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The End of a Dynasty: The Death of the Romanov Family

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 that other facets of history do not have the capacity to do. This paper is focusing on a very important event in Russian history, but it is important to know why it is important to me. History is a fascinating subject—one I am currently devoting my life to. 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 in 1917 led to a very dark time in Russian history, one of chaos and eventually tremendous loss of life. Many historians credit the violent dispersal of the Russia's royal family as leading to events like Russia's civil war, the forming of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), and entry into World War II after the country appeared vulnerable to tyrants like Hitler. In the words of author Joshua Hammer "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—members of the killing squad later expressed their regret in being involved in the killings. This paper will show my firm stance on these events, and my belief that this is not how power should be attained. Historians and Russian scholars can read this paper for an apt summary on the ending of a dynasty of imperial power,

and the start of a rough transition into the 20th century. Skeptics are welcome to disagree with the facts, as the mystery has been solved for decades. Any implications or assumptions made are through common knowledge, especially when I discuss the butterfly effect the execution caused through later years.

Prior to the night of July 17, 1918, Russians 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 efforts at an uprising, which failed and ended in bloodshed. Russia had come to have a dislike towards their tsar, Nicholas II, after the failed attempts of revolution. The events of Bloody Sunday in January of 1905, and the killing of innocents in St. Petersburg that it caused, had given Nicholas a bad name in Russia. Citizens had resented him for the petitioners' deaths, even though Nicholas was not in the Winter Palace or St. Petersburg when it occurred, making him uninvolved. (Hammer, 1) Though all of the blame cannot be laid upon Nicholas, he definitely held some responsibility in his own demise.

Nicholas was not raised to be the emperor of All Russia, and according to author 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 that could hold his own, in charge of all.

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. The military strength once possessed by Russia had disappeared, along with the perception of a strong tsar. Matters were made worse by his own wife, Tsarina Alexandra, who the people believed controlled Nicholas. Many Russians saw Nicholas as weak, in character and fortitude as both the head of his empire and his house. (Massie, 2) Nicholas was viewed as being a pushover, and Russia saw him as being directed in all matters by Alexandra, and in turn, Rasputin. The rise of Rasputin occurred due to 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 bleeding out at the slightest injury. Alexandra, in time, became obsessed with her child's health. 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, but she eventually came across Grigory Rasputin.

Rasputin reportedly was able to work wonders, and the dubious holy man became dear to Alexandra. Rumors eventually were spun that the two had a sexual relationship, and that Rasputin controlled Alexandra, who in turn controlled Nicholas. When Nicholas left St. Petersburg during the Great War, "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 [Russia's representative body], foreign ambassadors— pleaded with Nicholas to install a more responsible government. But Alexandra, goaded by Rasputin, passionately refused to share power.” (Massie, 2) Their actions 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 turning tide. There was war inside Russia, with people desperate for government-funded power.

Following Bloody Sunday in 1905, resentment brewed across the lower classes in Russia. Many blamed Nicholas for the deaths of the 92 protestors that January day in St. Petersburg, and the blood spilled on that day would incite many ill feelings toward the tsar as time would go on. Unrest was enhanced by Russia's humiliating defeat in the Russo-Japanese War of 1905. The summer of 1905 showed several revolts and uprisings across Russia, escalating up to October 1905, when Nicholas issued the October Manifesto, which gave citizens' rights, including representation by election in the Duma. The original Prime Minister of the Duma was Pyotr Stolypin, and another member was the worker's council, known as the Soviets. (Elwood, 1) Another group formed in this time period was the Bolsheviks, its leader Vladimir Lenin. Hiding in Germany, he was smuggled into Russia in a sealed rail car, making it to the country in April 1917. By this time there had been protests and riots across Russia for years, until Nicholas chose to abdicate on March 15, 1917 in the February Revolution. (Elwood, 2) By July of 1917 the government seemed on the verge of collapse, and 15 million men had already perished in Russia's involvement in the Great War. (Elwood, 1) The Romanov family had been moved by Alexander Kerensky, the current Prime Minister of the Duma, to Tsarskoe Selo for four months (April to August 1917) before being transferred live in a Governor's Mansion in Tobolsk, east of St. Petersburg by over 1,700 miles. (From St. Petersburg, Russia, to Tobolsk, Tyumen Oblast,

Russia) The family stayed in Tobolsk from August 1917 to April 30, 1918 before they were moved to their final location. It was during their stay in Tobolsk that the Bolsheviks overthrew Kerensky's government, which Nicholas had watched play out with interest in his readings. (Elwood, 2)

Through the different tales depicting the end of the Imperial Russia, there are distinctive commonalities amongst them. Nicholas was forced to abdicate 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) Lenin may have sanctioned the shooting of Nicholas alone if local authorities felt a trial was impossible or 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. (Elwood, 2) 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.”
(Levy, 2)

The script of *Good Morning America* discusses both the end of the Romanovs, and the discovery of Alexei and his sister, the last of the 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)

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 is “now named Sverdlovsk, after the man who ordered the execution of the Imperial family.” (Lovell, 2) Several attempts were made to dispose of the bodies, including 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 laid to rest. The secrecy made it

difficult to locate the bodies, especially under Soviet regime, over the next 60 years. In Hayley Moore's words, "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. (Pan, 1)

Over the course of time several came forward claiming to know the whereabouts of the Romanov family, or even coming into possession of the bodies. There were also 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 actual Grand Duchess Anastasia, until her DNA was tested after her death, following the discovery of the Romanov remains in 1991. A lock of Anderson's hair, as well as a sample of intestinal tissue, showed she was not Russian royalty when it did not match any surviving relatives of the Romanov family. (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, 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. (Coble, 2)

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, particularly with Nicholas. On the femur of the tsar there was heteroplasmy at position 16,169, which occurs widely in twins. His identification was confirmed by the exhumation of his brother George, who had died in 1899, 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 attempt in Japan. Only sustaining a slice to the forehead by his sabre-armed attacker, a handkerchief was used to stanch the bleeding. The DNA profile constructed from the ante mortem 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 gathered by Japanese scientists, whose replication of the DNA evidence was done poorly, leading to different results than the team of renowned scientists from varying 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 showed 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 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 exhumed and buried as a family in 2000, after which they were canonized as passion bearers. (States News Service, 1)

“This brings closure to a very sad chapter in Russian history. It is because their deaths symbolize the start of a diabolic era in world history. And now that has all come to an end.” (Levy, 3) Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, 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 “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.”

All of these decrees by Russia’s government show that a mistake was clearly made on the night of July 17, 1918 in the wilderness of Russia. Modern-day Russia is a clearly a very different country from what it was in the early 20th century. The execution of the Romanov family was unfounded, unnecessary, and sign of how brutal a country Russia was at that time. Power should never be gained through bloodshed, much less the killing of innocent children. The real story of what happened is what keeps me constantly intrigued on what really happened to the Romanovs.

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