

Nicholas and Alexandra: The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty

Robert K. Massie.

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Abstract

The new 2012 Random House Edition of Robert K. Massie's Nicholas and Alexandra contains much new information and is of vital importance to both professors and students of Russian history. The work presents an extraordinarily accurate biography of the last sovereign of the Russian Empire, Nicholas II (1894-1917). For Massie, the three determinant factors in the decisions of Nicholas II were: his love of country; his devotion and obedience to the Russian Orthodox Church; his belief in the rightness of autocracy as the most effective method of government. Massie considers the two principal weaknesses of Nicholas II's character to be: his deference to the political opinion of his consort Alexandra, who was herself misguided by Rasputin; the Tsar's inability to adapt Russia's anachronistic and repressive political system to the needs of the politically enlightened and progressive twentieth century.

Keywords: Nicholas II, Tsar of Russia, Political Views, Biography, Russian Revolution

To mark the four hundredth anniversary of the accession of Michael Romanov, the founder of the Romanov dynasty, to the throne of Russia on March 24th, 1613, and his subsequent coronation on July 22nd, 1613 as Tsar of All Russia, Random House has recently produced an extraordinary updated edition of Robert K. Massie's classic *Nicholas and Alexandra*. Robert K. Massie is the leading authority on the House of Romanov. His other works include: *Peter the Great: His Life and World*; *The Romanovs: The Final Chapter*; *Catherine the Great: Portrait of a Woman*.

Nicholas and Alexandra is characterized by impeccable and masterful scholarship. In addition, this book is written in a vibrant and engaging style, designed to transport the reader back to the days of the twilight of the Russian Empire (1702-1917). For sheer readability it is unsurpassed among works on European history.

Mr. Massie presents a well balanced assessment of the reign of Nicholas II (1894-1917), illuminating both the virtues and the weaknesses of the doomed Tsar, who perished with his entire family in the cellar of the Ipatiev House in Ekaterinburg, Siberia during the early morning hours of July 17th, 1918, at the orders of Nikolai Lenin. Lenin feared that the royalist White Army, then approaching Ekaterinburg, would liberate the Russian royal family and restore the monarchy, thus bringing to a swift end Lenin's experiment in Marxist Communism. For Massie, the three determinant factors in the personality of Nicholas II were: his love of country and devotion to duty and his coronation oath; his serious Christian faith and devotion and obedience to the Russian Orthodox Church; his firm belief in the rightness of autocracy as the most effective method of government.

The two principal weaknesses of Nicholas II's character Massie deems to be: his blind allegiance and deference to the political opinion of his consort Alexandra, who herself was misguided in political matters by her spiritual and political mentor Rasputin; the Tsar's inability to adapt Russia's anachronistic and repressive political system to the needs of the politically enlightened twentieth century. As a child and Tsarevich, Nicholas II was taught in the palace classroom at Gatchina to espouse the philosophy of autocracy, which had been the successful philosophy of Russia's government for more than a thousand years.

The three principal influences upon his political education were his political tutor Pobedonostsev, who insisted on the absolute authority of Russia's two great unifying institutions, the autocracy and the Orthodox Church (Massie, 15)); Kaiser Wilhelm II, who corresponded extensively with his distant cousin Nicholas between 1894 and 1904 and who constantly exhorted Nicholas to uphold the principle of the divine right of kings (Massie, 88); and Nicholas's own father, the venerable Tsar Alexander III (1881-1894). In the case of Alexander III, the authoritarian autocratic style of government had actually worked supremely well. Thanks to his father's stern temper and powerful will, there was no threat to the security of the Throne anywhere in the Russian Empire when Nicholas inherited the Crown at 2:15 PM, November 1st, 1894 (Lincoln, 1981).

Alexander III's obsession with political repression and conservatism is certainly understandable; his reign began in the midst of a grave crisis of state: on March 13th, 1881 Alexander III's own father Alexander II had been assassinated in Saint Petersburg by a bomb wielding Polish student. For the first time since the accession of Tsar Mikhail 268 years before, a Romanov had been assassinated, not as part of an internal palace coup d'état planned to place another member of the Romanov family on the throne but rather as the consequence of a revolutionary plot to destroy the dynasty and abolish autocracy altogether in Russia (Lincoln, 1981). Therefore, in the minds of both Alexander III and his advisor Pobedonostsev, under such unpredictable circumstances, the only way to preserve social order and to prevent anarchy in Russia was to implement the same style of autocracy at that practiced by Alexander III's eminently successful ancestors Peter the Great and Catherine the Great.

While today we may find the concepts of autocracy and the divine right of kings risible, many distinguished Russian historians have long defended autocracy as a valid, and even necessary, political concept. During the Enlightenment, for example, arose the dynastic interpretation of Russian history, whose premise is that the genealogy of its monarchs forms the basis of Russian history (Whittaker, 1999). These new histories equated the history of Russia with the fortunes of Russia's two royal dynasties: the secular leadership of the original Riurikids (862-1598) and the later Romanovs (1613-1917). These dynastic historians presented to the educated Russian public an autocracy the equal of any ruling house of Europe, an important desideratum in the eighteenth century when the country was just entering the Western family of nations (Whittaker, 1999). For the dynastic school the invitation to Riurik in 862 to rule Novgorod and the Slavic tribes demonstrated that the Russians recognized the need for an illustrious ruling class, which could unite the Slavic people into a single nation under single rule.

For the dynastic school, Peter the Great exemplified the benefits of hereditary autocracy for Russia. In their eyes, Peter represented the *nec plus ultra* of beneficent kingship. Mankiev saw in Peter's reign a demonstration of the intimate connection between autocracy and progress (Whittaker, 1999). Mikhail Lomonosov was awed by Peter's dynamism. Both Mikhail Shcherbatov and Nikolai Karamzin believed that the Petrine reforms had caused Russia to leap ahead by several centuries (Hughes, 1998). Overall, the more the critical spirit of the Enlightenment induced eighteenth century Russian historians to analyze autocracy, the more they became persuaded that this particular form of government best suited their country's interests. The Russian dynastic historians proclaimed autocracy to be the one form of government with the proven historical capacity to avoid anarchy and to bring Russia stability, grandeur and progress (Whittaker, 1999). Their opinion seemed to be confirmed when in contemporary France the great Voltaire, who had studied in depth the history of political theory, proclaimed that the best, wisest and most humane form of government was constitutional monarchy. In Voltaire's mind no modern state could hope for stability, wealth and happiness without the powerful unifying leadership of an enlightened monarch.

Thus, not only the personal education of Tsar Nicholas II but also the general educational system and historiography of his country as well as the history of European political theory tended to praise the virtues of monarchy and autocracy. Nonetheless, like Great Britain, Russia has a long history of experimentation with representational and democratic forms of government. Unlike France, where at the time of the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789 no National Assembly had met for more than 150 years and where royal absolutism prevailed, Russia on the eve of its Revolution in March 1917 was quite accustomed to popular involvement in national government. This democratizing process began in 1549, when Ivan the Terrible called together the first zemskii sobor, or Russian national assembly (Riasanovsky, 1977). During the Time of Troubles (1598-1613), in May 1606, the new Tsar Basil Shuisky made certain promises to the noble boyars and to the Russian people which historians regard as an unprecedented limitation of autocracy and as an extraordinary example of royal recognition of the Russian people's right to govern themselves (Riasanovsky, 1977).

Nicholas II's own ancestors were acutely aware of the need to listen to their people's admonitions and possessed a remarkably high degree of political sensitivity. Tsar Mikhail Romanov, the founder of the Romanov dynasty, for example, kept the zemskii sobor in session for the first ten years of his reign (1613-1623) and constantly heeded this assembly's advice (Dunning, 2001). This particular decade of the seventeenth century thus constituted a period of enlightened representational government, and the people's elected representatives consequently took an active part in Russia's reconstruction after the Time of Troubles.

Such royal expressions of respect for the popular will continued throughout the three centuries of Romanov rule. Peter the Great, the most autocratic of the Romanov Tsars, himself created the Russian Senate for consultative purposes. In 1730, during the reign of the Empress Anna (1730-1740) an attempt was made to place limitations on the monarch's power and to implement a more constitutional approach to government. At the time of the Francophile Catherine the Great (1762-1796), the Tsarina herself as well as Russian politicians and historians frequently consulted the works of the great political theoreticians Voltaire and Rousseau and discovered therein the value of representational assemblies and the need for a constitutional framework for the monarchy. Nicholas II's own grandfather, Alexander II (1855-1881), was keenly aware of the need for political reform in Russia, consequently emancipating the serfs in 1861 and creating in January 1864 the zemstva, provincial councils designed to give the Russian people control over their local affairs. This sagacious move brought nineteenth century Russia into alignment with the more democratic forms of representational government which had appeared throughout Western Europe in the wake of the Revolutions of 1848. Thus, when Nicholas II entered the political arena in November, 1894, Russia was already a politically enlightened and sophisticated nation.

Indeed, one of the most significant values of Massie's *Nicholas and Alexandra* is that the work provides an excellent outline of the growth of the Duma and representational government during the reign of Nicholas II (1894-1917) and gives an exceptionally high level of attention to the Tsar's serious examination of Russia's various political options. The book traces in depth the development of the four Dumas of the period (1905-1917) as well as the advice Nicholas received from his political mentors during this era. Great emphasis is placed upon the extraordinary political competence of Nicholas II's admired Prime Minister Peter Stolypin (1906-1911) and the particular effectiveness of the Third Duma (1907-1912), in whose proceedings "One could feel the pleasure with which the members were finding their way into common work for the good of the whole country..." and where "One could see political competence growing day by day" (Massie, 2012). Unfortunately, the assassination of Stolypin at the Kiev Opera House in September, 1911 and the outbreak of World War I in 1914 wrecked this beneficial Duma project.

The myth of Nicholas II's political incompetence, ignorance and mismanagement has been too widely disseminated and should be dispelled. The evidence provided by Robert Massie demonstrates conclusively that, prior to the global chaos occasioned by the First World War, Nicholas II and his ministers did work effectively and conscientiously with the Third and Fourth Dumas for the genuine good of their country. The political developments of the period of the Third Duma clearly indicate that Russia was evolving toward liberalism and political freedom. Thus, Massie paints an objective portrait of Nicholas II as a sovereign who, despite his extremely traditional aristocratic upbringing, did strive to respect the rights of his people and who did possess political competence and sensitivity, but whose well intentioned efforts to optimize Russia's government and economy were overwhelmed and nullified by calamitous global events.

Massie proceeds to enumerate the causes of the Russian Revolution of 1917: 1) the aforementioned outbreak of World War I, which would bring about the collapse of three European dynasties: the House of Hohenzollern in Germany; the House of Hapsburg in Austria-Hungary; and the House of Romanov in Russia 2) the economic decline of the Russian Empire, which, unlike Kaiser Wilhelm's heavily industrialized Germany, was totally unprepared to cope with the colossal demands of the new wartime economy 3) the spectacular growth across the Russian Empire of the labor movement and the soviets, the workers' councils, who were inspired by the Bolshevik leader Nikolai Lenin to invade the Winter Palace in Petrograd and overthrow Kerensky's Provisional Government and the monarchy in November, 1917 4) the erroneous belief, widespread among the Russian people, that there existed at the highest echelons of the Tsarist government, a German plot to destroy the Russian Empire, a plot conceived and directed by the Tsaritsa Alexandra, a Princess of the German House of Hesse-Darmstadt 5) Nicholas II's ill advised decision in September 1915 to desert his administrative complex at Tsarkoe Selo and to personally command his troops at the German front, from his headquarters at Stavka,

leaving the civil government in the hands of Alexandra, who had little experience in affairs of state and who before Nicholas's departure for the front had scarcely even known his ministers 6) the pernicious influence exercised upon the Russian government during the military absence of Nicholas and the regency of Alexandra by Rasputin, who often persuaded Alexandra to appoint his personal favorites to ministerial posts and who owed his uncanny and corrupt political power to his mystical ability to mesmerize and to heal the hemophiliac heir to the throne, the Tsarevich Alexis 7) finally, the breakdown in communication between the Duma and Nicholas II and the Tsar's ultimate failure to produce a responsible government.

This last point—Nicholas II's inability to communicate diplomatically and effectively with his own Parliament—was surely the most serious and widely deplored defect in the last Tsar's character. Owing to his highly conservative and traditional education at Gatchina and owing to the fact that he was raised by the ultra-conservative Alexander III and Kaiser Wilhelm to uphold the ideals of autocracy, royal supremacy and infallibility, Nicholas II never acquired the diplomatic skills, courtesy, adaptability and ethical sensitivity required in a modern Head of State. Nicholas II for example did not understand well the concept of political correctness. During his state visit to France during the autumn of 1896, for instance, he treated some of his French hosts in an insensitive manner. When he attended the great reception in his honor at the French Presidential Palace in Paris, the Tsar went out of his way to avoid the Deputies, the elected representatives of the French people. In his view, men of noble birth such as Ministers and monarchs were the only proper company for the exalted Russian Autocrat at an official reception.

Nicholas's rudeness in Paris provided a preview of his ineptitude in dealing with his own parliamentary government in Saint Petersburg two decades later on the eve of the Russian Revolution. During the weeks immediately preceding the Revolution of March 1917, Nicholas's three most respected advisers, Grand Duke Alexander Mikhailovich in early January, the Ambassador of Great Britain to Russia, Sir George Buchanan, on January 12th, and Michael Rodianzko on January 20th, went to Tsarkoe Selo in order to plead that the inexperienced Empress withdraw from politics and that the Tsar grant a government acceptable to the Duma. Nonetheless, the obdurate Nicholas refused to heed their advice. In his biography, Robert Massie illuminates with consummate clarity this fatal flaw in Tsar Nicholas's personality. According to Massie, there was one moment when there occurred a glimmer of hope and Nicholas wavered in his determination to refuse a responsible ministry and showed true political wisdom: On the eve of his departure for the front in March 1917, the Tsar summoned several of his ministers, including the Prime Minister Prince Golitsyn, and announced that he intended to go to the Duma the next day and personally proclaim the appointment of a responsible government. This announcement greatly relieved the ministerial cabinet. Nonetheless, that same evening, the surprised Golitsyn was summoned again to the palace and told by the Tsar himself that he had changed his mind and was leaving for Headquarters immediately.

This incomprehensible and regrettable royal change of mind and conversation at Tsarkoe Selo took place on Wednesday evening, March 7th. Five days later, on Monday, March 12th, 1917, the Imperial government in Petrograd collapsed (Massie, 2012).

Robert Massie's *Nicholas and Alexandra* provides a superb study of all phases of the Russian Revolution of 1917, from the initial bread riots in Petrograd on Thursday, March 8th until the invasion of the Winter Palace by the Bolsheviks and the collapse of the Provisional Government on November 8th, 1917. In addition, Massie provides a detailed study of the captivity of the Russian imperial family, first at Tobolsk and finally at Ekaterinburg, both in Siberia. The author contrasts the friendly attitude of royalist Tobolsk toward the captive Romanovs with the fiercely Bolshevik attitude of the royal family's captors at Ekaterinburg, who would treat their Romanov prisoners as the victims in a grim drama of retribution (Massie, 2012). The book is especially remarkable for its sympathetic and impeccably accurate portrait of the Empress Alexandra. Although it is true that Alexandra as regent made serious blunders in public policy under the spell and misguidance of Rasputin, the Empress did sincerely love her adopted country, and she truly believed that the royal family's love for Russia was reciprocal (Massie, 2012). Throughout *Nicholas and Alexandra*, Massie draws the reader's attention to historical episodes which do in fact demonstrate the Russian people's love and devotion toward their sovereigns, most notably during the coronation of Nicholas II in 1896, the celebrations of the Tercentenary of Romanov rule in 1913, and Russia's declaration of war against Germany and Austria-Hungary, announced by the Tsar from the balcony of the Winter Palace in Petrograd on August 2nd, 1914.

On all these occasions of state the Russian people and Nicholas and Alexandra were as one. Perhaps the highest tribute paid to the Empress Alexandra in the book is Prime Minister Kerensky's formal exoneration of the Tsaritsa from charges of acting as a German spy during the war and his declaration to the Duma in April 1917 of her unquestionable loyalty to Russia (Massie, 2012). Indeed, had the moderate and just Kerensky remained in power, Nicholas and Alexandra and their children would never have perished. The story of Nicholas and Alexandra is clearly a most deplorable tragedy. Nicholas and Alexandra bore no malice to the Russian people. On the contrary, the Tsar and the Tsaritsa regarded themselves as God's anointed vicars on earth who had been divinely appointed to care for the Russian nation. This compassionate Christian royal couple has for too long been maligned by certain historians who have not thoroughly investigated all the evidence pertaining to their reign. Robert Massie seeks to properly address this controversy and provides abundant evidence that Nicholas and Alexandra were true patriots whose love of country and the Russian Orthodox Church dictated their decisions. If their Empire collapsed and was engulfed by revolution in March 1917, that calamity, like the French Revolution of 1789, was dictated essentially by economic factors. The capacities of the economic resources and financial institutions at the disposal of Tsar Nicholas and his ministers in March 1917 were simply not commensurate with the demands of an event as horrific, unprecedented and financially exhausting as the First World War.

Historically, the Romanov family has been renowned in Russian history for its honesty, humanitarianism and ethical competence. The original matriarch of the dynasty, Ivan the Terrible's consort Anastasia Romanovna, was a good and compassionate Christian gentle woman. Her brother, Nikita Romanovich Iuriev-Zakharin, one of Ivan's generals and statesmen, was likewise famous for his honesty and humanity during an age notorious for its cruelty and corruption. The honesty, decency and personal warmth of Tsarina Anastasia and her brother Nikita Romanovich thus created an aura of popular affection for the Romanov family during the turbulent reign of Ivan the Terrible (Lincoln, 1981.) Nikita's eldest son Feodor was so venerated for his holiness that in 1619 he was elected Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church. The saintly Feodor would also become the father of the first Romanov Tsar Mikhail (1613- 1645).

Moreover, Robert Massie's and this author's positive assessment of Nicholas and Alexandra is shared by the people of Russia today. The members of the last reigning family of the Romanov dynasty are currently worshipped as martyrs in Russia. A church, The Church on Blood in Honour of All Saints Resplendent in the Russian Land, has been erected in Ekaterinburg on the site of the Ipatiev House, which in 1977 was razed by order of President Boris Yeltsin, and the place of the Romanovs' execution is now a holy place of pilgrimage. Clearly, the history of the Romanov dynasty is intimately related to the story of progress, civilization and the Christian faith in Russia, and the Russian Renaissance or Silver Age, as the early part of the reign of Nicholas II is called, represents the zenith of Russia's progressive and brilliant culture.

Additional notable attributes of this latest edition of Robert Massie's biography include an insightful introduction by the author himself; an extremely valuable list of the characters involved in the events leading up to the Russian Revolution, which greatly clarifies the era and which both professors and students of Russian history would find most helpful; useful maps of the Russian Empire during the reign of Nicholas II and the various royal palaces in the vicinity of Saint Petersburg; and finally a most interesting collection of photographs pertaining to the history of the Romanov family. In sum, the current 2012 Random House edition of *Nicholas and Alexandra* is without doubt the most outstanding and exemplary edition of this important work to date. This new Random House edition deserves its rightful place on the shelves of the libraries of all serious historians.

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