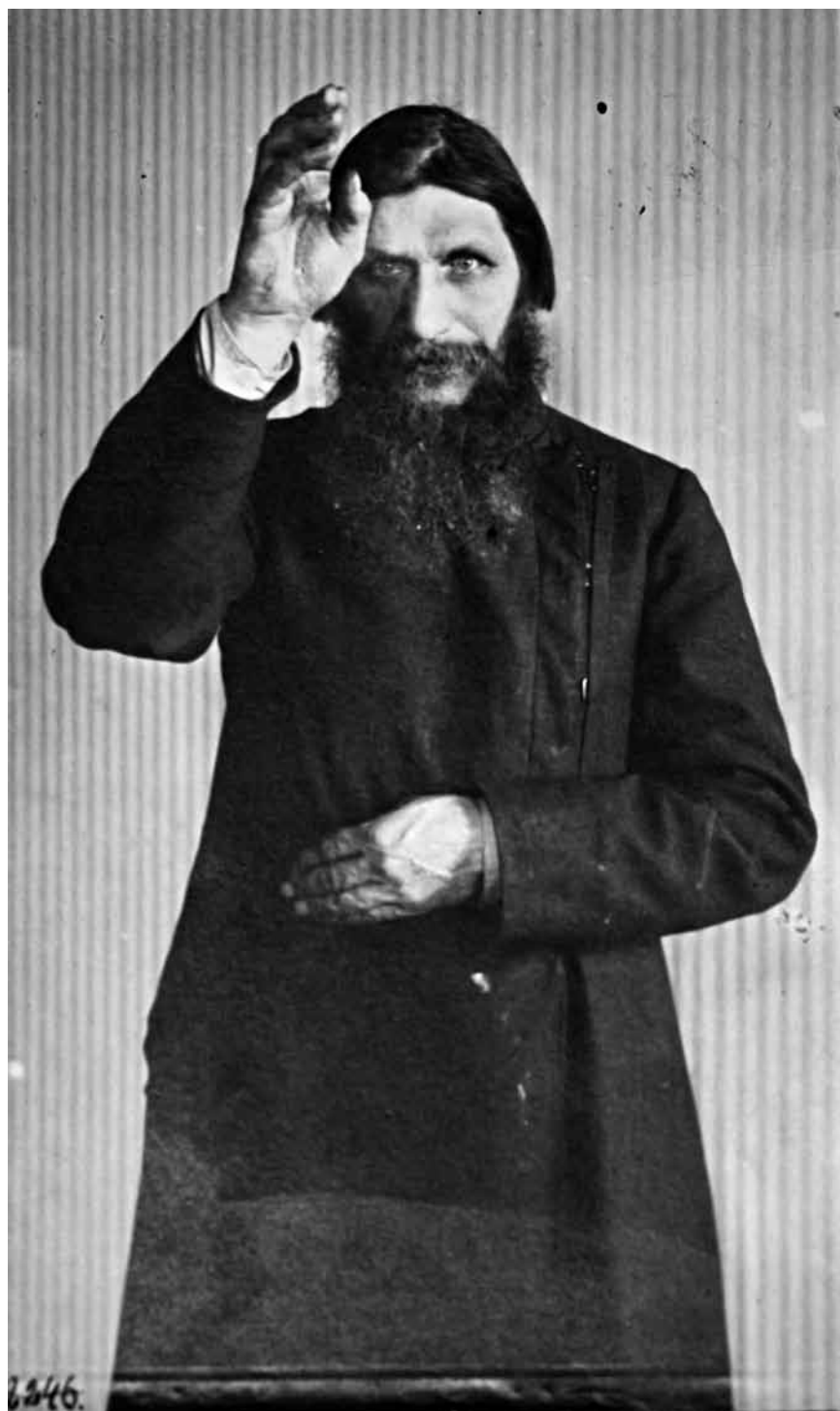


Alexandra and Rasputin

Has the role of Alexandra and Rasputin in the downfall of the Romanovs been exaggerated out of all proportion?

Sarah Newman



Grigori Rasputin, the famous Russian mujique
State museum of political history of Russia

If a country is defeated in war, the rulers run the risk of being overthrown. In 1918 the Kaiser left Germany for Holland, Germany became a Republic; the Austro-Hungarian Empire came to an end; in Turkey the Caliphate lasted little longer.

In Russia the overthrow of the Romanovs came before capitulation but was also precipitated by military disasters. By 1916 Russia had experienced immense losses in war and hardships at home, rumours about the Tsarina and Rasputin and their relations with Germany were rife. The Tsar had replaced his uncle at the front as commander-in-chief, thus becoming personally linked to military disasters. In October and November 1916 uncleared garbage littered the streets of St Petersburg, snowdrifts and typhus added to the misery caused by shortage of food.

There were long term reasons for the fall of the Romanovs but failure in war was the immediate cause. In this dynasty's downfall Alexandra and Rasputin played colourful but subsidiary roles.

Who was Alexandra?

Alexandra, wife of Nicholas II, last Tsar of Russia, came from Hesse. She was the youngest daughter of Grand Duke Louis and Alice, second daughter of Queen Victoria. The fact that she came from Germany added to the hatred Russians felt for her after 1914, but the rulers of Hesse had no love for the Prussian monarchs who forced them into the German Empire, and Alexandra was in fact an Anglophile, having spent much of her youth in England in the company of Victoria after Alice's early death.

Alexandra, probably Victoria's favourite grandchild, inherited from her the haemophilia which she passed on to her only son, Alexis, heir to the Romanov dynasty. It was this disease that caused her reliance on the healer, Rasputin. He was not the first mystic



healer she had turned to in her concern for Alexis, but he was to become the most notorious.

Alexandra disliked and was disliked by Russian society. She was awkward and often tongue-tied in public and her more serious nature revolted against the extravagance and frivolity of the Russian elite. She felt a mystical bond to the peasantry and developed an emotional attachment to the Orthodox Church but she alienated those sections of society that her mother-in-law had been able to charm.

It was her refusal to abandon Rasputin that led the dowager empress, who disliked her, to remark: 'My unhappy daughter-in-law is incapable of realising that she is bringing about her own downfall and that of the dynasty... She deeply believes in the holiness of that dubious individual.' It was her reliance on Rasputin, who she believed was her son's saviour, and who also modified her own ill health, that led the monarchist Purishkevitch, himself involved in the murder of Rasputin, to pronounce in 1916 that the Tsar's ministers 'have been turned into marionettes, marionettes whose

threads have been taken firmly in hand by Rasputin and the Empress Alexandra Feodorovna – the evil genius of Russia and the Tsar'.

Who was Rasputin?

According to Kerensky, a key politician in 1917: 'Without Rasputin there would have been no Lenin.' According to Alexei Khvostov, minister for internal affairs 1915-6: 'Princess Yusupova..., spokeswoman for the views of the whole grand-ducal milieu, saw clearly that Rasputin was leading the dynasty to destruction.'

Rasputin was a Siberian peasant. Born probably in 1869, in his youth he was a drunkard and womaniser. He was married by 1897. By the age of 30 his life was transformed. He became a pilgrim, wandering from monastery to monastery, part of a dying Russian tradition. He took to prophesying and became a Khlyst: a member of the sect who believed in suppressing lust through debauchery. He also became a healer. It was in this role that, after he arrived in St Petersburg in 1903, he was introduced to the Tsar and Tsarina by the Montenegrin princesses, Militsa, married to Grand

Duke Pyotr Nikolaevitch, and her sister, Anastasia, wife of the Duke of Leichtenberg but involved with Grand Duke Nikilai Nikolaevitch, the Tsar's uncle.

But D. Lieven writes: 'Rasputin's significance in pre-war Russia should not be exaggerated'. However, in 1915 Nicholas took the place of his uncle as commander-in-chief. During his absences at the front Alexandra exerted power in Russia and relied on Rasputin for help in doing so. His amazing ability to reduce the pain Alexis suffered and revitalise the boy convinced her that here was the man sent by God to aid the dynasty. But from 1914 Rasputin's character deteriorated, he reverted to the debauchery of his youth. He ceased healing others for free since he needed to fund his drinking. His influence on Alexandra and indirectly on the Tsar in the matter of political appointments was seen as malignant. His murder in 1916 by Prince Yusupov, a cross-dressing member of the imperial family, merely exiled to his estates for this crime, further weakened respect for the dynasty.

Perhaps if individuals are to be blamed for the fall of the Romanovs, the personality of Nicholas II himself, 'the very epitome of lack of will' [General Alexander Kireev], should be looked at? The Tsar's decision to leave behind the political squabbles of Petrograd and go to the front inevitably tied him to the defeats Russia was to suffer in the war's later stages.

Longer term causes

After the Crimean War of the 1850s it became clear that, if Russia was to remain a great power, she had to industrialise. But industrialisation meant factories and large towns. In the towns would be a large population of workers concentrated in undesirable living and working conditions. Among these groups revolutionary ideas could spread.

Also after the Crimean War came the emancipation of the serfs. But many of them and their descendants believed that the Tsar had meant all the landlords' land to be handed over to the commune. Many peasants believed that land truly belonged to those who worked it. The peasants gained only about half the land they expected after emancipation and felt entitled to the rest. This some were ready to seize during the unrest in 1905, with more following the wartime disasters in 1917.

Under the rule of Nicholas II's father, Alexander III, the non-Russians who made up half the population of the Empire were increasingly persecuted;



the Finns suffered in the reign of Nicholas II, as the Poles and Jews, among others, had earlier: the Tsar did nothing to discourage pogroms. The Russian minorities did not support the tsarist system: just as minority nationalities were ready to overthrow the Communist system, so they were ready to react against the rule of the tsars. In a higher proportion than their numbers warranted, they were stalwarts of the revolutionary movements - Social Revolutionaries, Mensheviks and Bolsheviks.

Russia was in a precarious position at the end of the nineteenth century. She possessed neither the wealth nor the military strength to compete with the expanding German empire. Compared with western Europe, Russia was still backward, with a mediaeval agriculture and illiterate peasants living in poverty and ignorance.

By the twentieth century Russia was still an autocracy, ruled by will of the Tsar. By then there was increasing tension between Russia and Germany. Germany had placed high tariffs on Russian goods, and threatened to expand militarily into Russian territory. The Russian treasury was shored up by loans from France. French investors funded the growth of Russian industry. Like Russia, France feared German expansionism. And under Alexander III a military alliance between the two

was agreed, adding to German fears of encirclement.

Russian defeats in the war against Japan, 1904-5; the shooting down of unarmed demonstrators on 'Bloody Sunday', January 1905; the Tsar's reluctance to grant meaningful powers to the Duma [Assembly] set up in 1906; the increasing industrial unrest after 1912; and the continuous peasant demand for land, all formed the background to the discontents that were to erupt in 1917, creating a similar climate of discontent as in 1905.

The short term causes of the abdication were the disasters of the first world war coupled with inflation, with hunger in the cities caused by the need to get what food the reduced peasantry was willing to sell being needed at the front, and with transport being geared to the needs of troops, not towns, and to the army loyal in the 'dress rehearsal for revolution' of 1905 becoming less so by 1917: the Petrograd garrison did not want to be sent to the front and refused to fire on the crowds protesting in the streets. Once the ordinary soldiers at home could not be relied on, and the military leaders at the front were persuaded, how ever mistakenly, that the Duma leaders, with whom links had existed at least since 1909, could wage war more successfully than the Tsar, then Nicholas was doomed. Since he abdicated in favour not of his son, whom

the doctors revealed could not live long, but his brother, who refused the throne once it was clear the Duma did not support him, the Romanov dynasty was over.

All in all, subtract Alexandra, or Rasputin, or both, from the Russian scene, the downfall of the Romanov dynasty was still on the cards.

Further reading

Erickson C. *Alexandra* Robinson, London 2001

Lieven D. *Nicholas II* Pimlico, London 1993

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