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The Fall of the Tsars

Russian history in recent years has become a sort of door that I can open and escape into for moments of time. I am not sure why, but Imperial Russia appeals to me in ways other facets of history do not have the capacity to. This paper is focusing on a very important event in Russian history, but it is equally vital to know why it is important to me. History is a fascinating subject – one I am currently devoting my life to. As a child I constantly watched the movie *Anastasia* time and time again, but it didn't mean anything to me. I think I was merely enthralled by the swaying of Anastasia's dress. The history was meaningless as well, and as I got older I never watched or thought about *Anastasia*, until a little over two years ago, when I was a junior in high school. I was home sick from school, and needed something to watch on Netflix when *Anastasia* popped up. I immediately thought of her dress, because it was the only thing I could remember, along with the fact that I used to love watching it many years ago. Not even halfway through watching it, I started looking up Anastasia on my phone, which led to the Russian Revolution, Nicholas II, Dowager Empress Maria Feodorovna, and all things surrounding Russia in the crucial time period of ten years before and after the execution of the Romanovs. I was immensely interested, I remember having to start the movie over because I wasn't paying attention to it, I was too immersed in *Wikipedia*. Above all other subjects, Imperial Russia is the most flattering to me by far, which is why becoming a historian and dedicating my time to studying fascinating Russian history is my objective. I hope the summary of almost one hundred years' worth of information on the fall of the tsars is as interesting to you as it is to me.

The fall of the Romanovs led to a very dark time in history, one of chaos and tremendous loss of life. Many historians credit the violent dispersal of the Russia's royal family as leading to events like Russia pulling out of WWI, the country's civil war, the forming of the USSR, and World War II after the superpower country appeared vulnerable to tyrants like Hitler. In the words of author Joshua Hammer of "Resurrecting the Czar," "the murder of Czar Nicholas Romanov and his family has resonated through Soviet and Russian history, inspiring not only immeasurable government cover-ups and public speculation but also a great many books, television series, movies, novels and rumors." (Hammer, 1) The murder of the Romanovs was unnecessary, brutal, and gruesome to all involved – even to some of the killing squad. Historians and Russian scholars can read this paper for an apt summary on the ending of a dynasty of imperial power, and the brutal transition of the 20th century. Skeptics are welcome to disagree with facts proven by science, the mystery has been solved for decades. I might imply assumptions through common knowledge, especially when I discuss the butterfly effect the execution caused through later years. I want readers to walk away confident of what I discuss, and pleased with the information compiled.

There were many different things going on in Russia prior to the night of July 17, 1918. Russia and its people were in turmoil over the state of their country, and what to do to make it better. The faults in the country do not excuse or amend the execution of a family, either in a bid for power or an attempt at bettering the country. There had been many efforts at an uprising, all of which failed and ended in bloodshed. Russians had come to have a dislike towards their emperor, Nicholas II, after the failed attempts of revolution. (Hammer, 1) All the blame cannot be laid upon Nicholas, but he definitely

held a fraction of responsibility in his own demise. Nicolas was not raised to be the Emperor of All Russia, and according to author of "The Wrong Man for the Time," by Robert Massie, "Nicholas II was a decent man but a bad tsar. As heir to the throne, Nicholas was thoroughly imbued with the mystique of ruling but left untrained in the practicalities. In 1894, his father, Tsar Alexander III, suddenly died of nephritis at 49, and Nicholas, then 26, was transformed into the Emperor and Autocrat of All the Russias. His reaction was despair. 'I am not prepared to be a tsar,' he said to a cousin. 'I know nothing of the business of ruling. '" (Massie, 1-2) It is clear that Nicholas was not a bad person, but he was exactly what Russia did not need at this time. The country needed a strong ruler who could hold their own, in charge of all, and his people did not see Nicholas as that man. His aura of greatness was diminished over time through crucial events, as in the Russo-Japanese War. The catastrophe of the Russo-Japanese War made the image of Russia, not just Nicholas II, look vulnerable and in shambles. The military strength once possessed by Russia had disappeared, along with the perception of Nicholas. Matters were made worse by his own wife, Empress Alexandra, who controlled Nicholas. Russia saw Nicholas as weak, in character and fortitude, as the head of his empire and house. (Massie, 2) Nicholas was viewed as being a push-over, and Russia saw him as being directed in all matters by his Tsarina Alexandra, and in turn, her advisor Rasputin.

The rise of Rasputin occurred due to the birth of tsarevitch Alexei Romanov, who was diagnosed with hemophilia five months after his birth. The heir to the Russian throne contracted it through his mother, Alexandra, due to the diseases' prominence in the royal lines. Alexandra was descended from Queen Victoria of England, who also had the blood-clotting preventative disease, and the breeding between all royal families caused it to occur in English, Russian, Danish, Spanish, and other royal lines. (Massie,

2) Due to the disease, Alexei was an extremely fragile child, always in danger of dying at the slightest injury. Alexandra in time became obsessed with her child's health, and it was unclear whether Alexei would end up being a tsar of Russia for the duration of his life. Alexandra searched for a doctor to stop her son's bleeding, until she came across Grigory Rasputin. He reportedly was able to work wonders, and the false holy man became dear to Alexandra. Rumors were spun that the two had a sexual relationship, and that Rasputin controlled Alexandra, who in turn controlled Nicholas. When Nicholas left St. Petersburg for World War I, "Alexandra remained behind [in St. Petersburg] as a kind of de facto leader. She, in turn, relied on Rasputin for advice. Everyone who could – Nicholas's relatives, the leaders of Duma, foreign ambassadors--pleaded with Nicholas to install a more responsible government. But Alexandra, goaded by Rasputin, passionately refused to share power." (Massie, 2) These events severely weakened Nicholas, who spent months at a time out of St. Petersburg. Change was being called for, a modern age was dawning, and Nicholas was stuck in the dark ages-unable to cope with the tide. There was war inside Russia, with people desperate for power.

To quote my history professor John Poling, "Do I believe their deaths were necessary? No. Lenin was convinced the White Russians would rally around the royal family and try to restore them to the throne, even though Nicholas was probably happy to be out of the tsar business; he was never a particularly adept one and he made the Russian situation in the Great War even worse." (Poling, 1) Among the reasons already listed for the lead-up to the execution of the Romanovs, another was Vladimir Lenin, who came to gain an enormous amount of power after Nicholas and his family's disposal. Some historians credit Lenin's possible execution order due to the White Russians-loyalists who would've attempted to rescue and restore the Romanovs to the throne had the family

remained any longer in Yekaterinburg. The rise of the Soviet Union, as well as Lenin, came directly out of the Romanov's deaths, on the fateful night of July 17, 1918.

Through the many different tales depicting the end of the Imperial Russia, there are distinctive commonalities amongst them. Nicholas was forcefully abdicated from the Russian throne, 'and was unable to give it to the tsarevitch, his son, Alexei. The next in line, Nicholas' brother George, was murdered by Bolsheviks within 24 hours of the abdication. According to R.C. Elwood, author of "The Fall of the Romanovs," "The events surrounding Nicholas's abdication in March 1917, the circumstances of his four-month detention at Tsarskoe Selo, the decision to move the royal family to Tobolsk and their life in Siberia from August 1917 to April 1918, and their final captivity and execution in Ekaterinburg," were all orchestrated by Lenin and the Bolsheviks, their future killers. (Elwood, 2) It is possible that Lenin may have sanctioned the shooting of Nicholas if a danger existed that the royal family might be rescued by White Russians. The throne was taken away from the Romanovs, the first time in over 300 years, and they were forced to wear peasant clothing and live like the majority of their people for over a year before they were finally killed. It is said that Nicholas spent his days chopping wood, shoveling snow, and writing letters to his relatives, while Alexandra put her total faith in God. (Elwood, 2) Clifford Levy argues that, "Eleven people were said to have been killed that day in July 1918 on Lenin's orders. People looked for bones all over Yekaterinburg, where the killers knifed and gunned down Nicholas II, his wife, five children, doctor and three servants in the basement of a house where they were being held after Nicholas was forced to abdicate," in his article "Amateurs Unravel Russia's Last Royal Mystery" (Levy, 2)

The firing squad shot the family down, then stabbed them with bayonets until all were dead, in the town of Ekaterinburg, which according to James Lovell, author of "Romanov Mystery (Continued)," is "now named Sverdlovsk, after the man who ordered the execution of the Imperial family." (Lovell, 2) Many attempts were made to dispose of the bodies, according to National Geographic's "Solving One of the Great Mysteries of the 20th Century," includes having the bodies "thrown down a mineshaft--only to be retrieved shortly after the burial location was leaked to the locals. The perpetrators then planned to switch locations and incinerate two of the corpses. Because of the lengthy burning process, they dismembered the corpses and covered them with acid to disfigure them beyond recognition. Running out of time before dawn, they threw the other nine bodies into another hole and covered them with acid." (Science Letter, 1) The crimes done against the Romanovs were mighty, including the horrific way they were buried. This made it much more difficult to locate the bodies, especially under Soviet regime, over the next 60 years. In Duke History major Hayley Moore's words, writer of "Leave the Romanov bones alone," "Whoever ordered their death and the disposal of the bodies wanted to make sure that no one would ever discover the truth or where the remains were. Someone wanted to make sure that the Romanovs would never be found." (Moore, 1) It would be over 73 years later before nine of the eleven people killed that July night were to be reclaimed by their country.

Over the course of time many came forward claiming to know the whereabouts of the Romanov family, or even coming into possession of the bodies. There were many Anastasia impersonators, which stemmed from the public's belief that the youngest

daughter survived. Anna Anderson was the most famous, with many believing her to be the Romanov, until her DNA was tested after her death, showing, in fact, she was not Russian royalty. (Moore, 1) In 1989, Soviet Writer Geli Ryabov announced to *The Moscow News* that in 1979 he "found the bodies of Czar Nicolas II, his wife Alexandra, their five children and four staff members. He claims that the bodies are in his possession but won't reveal where." (Lovell, 1) In reality, according to Michael Coble's "The Identification of the Romanovs: Can we (finally) put the controversies to rest?" Dr. Alexander Avdonin discovered the mass grave in the mid-1970s', and it contained all except Alexei and his sister. Avdonin chose to keep his discovery to himself, in fear of the Soviet regime's cover-ups that could have led to his death. After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, Avdonin revealed his secret, and intense excavation and DNA analysis ensued. Geneticists, forensic scientists, and various renowned experts were all invited to the grave site in 1991.

Through DNA, mtDNA, and nuclear DNA, it was proved over the course of several years that all the Romanovs except Alexei and his sister, either Maria or Anastasia, had been found at last. (Coble, 1-3) Many lengths were taken to ensure the identification, especially with Nicholas. On the femur of the tsar there was heteroplasmy at position 16,169, which occurs widely in twins, and his identification was confirmed by the exhumation of Nicholas's brother George, in which he had said heteroplasmy on the same exact position, 16,169. (Coble, 3) To further ensure that it was Nicholas, a bloody handkerchief containing Nicholas's blood was pulled from the Hermitage Museum, where in 1891 Nicholas survived an assassination with blows to head, after which a handkerchief was used to stop the bleeding. The DNA profile constructed from the antemortem evidence was a match to the tsar. (Coble, 3) According to article "Ongoing

Controversy Over Romanov Remains," by Michael Hofreiter, the DNA had supposed inconsistencies, "Given present knowledge and inconsistencies, the Ekaterinburg remains cannot be regarded as those of Nicholas II and his family." (Hofreiter, 1) The reason for these scientist's inconsistencies is that their evidence was done by Japanese scientists, whose replication of the DNA evidence was done poorly, in turn leading to their having different results than the renowned scientists from many different countries. Skeptics were fueled further by the Russian Orthodox Church's refusal to accept the findings and identification, but in "Mystery Solved: The Identification of the Two Missing Romanov Children Using DNA Analysis," Michael Coble asserts that the Church refuted the findings after being snuffed from doing their own investigation. (Coble, 6)

In 2007 the mystery of the disappearance of the Romanovs was revealed further by the discovery of the two missing children's grave sites by amateur archeologists. Russian and American anthropologists analyzed the remains, which were a set of 44 bone fragments and teeth, and concluded, "A minimum of two people were present among the recovered remains. One person present among the remains was of female sex, with a biological or developmental age of approximately 15-19 years. The sex of the other person was male, and the biological age ranged from 12-15 years. Three amalgam fillings discovered on the crowns of two molars recovered from the grave suggest that at least one person was of an aristocratic status. The overall age of the burial site was most likely greater than 60 years old based on culturally diagnostic material found contextually with the bones. The DNA analysis of all genetic systems confirms that the samples tested from the second grave are one female and one male child of Tsar Nicholas II and Tsarina Alexandra, solving the mystery of the missing Romanov children." (Coble, 2) Further evidence shows that

the children's mtDNA exactly matched that of Tsarina Alexandra, which makes the samples maternally related, with overall confirmation that the boy is Alexei and one of his sisters--possibly Anastasia or Maria. (Coble, 5-6) With all of this information it is safe to conclude that none of the family members survived July 17, 1918. The Russian Orthodox Church has still voiced concerns over the remains, but according to *States News Service* in "Russia Reopens Romanov Family Murder Case," the Romanov family was exonerated and buried as a family in 2000, after which they were canonized as passion bearers. (States News Service, 1)

These events bring closure to a very unfortunate chapter in Russian history. The murder of the Romanovs symbolizes the beginning of a diabolic era in world history, which has now come to pass. (Levy, 3) The script of *Good Morning America* breaks the news of the discovery of Alexei and his sister, the last of the royal family to be laid to rest, "They were the Romanovs, sons and daughters of Mother Russia, who were dragged by the Bolsheviks into a dark room. In a basement in the dark of the night, they were told to line up as if posing for a photo. But then, they were shot one by one. Bullets, bayonets. The bullets bouncing off the women because they had their corsets lined with jewelry. And when the bodies were found, two were missing. And all over the world, people claimed to be those Romanov children, most famously, Anna Anderson, who went to her death insisting that she was Anastasia, even though the DNA said that was wrong. And now, two young bodies have been recovered from the nearby site of their parents. Not the romantic ending, but a chapter closing on a night long, long ago." (Sawyer, 1-2)

Now that the Soviet Union has collapsed, Russia's government now recognizes

and apologizes for the way the Romanovs left the world, in Philip Pan's article "Russia's Last Czar Exonerated By Court; Ruling a Victory for Descendants," "Russia's Supreme Court on Wednesday [October 1,2008] recognized the nation's last czar, Nicholas II, and his family as victims of 'groundless repression,' formally rehabilitating the Romanovs more than 90 years after their execution in a basement in the eastern Urals signaled the Soviet embrace of terror as state policy." (Pan, 1) The Romanovs were further cleared of any charges according to Michael Wines' article "80 Years Later, Moscow Declares Four Romanovs 'Not Guilty'," "More than 80 years after they died at the hands of the Bolshevik executioners, the son of Czar Alexander III and three other members of the Romanov dynasty were cleared of wrongdoing tonight [June 9, 1999] by the Prosecutor General, Russia's chief law enforcement officer." The fact that Russia's government is showing that mistakes were clearly made, from the night of July 17, 1918 and on, are attempts at retribution and forgiveness. Modern-day Russia is a clearly a very different country from what it was in the early 20th century. The power-country lost its' footing, embarrassed itself, but is now making amends for the behavior that ended in murder. The execution of the Romanov family was unfounded, unnecessary, and sign of how brutal the country was in that time. Power should never be gained through bloodshed, much less the killing of innocent children. *20th Century Fox's* animated film *Anastasia* sheds a light of beauty on Russia before and after the rise of the Soviet Union that was not in existence, as well as the happiness of the characters. *Anastasia* is what made me interested in Russia, but its flaws, inaccuracies, and the real story of what happened is what keeps me constantly intrigued on what really happened to the Romanovs.

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