOLAS II, *October 17, 1905*

THE DATES USED IN THIS BOOK FOLLOW THE OLD-STYLE JULIAN CALENDAR IN USE IN RUSSIA UNTIL FEBRUARY 1918. IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY THAT CALENDAR LAGGED TWELVE DAYS BEHIND THE GREGORIAN CALENDAR USED IN THE WEST; IN THE TWENTIETH, IT LAGGED THIRTEEN DAYS BEHIND. NICHOLAS AND ALIX USED A DOUBLE-DATING SYSTEM IN THEIR DIARIES AND LETTERS BEGINNING IN FEBRUARY 1918, BUT NICHOLAS SOON RETURNED TO THE OLD-STYLE DATING.

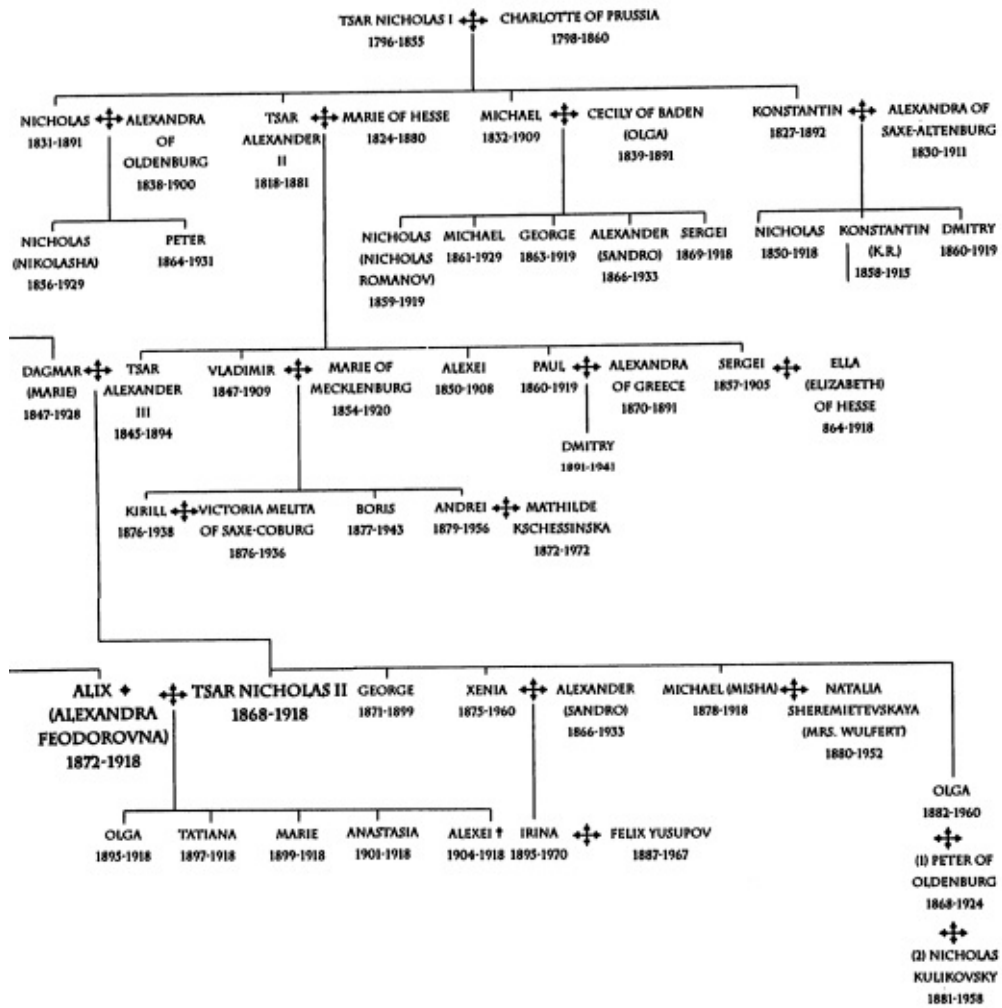
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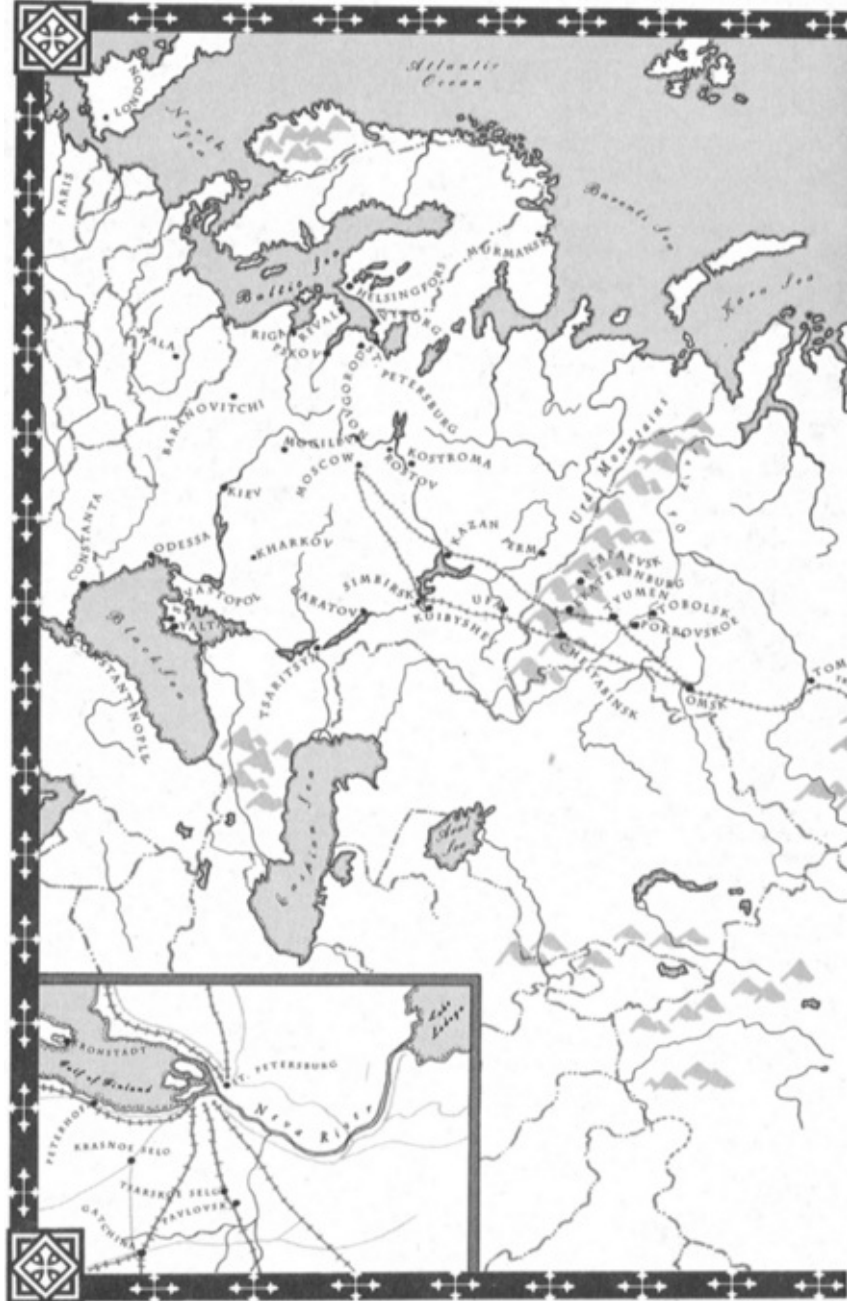


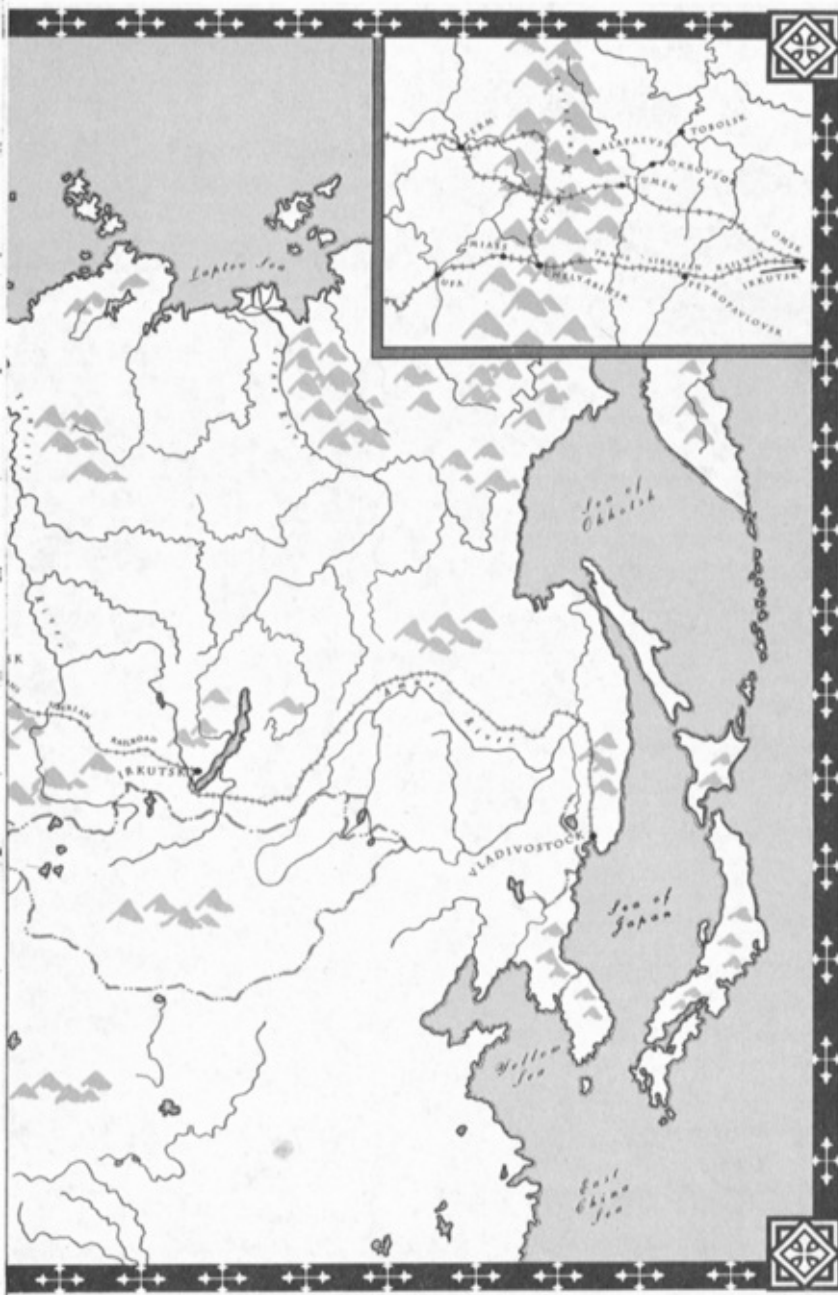
◆ FEMALE HEMOPHILIA CARRIER
 † HEMOPHILIAC



Tsar Nicholas II







PROLOGUE



As now, the century then was living out its last years. And as now, old people felt a sadness that what was coming, which promised mankind the flowering of science and serene well-being, had nothing to do with them. Young people, though, were living with a presentiment of what was to be.

The two happiest of young people, Nicky and Alix, in love, joined in marriage, and ruled over one-sixth of the world, were also living this happy future. The day of their coronation, set for 1896, promised to be the prologue to the even happier life that awaited them in the new century.

May 14, 1896. Moscow, the Kremlin. In ancient Assumption Cathedral, the sacred coronation rite was in progress. Candles burned ... cherubic singing a cappella.... He took the large crown from the metropolitan's hands and placed it on his own head. She went down on her knees before him.... A small diamond crown already sparkled on her golden hair.

July 17, 1918. Ekaterinburg. "The bodies were put in the hole and the faces and all the bodies generally doused with sulfuric acid, both so they couldn't be recognized and to prevent any stink from them rotting [it was not a deep hole]. We scattered it with dirt and lime, put boards on top, and rode over it several times—no trace of the hole remained; The secret was kept" (from the Note of Yakov Yurovsky, who directed the execution of the last tsar and his family).

"Though thou exalt thyself as the eagle, and though thou set thy nest among the stars, thence will I bring thee down, saith the Lord."

The last tsaritsa from the house of Romanov read these words from the prophet Obadiah (1:4) to her daughter in the Ipatiev house. On the family's last day of life.

The progenitor of the Romanov clan was Andrei Ivanovich Kobyla, a distinguished émigré from the land of Prussia, where, in the fourteenth century, a long and fruitful line that included many of Russia's most distinguished families began with Kobyla and his brother Feodor. Kobyla's great-great-granddaughter Anastasia became wife and tsaritsa to Tsar Ivan the Terrible. Thus Andrei Kobyla's descendants allied themselves with the ancient dynasty of Muscovite tsars.

The tsaritsa's brother, Nikita Romanovich, was particularly close to the cruel tsar. But Ivan the Terrible died, and in his will and testament he appointed Nikita Romanovich guardian and councilor to his son, the new tsar, Feodor.

The struggle for power commenced.

Slandered by the all-powerful Boris Godunov, Tsar Feodor's brother-in-law, the eldest of

Nikita Romanovich's sons was forced to take monastic vows under the name Filaret.

With the death of Tsar Feodor in 1598 Rurik's ancient dynasty came to an end, whereupon ensued a period of unprecedented turbulence for old Russia—the Time of Troubles. Selected to be tsar was Boris Godunov, whom the people suspected of having murdered the infant Dmitry, heir to the throne. In the midst of unimaginable famine and death, Godunov died and the Poles invaded Russia, putting a tsar-pretender, the False Dmitry, on the Russian throne. Russia suffered widespread impoverishment, cannibalism, brigandage.

It was then, during the Time of Troubles, that Filaret Romanov was returned from exile and made metropolitan of Rostov.

The Poles were driven from Moscow, and the false tsar perished. And at last, in 1613, the Assembly of the Land put an end to the terrible interregnum.

The son of Metropolitan Filaret, Michael Romanov, who was at that moment at Kostroma in the Ipatiev monastery, was unanimously elected tsar by the Assembly of the Land on February 21, 1613. Thus began the three-hundred-year history of the house of Romanov.

The mysticism of history: the monastery whence the first Romanov was called upon to rule was the Ipatiev; the house where the last ruling Romanov, Nicholas II, parted with his life was the Ipatiev house, named after the building's owner, the engineer N. N. Ipatiev.

A Michael was the first tsar from the house of Romanov; a Michael was also the last, whose favor Nicholas II tried unsuccessfully to abdicate the throne.

Part I

LEAFING
THROUGH
THE TSAR'S
DIARIES



PRELUDE:

FROM THE ARCHIVE OF BLOOD



In the seventh decade of our century, in Moscow, lived a strange old woman: her wrinkled face was plastered with a grotesque layer of theatrical makeup; her bent figure tottered on high heels. She moved almost by feel, but nothing could induce her to don glasses. Oh, no, she had no intention of looking like an old woman!

According to the *Theatrical Encyclopedia* she was then in her tenth decade.

This was Vera Leonidovna Yureneva—a star of the stage from the turn of the century. Once, her student admirers harnessed themselves to her carriage in place of horses to take her home from her performances. Now, yesterday's femme fatale was living out her life in a communal apartment on a miserable pension. And she had rented one of her two rooms to me, a sorry student at the Historical Archival Institute.

Evenings, when I returned home, I often had long talks with her in the communal kitchen. The suites of Petersburg restaurants, the glamorous Yacht Club with its grand dukes, the palaces on translucent White Nights—this drowned world where she had once lived Vera Leonidovna ironically referred to as Atlantis. She scattered names: “Anya”—just Anya—turned out to be Anna Vyubova, the empress's fateful friend; and “Sana”—to the rest of Russia the Empress Alexandra Feodorovna. Thus began our nightly conversations in my Moscow kitchen, our journey to a drowned Atlantis. I recorded her stories greedily. And now that I have read so many reminiscences by participants in those stormy events, her opinions retain a distinct charm for me, precisely because she was not a participant. Participants are after all, biased. It reminds me of the expression “He lies like someone who was there.” Vera Leonidovna was merely a contemporary, an interested but disinterested party.

Here is one of Vera Leonidovna's stories about Atlantis's demise: “Only after the revolution did Mikhail K. become my husband. [Mikhail Koltsov was a distinguished journalist in Bolshevik Russia.] ‘Yet Another Bolshevik Victory’—that was what the émigré press wrote about our union.

“At that time many prominent Bolsheviks lived in the Metropole Hotel. For relaxation they often invited writers and journalists serving the new authorities. Koltsov, too, was often in the Metropole. Once he met two people there. One had been the head of the Ekaterinburg Bolsheviks when the tsar's family was executed. The other had been in charge of the execution itself. And they reminisced about how it all had been. They sipped unsweetened tea through a sugar lump, crunched the cube, and told stories about how *the bullets bounced off the girls and flew about the room*. Gripped with fear, they had been utterly unable to get the boy. He kept crawling across the floor, warding off their shots with his hand. Only later did they learn that the grand duchesses had been wearing corsets sewn solidly with diamonds which had protected them. Later Misha [Koltsov] used to say that there must be a photograph

of that horror somewhere. ‘After all, they were very proud—they had liquidated Nicholas the Bloody. How could they have resisted taking their picture with the slain afterward, especially since the chief assassin had once been a photographer.’ He never did stop searching for the photograph.”

This picture: the tsar’s murderers drinking tea in a room at the Metropole ... and the bullets bouncing off the girls and the boy on the floor, and the terrible photograph. I could not put it out of my mind.

Later at the Historical Archives Institute I heard about a secret note written by that same former photographer who had led the execution of the tsar’s family. His name: Yakov Yurovsky. In the note he purportedly told all.

Once I had completed my archival internship, I found myself in the Central State Archives of the October Revolution in Moscow. Immediately I made a naive inquiry about the Yurovsky “note.”

“There is no Yurovsky note,” my colleague replied brusquely, as if to point up the question’s lack of tact.

I was shown the Romanov archive, however. To my surprise, at a time when everything was classified, these documents were not.

First I looked through albums of Romanov photographs. The same colleague with the bloodless (archival) face carried in huge scrapbooks—Moroccan leather, with the tsarist seal and without—and carried them out, one after the other. She refused to leave me alone with those photographs for a second. At first she was cold, indifferent, but then, forgetting herself, she waxed enthusiastic and explained each one to me, as if boasting of this amazing vanished life. The dim pictures in those tsarist photographs were a window out of her destitute, boring life.

“They took pictures of everything,” she explained with a certain pride. “The whole family had cameras: they took photos of the girls, the tsar and the tsaritsa.”

Photographs, photographs. A tall, slender beauty and a sweet young man—the period of their engagement.

Their first child—a little girl on spindly legs.

The four girls sitting on a leather sofa. Then the boy, the long-awaited heir to the throne. The boy and his dog, the boy on a bicycle with an enormous wheel, the amusing bicycle of that era. But most often he is in bed, the empress beside him. She has aged so. She looks into the camera, she looks at us. A bitter crease circles her mouth. The thin nose now hooked—sad young woman. And here is Nicholas and the future king of England, George. They are looking at each other—astonishingly, ridiculously alike (their mothers were sisters).

A photograph of a hunt: a huge deer with giant antlers lying in the snow. And here is Nicholas on vacation: Nicholas swimming—he has dived and is swimming underwater, naked—his bare strong body from the back.

Since then I have often recalled those photographs—the dead deer and the naked tsar—when thinking about him lying dead and naked on the warm July ground by the mine shaft into which they later tossed his body.

Then I was given his diary.

In July 1918, the Czechs and Cossacks were advancing on Ekaterinburg. The Bolsheviks

would have to surrender the town. Yakov Yurovsky left Ekaterinburg on the last train out. The “secret courier” (as he was officially referred to in the documents) was carrying the tsar’s leather cases—one of which contained the family archive of the very recently executed Romanovs.

So there he was riding the train, looking through the albums of photographs. The former photographer must have found this very interesting. But the main thing, naturally, was that he read the tsar’s diary. The diary of the man with whom his name would be linked from then on and always. Imagine what he felt as he leafed through it on his long journey, trying to picture this life lived in full view of the entire world.

That is how the diary of Nicholas II, kept in the Romanov archive, came to be in the Central State Archive of the October Revolution. The Romanov archive. I call it the Archive of Blood.

Nicholas kept a diary for thirty-six years without interruption. He began it at the age of fourteen, in 1882, in the palace at Gatchina, and ended it as a fifty-year-old prisoner in Ekaterinburg.

Fifty notebooks filled from beginning to end with his neat handwriting. But the final, fifty-first notebook is only half filled: his life was cut short, and yawning blank pages remain conscientiously numbered by the author in advance.

This diary contains no reflections, and opinions are rare. He is terse—this taciturn, retiring man. The diary is a record of the principal events of the day, no more. But his voice lingers on its pages.

The mystical force of genuine speech.

The revolution punished him without trial, not allowing him a final say. The portrait of this puzzling man was created only after his death—by his opponents and his supporters. Now he himself can speak in the words he himself once wrote. I leaf through his diary. One experiences an eternal yet banal sensation in the archive: one feels *other* hands, the touch of hands across a century. He himself will lead us through his life. He is the Author.

Chapter 1

DIARY OF THE YOUNG MAN



THE DIARY BEGINS

The author of the diary was born on May 6, 1868.

An old postcard: an angelic infant in long curls. Here Nicholas is all of a year.

Another photograph: a youth with his hair fashionably parted.

In 1882 Nicholas received a gift from his mother: a gilt-edged “book of souvenirs” bound in precious inlaid wood. This luxurious book became the first notebook of his diary. Nicholas was moved to begin keeping a diary conscientiously by a fateful date in Russian history: March 1, 1881.

On the dank night of February 28, 1881, in a Petersburg apartment, the light stayed on for a long time. All that day, from early morning, certain young people had been going in and out of the apartment. Since eight o’clock in the evening six had remained, four young men and two young women. One of them was Vera Figner, distinguished leader of People’s Will, the revolutionary terrorist organization. Subsequently she would describe that day in her autobiography.

The other woman was Sofia Perovskaya, who in the morning was going to take a direct part in the *cause*. They had convinced her to get some sleep.

Vera Figner and the four men worked through the night. Only toward morning did they finish the kerosene cans with blasting jelly. They now had four homemade bombs.

The cause was the assassination of Tsar Alexander II, one of the greatest reformers in the history of Russia. That spring he had been preparing to give Russia its longed-for constitution, which would have brought his feudal despotism into the ranks of civilized European states.

But the young people were afraid that the constitution would create false contentment in society and distract Russia from the coming revolution. Also, the tsar’s reforms seemed to them too gradual. The young people were in a hurry.

By that time People’s Will terrorists had already made seven unsuccessful attempts on the tsar’s life. The price had been twenty-one death sentences. And now, once again, they were going out onto a Petersburg street—to kill Alexander II.

That day in the Pavlovsky Regiment barracks, which had a view on the Moika Canal and the Field of Mars, the young soldier Alexander Volkov was standing guard. From the direction of the Ekaterininsky Canal came two powerful explosions. Volkov saw the smoke disperse slowly over the canal and the police chief’s sleigh dash past.

Three Cossacks from the tsar's escort were propping up the dying tsar: two standing to the side on the runners and one in front whose Circassian coat was black with Alexander's blood. The savaged muscles of the tsar's legs were gushing blood.

The sleigh was heading toward the Winter Palace. "I want to die there," the tsar kept repeating. Alexander II had been mortally wounded by a bomb made in that same Petersburg apartment. The bomb that killed the Orthodox tsar had been disguised as an Easter cake, a fine-looking Easter gift—the young people had not overlooked the irony.

Then a coach under escort sped past Volkov. A huge, heavy, bald man and a thirteen-year-old boy were sitting in the coach—the new Tsar Alexander III and his thirteen-year-old son Nicholas, who that day became heir to the Russian throne.

The entire life of the soldier standing guard that day, Alexander Volkov, would be linked with this boy sitting in the coach. His life would rush by between two regicides.

Meanwhile Vera Figner and her friends had already learned of the mortal wounds of Alexander II. Their gruesome success evoked a strange exultation in the young woman: "In my agitation I could scarcely get the words out, that the tsar had been killed, and I wept: the terrible nightmare that had oppressed young Russia for so many decades had been broken off. All had been redeemed by this moment, this tsarist blood we had shed." And they embraced for joy—the young people who had killed the tsar-reformer.

"The revolutionary is a *doomed* man." This is a quotation from Mikhail Bakunin's famous *Revolutionary Catechism*, according to which the revolutionary must break with the civilized world's laws and conventions and renounce any personal life and blood ties in the name of the revolution. He must despise society and be ruthless toward it (and must himself expect no mercy from society and be prepared to die), intensifying the people's misfortunes by any possible means, spurring them on toward revolution. He must know that all means are justified by a single goal: revolution.

They had resolved to smear the stalled Russian cart of history with blood. And roll on, roll on—to 1917, the Ekaterinburg cellar, and the Great Red Terror.

Tsar Alexander II passed away in the palace in agony.

This picture: the murdered grandfather bleeding profusely. It would not quit Nicholas his whole life long.

In blood, he became heir to the throne.

"A tsar's blood shed" gave birth to his diary. Nicholas was the heir, and now his life belonged to history. Starting with the New Year he must record his life.

HIS FAMILY

As a result of countless dynastic marriages, by the twentieth century scarcely any Russian

blood flowed in the veins of the Russian Romanov tsars.

But “Russian tsar” is a nationality in itself, and the German princess who ascended to the Russian throne and brought glory on herself in Russian history as Empress Catherine the Great felt truly *Russian*. So Russian that when her own brother prepared to visit Russia she was indignant: “Why? There are more than enough Germans in Russia without him!” Nicholas’s father, Alexander III, was in his appearance and habits a typical Russian landowner who loved everything Russian. The proud formula “Autocracy, Orthodoxy, and Nationality” flowed in the non-Russian blood of Russia’s tsars.

Nicholas’s mother was the Danish Princess Dagmar; his grandmother, the Danish queen. He called his grandmother “the mother-in-law of all Europe”: her numerous daughters, sons, and grandchildren had allied nearly all the royal houses, uniting the continent in this entertaining manner from England to Greece.

Princess Dagmar was first engaged to the elder son of Alexander II—Nicholas. But Nicholas died from consumption in Nice, and Alexander became heir to the throne. Along with his title, the new heir took his deceased brother’s fiancée for his wife: on his deathbed Nicholas himself joined their hands. The Danish Princess Dagmar became Her Imperial Highness Marie Feodorovna.

The marriage was a happy one. They had many children. Nicholas’s father proved to be a marvelous family man: his main precept was to preserve the foundations of the family and the state.

Constancy was the motto of Nicholas’s father, the future Emperor Alexander III.

Reform—that is, change and quest—had been the motto of Nicholas’s grandfather, Emperor Alexander II.

His grandfather’s frequent enthusiasms for new ideas found a unique extension in his many romantic involvements. Alexander II’s love affairs followed one after the other, until *she*—the beauty—appeared: Princess Catherine Dolgorukaya. To everyone’s astonishment, Alexander II was faithful to his new mistress. Children were born. An official second imperial family appeared, and Alexander II spent nearly all his time with them. And when the revolutionaries began their tsar hunt, Nicholas’s grandfather took an extravagant step: for their safety he settled both his families in the Winter Palace.

In 1880 Nicholas’s grandmother, Marie Feodorovna, Alexander II’s official wife, died, whereupon Nicholas’s grandfather married his mistress. Although the intelligent and punctilious Princess Catherine was quick to renounce all rights to the throne for her elder son, who knew? Today, perhaps tomorrow, the impossible.... Alexander II was sixty-two years old, but he was at the dawn of his powers and health. Nicholas’s father took a marked step into the background. But now, just a few months after Alexander II’s shameful marriage, a bomb exploding on the Ekaterininsky Canal carried Nicholas’s grandfather to his grave. Naturally, Nicholas heard what people around him were saying: divine retribution for the sinful tsar!

In the fall of 1882 Nicholas sang a song which so impressed him that when he got home he wrote it out on the inside cover of his very first diary (“The song we sang while one of us hid”). This folk song about the old hag death combing out the curls of the slain lad opens his diary. Yet another mysterious portent.

“Began writing my diary on the 1st of January 1882. In the morning drank hot chocolate dressed in my Life Guard reserves uniform.... Took a walk in the garden with Papa. We chopped and sawed wood and made a great bonfire. Went to bed at about half past 9. Papa, Mama, and I received two deputations. Presented me with a magnificent wooden platter inscribed ‘The peasants of Voronezh to their Tsarevich.’ With bread and salt and a Russian towel.”

Games at Gatchina, visits with his cousins the grand dukes, who were his age. The large Romanov family.

“This morning the canaries were moved into a small wooden cage.... Sandro [Alexander] and Sergei ... skated and played ball, and when Papa left we started a snowball fight.”

Boys at play. A carefree life. Sergei and Sandro were the sons of Grand Duke Michael, his grandfather’s brother.

Nicholas (or Nicky, as everyone called him) was especially friendly with Michael’s sons. Sergei, Sandro, and George Mikhailovich were his diary’s favorite characters, the comrades of his childhood games, his youth. The eldest was also a Nicholas, later the distinguished liberal historian Nicholas Romanov, who looked bemusedly on their play. He would always regard Emperor Nicky with gentle irony.

Later, outside at the Fortress of Peter and Paul, Nicholas Mikhailovich and George Mikhailovich would be executed, and Sergei Mikhailovich would lie at the bottom of a mine shaft with a bullet in his head.

“We worked in the garden. Cleared three trees that had fallen on top of one another. The wood made a huge bonfire. Mama came to look at our bonfire it was so inviting.”

Burning, burning, a huge bonfire in the dark of night. Many years later this gray-eyed adolescent would kindle another bonfire in which an empire would perish.

THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF HIS LIFE

All this went on at Gatchina, where Alexander III shut himself in with his family after his father’s assassination. The tsar appeared in Petersburg from the New Year until Lent, during which time he gave royal balls whose Asiatic splendor stunned the foreign emissaries. But there was window dressing. The family’s real life was at Gatchina, where they lived in a magnificent palace whose formal rooms were empty. Alexander and his family occupied the mezzanine, once the servant’s quarters. His numerous family lived in small rooms so narrow one could scarcely bring in a piano. The shade of his murdered father haunted Alexander III. There was a chain of sentries along the fence, guards around the palace, and guards inside the park. The life of the young Nicholas began with a prison accent.

Meanwhile, the young soldier Alexander Volkov was beginning to make a career for himself. He was brought into the inner Palace Guard. After midnight he watched the emperor fish on the lake.

A moonlit night over the Gatchina park. Volkov stood all alone on the bank, demonstrating the guard's small numbers. The real guard, comprising thirty men, was hiding in the bushes around the lake. Beyond the tsar's boat was another guard with a convoy.

In the tsar's boat the huntsman held up a lantern, the fish swam toward the light, and the huge, heavy tsar speared the surfacing fish.

Fishing and hunting at times even pushed back affairs of state. "Europe can wait while the Russian tsar fishes." This aphorism of the powerful monarch, the master of one-sixth of the earth's surface, circulated through the newspapers of the world.

Nicholas was taken hunting and fishing, but more often his father took Michael, the younger brother. The hardy rascal Michael was his father's and mother's favorite.

The tsar is drinking tea with guests on the balcony, and below Misha, as Michael is called, is playing. The father gets an idea for a bullyish prank: he takes a watering can and douses the boy from above with water. Misha is pleased. Misha laughs, the tsar laughs, the guests laugh.

But suddenly, an unexpected cry: "And now, Papa, your turn." The tsar obediently presents his bald spot—and Misha douses him with the watering can from head to foot.

But the father's iron will broke Michael's childish independence. Both brothers would grow up good, gentle, and timid, as often happens with children of strong fathers.

This was when Nicholas grasped what is for an adolescent the bitterest truth: They don't love me, they love my brother! His adolescent insight did not make him mean, sullen, or rebellious. He simply became reticent.

Alexander appointed the distinguished K. P. Pobedonostsev, chief procurator of the Holy Synod, Nicholas's tutor.

Alexander III ascended to the throne with an understandable logic: there were reforms under my father, and what was the result? His murder. So Pobedonostsev was called to power. The desiccated old man with protruding ears had the dry wheeze of a grand inquisitor who had wasted away from fasting.

Pobedonostsev would explain that Russia was a special country where reforms and a free press would inevitably result in decadence and disorder. "Like frost he inhibits any further decay, but nothing will grow under him," a Russian commentator pinpointed Pobedonostsev. But the frost-man was then already feeling the heat of the fiery luminescence advancing on the empire: revolution. Who was going to stand up to it? This kind boy whose nature was anything but that of a tsar? Pobedonostsev respected Nicholas as the future monarch, but he could not love him. Nicholas found no love in his tutor.

Instead of love he got—the army!

Alexander III had the nickname "Peacemaker." He avoided wars, but the army loomed over society as imposing as ever. The army, which had always made Russia strong. "Not by its laws, nor its civilization, but by its army," as Count Witte, the powerful minister and advisor to both Nicholas and his father, wrote. "Russia as a state is neither commercial nor agricultural but military, and its calling is to be the wrath of the world," said a Cadet Corps

textbook. The army meant obedience and diligence above all else. Both these qualities, which the shy youth already possessed, the army would foster ruinously.

The heir to the throne did his service in the Guards. Ever since the eighteenth century Russia's wealthiest, most distinguished families had sent their children to Petersburg and the Guards. The richest grandees, having retired to live out their days away from Petersburg in hospitable Moscow's magnificent palaces, sent their children off to Petersburg and the Guards. Drinking, gypsies, duels—these were the Guards' gentlemanly occupations. The Guards had been responsible for all of Russia's palace revolutions. Guards had brought the Romanov empresses—Elizabeth and Catherine—to the throne and killed Emperors Peter I and Paul I. But the Guards had done more than plot against the imperial court. In all of Russia's great battles, the Guards had been in the van.

Nicholas began his service in a mixed regiment of a Guards battalion. The first half company was commanded by the heir, and the second by Alexander Volkov, who was a noncommissioned officer by then. At Alexandria, the tsar's dacha, Volkov taught the heir the art of marching.

Nicholas adored physical exercise, and he was indefatigable. During his trials with Volkov in the art of square-bashing, his middle brother George would watch from the bushes. George, chronically ill and painfully ashamed of his persistent weakness, followed his brother's every move ecstatically.

“6 May 1888. Am twenty and becoming quite the old man....

“7 May. Liked this costume ball very much. All the ladies wore white dresses, and the men wore red.... Danced the mazurka and cotillion.”

Balls, the regiment, a life without care.

Then on October 17, 1888, for the first time, miraculously, Nicholas eluded death when the tsar's train had a terrible wreck at Borki, not far from Kharkov (and for the first time in his life the number 17 appeared in conjunction with calamity).

“A fateful day for us all. We might all have been killed, but by the Lord's will we were not. During breakfast our train jumped the rails. The dining car and coach were demolished, but we emerged from it all unscathed. However, 20 people were killed and 16 injured.”

So the holiday resumed: 1889.

“Returned from the ball at half past 1. Slept through my first lesson....

“A gay old time getting an eyeful of that gypsy. Returned home at 2....

“Surprised at awakening in Gatchina. The sight of my room lit by sunshine. After tea fence at Mama's.

“Couldn't help myself and began to smoke, assuring myself this is all right....

“At midnight went with Papa after grouse. Sat in the cabin, the mating place was remarkable. Slept until 10....

“6 May.... Was made a member of Council of State and Committee of Ministers.”

The pleasure with which gentle, retiring Nicholas threw himself into the unruly world of the Guards was striking. Nicholas's regimental superior was his father's brother Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovich. A powerful giant, the peremptory and strict commander was the

unhappiest of men. Profoundly religious, he suffered endlessly from what he felt were
unnatural inclinations: Sergei Alexandrovich was a homosexual.

The Guards, a closed male fraternity, encouraged pederasty and heavy drinking.

The tradition of the hard-drinking Russian Guards! The poetry of that famous hero and hard
drinker the hussar Denis Davydov was set to music and his ballads sung all through the
Guards' barracks:

*Old men! I remember you,
Draining dippers round the fire,
Your noses red and blue.*

“Yesterday [during training at Krasnoe Selo] we drank 125 bottles of champ[agne]. We
sen[try] for the division. At I took my squadron out on the battlefield. At 5 an inspection of
military institutes under a pouring rain.”

But by that night he was draining the dipper again.

“Woke up and felt as if a squadron had spent the night in my mouth.” It was all as Davydov
had devised: they drank “elbows” (filling a glass the length of a forearm and draining it in
one draft), “the staircase” (setting glasses all the way up the stairs and emptying them one
step at a time, ascending, but often falling down dead drunk before reaching the top), or “the
wolves” (stripping naked and jumping out in the savage frost, where an obliging barman
carried out a tub of champagne for the gentlemen guardsmen, who sipped from the tub
howling all the while like wolves). People said this strange entertainment had been dreamed
up personally by Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovich, who was famous for his remarkable
truly guardsmanly drinking.

“16 March 1892.... Have never seen such a profusion of gypsies. There were four choruses
We supped, like that time, with the ladies. Sojourned in vinous fumes until 6 in the morning

Amid these rather awful, noisy amusements Nicholas had the good sense to remain gentle
chaste, and lonely. There was the anticipation of love, ideal love.

“19 January 1890.... Don't know how to explain it but a mood has come over me: neither
sad nor happy. Almost over now, drank tea and read.”

Only *she* could break this loneliness.

A rather short young officer strides briskly with the crowd down Nevsky Avenue.

Meanwhile, the coach of Petersburg's governor rolls down Nevsky as the governor searches
the faces on the street.

Finally he spots the young officer, the carriage slows, and respectfully but firmly the
governor transmits the father's order to return to the palace.

Vera Leonidovna Yureneva:

“He adored walking.... There was a rumor that he had met a beautiful Jewess on a walk...
And a romance had sprung up. There was a lot of gossip about that in Petersburg. But his
father acted as decisively as ever: the Jewess was sent away along with her entire household.
Nicholas was in her home while all this was going on. ‘Only over my dead body,’ he declared

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