

The Romanov Tercentenary:

nostalgia versus history on the eve of the Great War

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The Romanovs on the *Standart*, 1910.

The spring of 2013 was unusually significant for devotees of the Romanov dynasty. Though there was little international recognition of the fact, the season marked the 400th anniversary of the accession of Russia's first Romanov tsar. Historically, the story was a most dramatic one, for Mikhail Fedorovich had not seized Russia's crown in battle, nor had he merely inherited it. Instead, the 16-year-old had been elected, at the end of a decade of civil war, by an assembly of Russian citizens. The delegation that travelled from Moscow to the Volga town of Kostroma to invite him to rule had found their hero less than eager to accept the throne, but his subsequent coronation marked the end of an era that Russians still think of as their archetypal Time of Troubles.

The twenty-first-century Romanovs have an official website, and in 2013 this declared Mikhail Fedorovich's election to have been 'a great deed by Russia's long-suffering people,' placing emphasis on the collective genius of the nation itself.¹ In the same tone, Grand Princess Maria Vladimirovna, the self-styled head of the imperial house, appealed to Russia's faithful to remember martyred rulers of more recent times by giving money to the poor. Plans to renovate a string of tsarist-era monuments were hastily approved. The celebrations also gave a welcome boost to tourism in Kostroma and several other Volga towns around what Russians call the Golden Ring.

Jubilees say far more about the societies in which they are staged than they do about historical events. The celebrations of 2013 were generally low-key, their flavour markedly commercial. Crucially, too, there was no tsar to play the leading role; the latest tale of Mikhail Fedorovich, like every reference to the Romanovs since 1918, was haunted by the bloodstained images of his murdered successors, their bodies riddled with bullets. The contrast with the 1913 jubilee, then, could scarcely have been starker. A hundred years ago, a group around Russia's last tsar, Nicholas II, seized on the Romanov tercentenary as an opportunity to foster patriotic unity in a country troubled by rapid change and deep social division. Unaware how murderous the future was about to be, however, neither tsar nor people played their parts with any real grace. Far from bringing citizens together, the ceremonial events of 1913 served mainly to underscore the very problems they were meant to ease. No one sleepwalked, perhaps, but it was a textbook case of a court that managed to dance, fulminate and gossip its way along a path that ultimately led to tragedy.

Russians had an impressive list of reasons to celebrate in 1913: the revolutionary wave of 1905-6 had been contained, the economy had been growing at a healthy average annual rate of six percent since 1907, consumption was booming, and even the peasants had seen improvements in their living standards, though the 50th anniversary of their emancipation, in 1911, was one jubilee that the Romanovs



The Romanovs. From left to right: Olga, Maria, Nicholas II, Alexandra, Anastasia, Aleksei, and Tatiana. Pictured at Livadia Palace in 1913.

chose to overlook. A new class – industrialists, lawyers, doctors and other urban professionals – now took an active part in civic life, and Russia's first constitution, granted in 1905, suggested that the nation itself was beginning to acquire a voice. But any celebration of all this called for a basic acceptance of the desirability of change, and Nicholas II regarded progress as anathema. To this weak man, perpetually horrified by the wilfulness of ministers and the strange demands of urban crowds, the jubilee of 1913 became a chance to reassert the spirit of divinely-ordained autocratic rule. Official events that year acquired an air of disconnected fantasy as the real Russia was ignored in favour of a dream of changeless mystical union between the tsar and the most simple, the most historic, of his people.

All pageantry, of course, involves a measure of collective myth-making. Nations are not united any more than crowds speak with one voice, but for a time an illusion can be maintained if there is minimal consensus and a common goal. One problem with 1913

was that the gulf between the saint-like tsar the court tried to project and the beleaguered but intransigent man himself was just too great. Whatever myth his retinue might try to propagate, the facts spoke for themselves. Russia was in turmoil; its elite was divided over constitutional reform, its workforce was alienated by successive moves towards repression, and the court itself quivered with scandal, not least about the monk and healer Rasputin. Nicholas might dream of mystical unity, and his treasury had diamonds enough to dazzle any crowd, but the jubilee left many influential sections of the population cold, and in return the tsar and his elegant consort, Empress Alexandra, repaid their audience with grudging and lacklustre shows.

Ironically, it was the very economic change that Nicholas deplored that gave the celebrations their popular flavour. The coronation of 1896 had inspired the production of limited quantities of souvenirs, but by 1913 Russia's modern factories could turn out cheap stuff by the cartload, while

twentieth-century mass-media in the shape of books, illustrated magazines, postcards and even film brought the tale of the Romanovs to new life. The jubilee was marked by the issue of the first stamps ever to bear a portrait of Russia's tsar, though there were problems with the mail when postmasters refused to deface the iconic images by franking them. Less controversially, medals were struck, bearing the twin portraits of Nicholas and Mikhail Fedorovich on one side and a double-headed eagle with '300' emblazoned above it on the other, and shops filled with cups, brooches, tablecloths and even scarves. The imperial authorities were so shocked by the commodification of it all that they felt moved to rule that the scarves at least should not be 'of a size suitable for use as handkerchiefs.'² But the civic ebullience continued. Whole towns were emblazoned with posters, portraits, flags and banners for the events themselves, while gala streets were brightened by the copious lengths of mass-produced ribbon, in the Romanov colours of yellow and black, that were twisted

A stamp of Nicholas II printed to celebrate the 300th anniversary of the Romanov royal family, c.1913.



round their new street lamps.

But this was not a people's holiday in any modern sense. The tone was set by the official biography of Nicholas II (another first) that Professor Major-General Andrei Elchaninov was graciously permitted to issue at the start of the celebrations in February 1913. Here Nicholas appeared as a pious, hard-working paragon, a saint in a succession of flawless military uniforms. He was not a politician, certainly, for his task was way above mere compromise and as autocrat he was subject to neither Duma nor nation. Briskly marching past the memories of 1905 – military defeat at the hands of the Japanese, violence and mass protest on the streets, concessions wrested like drops of heart's blood from the government – Elchaninov focused on the tsar as father to good Russian people of all kinds. 'Through all its misfortunes and trials the august pilot has steered the Russian ship of state back to calm and clear waters,' he explained. Readers saw how much Nicholas valued peasants, frequently entering their huts 'to see how they live and partake of their milk and black bread.' And though the real tsar was known to hate the universities and fear their radical ideas, Elchaninov's imaginary one 'considered himself the Father of all those who are commencing their studies.' It was all part of the 'high service' this superman performed, the burden he accepted at his coronation, a duty to Russia's destiny for which he would answer only to God.³

A good deal of this stuff might have raised eyebrows at court, but worse was to come. In tones that call to mind Vladimir Putin's much more recent exploits, Elchaninov's book praised every aspect of the tsar's manhood, including his physical strength and endurance, his marksmanship and even his ability to swim under water. Lest his readers fear

for the succession, the Professor also added a long section on the Tsarevich, Aleksei. Here they learned how much the boy enjoyed clean-living manly sports: 'In summer, bicycling, bathing and rowing; varied by walks and picking mushrooms and berries; in winter, tobogganing, snowballing, making snow-men and snow-castles.'⁴ A section of the book that mentioned the prayers the imperial family had recently offered for the heir's recovery from illness was censored at Nicholas' request, so readers could glean no hint of the lad's poor state of health. But the spectacle of Aleksei's evident frailty during public engagements in the jubilee year would soon have everyone talking.

The committee that organised the celebrations themselves, headed by the former Minister of the Interior, Alexander Bulygin, chose to mark the election rather than the coronation of Mikhail Fedorovich Romanov, which meant staging a series of events in the freezing, wet and perpetually gloomy setting of St Petersburg in late February. A Te Deum service in the Kazan Cathedral was intended as the centrepiece of the first day, but though a public holiday had been declared the people who had gathered on the boulevards were unenthusiastic. 'There was nothing in the feeling of the crowd but shallow curiosity' was how the Prime Minister, Vladimir Kokovtsov, later remembered it, and in return the royal party appeared icily reserved.⁵ For Mikhail Rodzianko, a leading member of the court administration at the time, the most notable part of the proceedings was an altercation with Rasputin, who had assumed, mistakenly, that he might have a front-row seat.

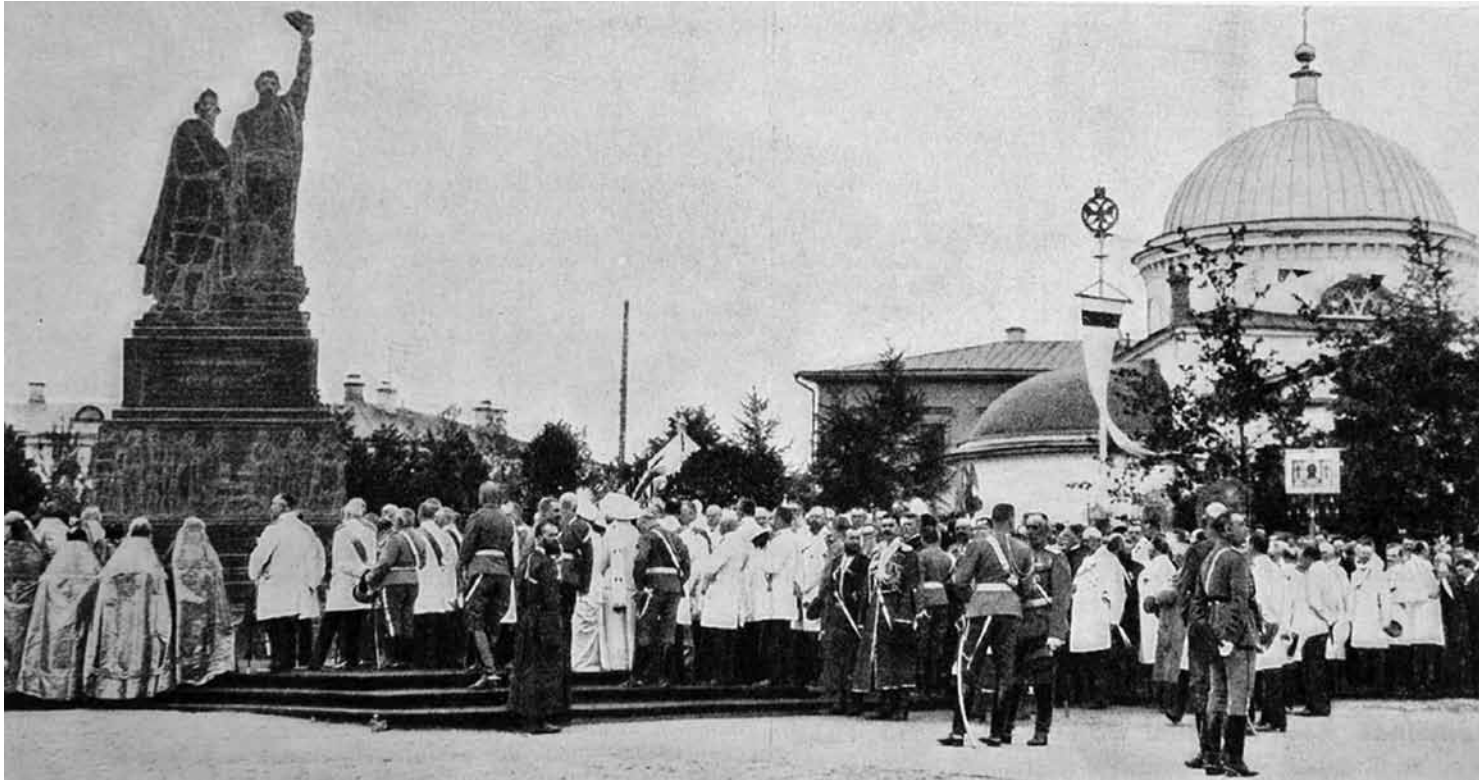
The balls and soirées were no more lively than that half-hearted Te Deum. Indeed, the gala performance of Glinka's

opera, *A Life for the Tsar*, which told the story of Ivan Susanin, a peasant who saved Mikhail Romanov's life during the Troubles at the cost of his own, provided further opportunities for the royal family to give offence. The Mariinsky theatre was at its flawless best, and the management had made spectacular efforts with the production, which featured Feodor Chaliapin (on loan from Moscow) and the dancers Mathilde Kshesinskaya and Anna Pavlova. But the Empress Alexandra sat stony-faced through the first act and then left early, as if ill. The following night, at the ball the court had organised for the imperial couple, she fainted after putting in a brief, unsmiling appearance. Whatever the reason, St Petersburg experienced the coldness as a snub from a foreign woman who had not exactly hidden her scorn for the place she regarded as 'a rotten town, not an atom Russian.'⁶ But Nicholas was hardly more vivacious at this jubilee, and everyone remarked that the tsar and his consort seemed preoccupied, remote and almost listless through the entire week.

The second round of celebrations, in May, was certainly an improvement on February's chilly scene. This time, the entire royal family took part in a journey that was meant to trace Mikhail Romanov's route from Kostroma to the Kremlin. It was an opportunity for Alexandra to tour the Russian countryside she yearned to see, and a chance for Nicholas to make contact with some of the simple souls that he viewed as his truest subjects. Unlike the seventeenth-century hero they were celebrating, however, these Romanovs travelled in style, taking the imperial train from St Petersburg to Vladimir and Nizhnyi-Novgorod before boarding the luxurious steamboat *Mezhen* for a four-day cruise along the Volga. Three other steamboats made up the flotilla, including one that was equipped with enough crystal, silverware and china to throw a full-scale banquet for a 100 guests.

This time, at last, there were adoring crowds. Indeed, the riverbank was lined with them, and it seemed that anyone with access to a raft or small boat had packed it with neighbours and taken to the water. Grand Duchess Olga, the eldest of the Romanov daughters, would recall later that in Nizhnyi-Novgorod she noticed workmen falling to the ground to kiss her father's shadow. She saw no irony in the fact that the building the city had asked him to open in honour of the occasion was a new branch of the state bank. Alexandra used the tour to make a pilgrimage to some of Russia's most historic monasteries,

A celebration of the 300th anniversary of the Romanov royal family in Nizhny-Novgorod, Russia, 1913.



Cortège of Emperor Nicholas II at the Triumphal Arch in Moscow, 1913.



though several town authorities intruded on her contemplation by asking her to open their commemorative hospitals. She did this with cautious reserve, but mercifully overlooked the looming factories nearby, the evidence of change that marred the pristine world of peasant fields. The dream of timelessness was finally within her reach; it was delightful to wake, aboard that voluptuous boat, and view the Volga in the limpid light of summer dawns. Even the big events held reassurance, joining so many hands in prayer and voices in pure gasps of joy. In Kostroma the crowd sank to its knees when the strains of the tsarist anthem began to play, and everywhere there were those simple peasants in traditional dress, the women bearing salt and giant loaves of gleaming bread, an illusion of holy truth that seemed as changeless as an icon.

The last call on the tour that spring was the historic capital, Moscow. This time, the royal party arrived by train, stepping from their carriage at the Alexander station to the strains of a military orchestra. They made their journey to the Kremlin, citadel of the first Romanov tsars, by the original horse-power, with Alexandra in a state carriage and Nicholas riding at the head of a procession. Before them lay a religious ceremony in the Cathedral of the Archangel Michael, tomb of Russia's pre-Petrine rulers, and then more celebrations in the Grand Kremlin Palace. The setting was as urban as St Petersburg, but the Kremlin was a favourite with Nicholas and Alexandra. As Nicholas had written to his mother in 1900 after celebrating Easter there, he and Alexandra had 'spent the best part of a day' visiting the Kremlin's holy places and 'deciding which church



we shall attend for Morning Service or Mass or Evensong ... We also read a good deal of history about the "Times of Moscow" [i.e. Time of Troubles]: 'I never knew I was able to reach such heights of religious ecstasy,' he added. 'I am so calm and happy now.'⁷

Religious ecstasy was on his Moscow menu in 1913 as well, but so, at the official banquet that the city's nobles put on, were celery consommé with assorted pastries, crab mousse with burbot and Oxford sauce, chicken, grouse and quail, Romaine lettuce with oranges and a dessert of hazelnut parfait.⁸ While Nicholas toyed with some of that, the Kremlin shone with lights thanks to the discreet electricity generating-station that had been installed there 20 years before. But history took centre stage. A special exhibition had been mounted in the Armoury Museum, featuring 147 rare pre-Petrine icons as well as valuable documents from the early Romanov age. Not to be outdone, the nearby House of the Romanov Tsars put Mikhail Fedorovich's cradle on show, as well as his exquisite chess set. In the midst of its commercial boom, Moscow as a whole seemed ready to enjoy an interval of nostalgia.⁹

Ecstatic moments apart, however, even this portion of the jubilee was marred by tension and misunderstanding. In Kostroma, the problem was a speech by the Provincial Marshal of Nobility which provocatively mentioned the Duma. Nicholas was so enraged that in place of gracious thanks he could only mutter 'Are you finished?' Representative government, after all, was something he had abjured in 1904 'because I consider it harmful to the people whom God has entrusted to me,'¹⁰ and he resented any reminder of what had followed less than a year later. He also feared the effects of gossip about his wife and son. The crowds must all have noted that the tsarevich could barely stand. For much of the time, indeed, the boy was carried by a serviceman. But no one was allowed to offer sympathy, still less to ask about the cause. Nicholas' pride, and perhaps also his wife's shame (for she now knew that she had passed the haemophilia to their son), created yet another barrier between his world and Russia's modern, machine-age reality.

History was his watchword, then, but the poignant truth was that Nicholas also managed to ignore the message of his royal ancestor's accession. By 1913 there were plenty of historians who might have put him straight. The previous year, as part of the build-up to the jubilee, the most prominent of them, Sergei Platonov, had published an essay about Mikhail Fedorovich.¹¹ Platonov was no firebrand, and he did not suggest that the fact of Mikhail's election had limited his power as tsar. The accession was treated as a sacred act, 'blessed by God', and the role of the people came across as the collective manifestation of nationhood rather than a democratic, lightly revocable choice. But act the people certainly had, and their right to some form of expression within the Russian state was integral to the Romanov tale. The moral was a simple one. If the people could make one tsar in a bid to save their land, they could also save it, in a different age, by unmaking another one.

Whether the protesters of Petrograd remembered that or not in 1917, Nicholas had barely five more years to live. Within a decade, the Bolsheviks had also destroyed many newly-built 1913 memorials. In Kostroma, an elaborate tercentenary chapel-monument was eventually modified into a plinth for the local Lenin statue. In Moscow, an obelisk near the Kremlin turned into a memorial to Marxist thought. Many of the rest were simply razed. Among the few survivors was a metal railway-bridge, a miracle of twentieth-century engineering, that spanned the mighty Volga at Yaroslavl. A harbinger of change when it was opened in 1913, this structure could have prompted Nicholas to ponder the future. His political programme, however, was little more than indulgent nostalgia. Professor Elchaninov had spelled it out. 'The tsar in all matters loved tendencies and ideas of a purely Russian character,' he had written, 'and likes matters to be directed in accordance with the traditions of our glorious past.'¹² Nicholas turned his back on steam and steel. But his tragedy was that he also failed to think about the past, preferring the comfort of fables. It was escapism, not history, that brought the final curtain down on the Romanovs, and with them went the dream of Holy Russia and its timeless peasant world.

Grand Duchesses Olga, Tatiana, Maria and Anastasia Nikolaevna of Russia in captivity at Tsarskoe Selo in the spring of 1917. One of the last known photographs of Tsar Nicholas II's daughters.

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- ² Cited in Slater, Wendy (2007) *The Many Deaths of Tsar Nicholas II*, Abingdon: Routledge, p. 153.
- ³ The English translation of Elchaninov's work, from which all my quotations are taken, was published in 1914 as *The Tsar and His People* (London: Hodder & Stoughton). The cited statements appear on pp. 2, 8 and (for the peasants) 78 and (for students) 87.
- ⁴ Elchaninov, *Tsar*, pp. 32-3 and 55-8.
- ⁵ Cited in King, Greg (2006) *The Court of the last Tsar: pomp, power and pageantry in the reign of Nicholas II*, Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley, p. 391.
- ⁶ Letter from Alexandra to her sister, Princess Louise of Battenberg, 1905. Cited in Lieven, Dominic (1993) *Nicholas II: emperor of all the Russias*, London: John Murray, p.136.
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- ⁸ Cited in Slater, *Many Deaths*, p. 130.
- ⁹ For more on this, see Merridale, Catherine (2013) *Red Fortress: the secret heart of Russia's history*, London: Allen Lane, pp. 232-34.
- ¹⁰ Quotation from Lieven, p. 136. See also King, p. 400.
- ¹¹ S. F. Platonov, writing in P. G. Vasenko, S. F. Platonov and E. F. Turæva Tsereteli (eds) (1912) *Nachalo Dinastii Romanovykh: istoricheskie ocherki*, St Petersburg: Ia Basmakova, pp. 147-49
- ¹² Elchaninov, *Tsar*, pp. 17-18.

Further Reading

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One of the last photographs taken of Nicholas II, showing him at Tsarskoye Selo after his abdication in March 1917