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Russia's Last Czar, Nicholas II

By Mike Kubic
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Mike Kubic is a former correspondent of Newsweek magazine. In 1894, Nicholas II took to the throne as Emperor of All Russia. Less than 25 years later, he would be deposed of power, placed under house arrest, and murdered, along with his entire family, in a basement in central Russia. As you read, take notes on the factors that led to the downfall of not only Nicholas II but the entire House of Romanov.

Ascension to the Throne

- [1] When telling the tragic story of the last Russian czar, Nicholas II, the temptation is to start at the dramatic end — the July 1918 massacre of him, his entire family, his household help and personal physician, by which the triumphant Communist¹ movement introduced its rule.

But more instructive about the monarch was his reaction to the news in November 1894 that his father, Alexander III, had died and that he, Nicholas, would be the new Emperor of All Russia.



"Nicholas II of Russia with the family" by Boasson and Egger St. Petersburg Nevsky 24 is in the public domain.

As told by Simon Sebag Montefiori in his book *The Romanovs*, the 26-year-old Nicholai Aleksandrovich Romanov broke down in tears and ran to his sister.

"What is going to happen to me, to [my family] and to Russia?" he cried on her shoulder. "I never wanted to be the czar!"²

- [5] Nicholas' despair was understandable: the job with which he was about to be entrusted was colossal.³ He was assuming it while Europe was haunted, as Karl Marx had put it, with the "specter" of Communism,⁴ and by the end of the 19th century no country was a more inviting target for a revolution than feudal Russia.⁵

1. a political theory and economic system derived from the works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels that advocates class war, the rise of the working class, and a society in which all property is publicly, rather than individually owned; in theory, under communism, everyone works and is paid according to their abilities and needs
2. Nicholas II was the eldest son of Alexander III and had been his heir to the throne since he was young. He was always intended to be czar in the line of succession, but many historians and sources agree that his disposition was not well-suited to the job. It should also be noted that Nicholas II became his father's heir at age 12 following the assassination of his grandfather Alexander II. This event had a great impact on Nicholas II and his conservative father.
3. **Colossal (adjective):** extremely large
4. An allusion to *The Communist Manifesto*, written by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, that is the main source of communist political theory.

To successfully rule this oversized empire required an astute⁶ and strong leader who was closely attuned to the needs and feelings of his 160-odd million subjects. Nicholas II, by contrast, was one of history's most dismal⁷ examples of the wrong man, at the wrong time, and in the wrong place. His reign seemed to be almost predetermined to end in a momentous tragedy.

It didn't start that way.

In 1894, when Nicholas ascended the throne, the Romanovs were one of the world's most successful noble families.

They had ruled Russia for more than 280 years, and most of their subjects — as the czar's German-born wife, Alexandra, wrote to British Queen Victoria⁸ — practically worshipped them “as divine beings.”⁹

[10] Russia was recognized as one of the world's great powers, and its empire spanned the continent from the Baltic Sea in Europe to the Bering Sea in Asia — one sixth of the global land mass.

And the Romanovs' personal wealth was almost unimaginable: for example, Alexandra's wedding wardrobe included a tiara with 475 big diamonds set in platinum and earrings that were so heavy they had to be held by wires wrapped around her ears. It took eight assistants to help her wear her diamond- and gold-studded dress and its 15 foot-long train.

What the last Romanov did not have was an understanding and respect for the dirt-poor and frequently hungry peasants who eked¹⁰ out a meager living, and it was part of Nicholas' misfortune that his abysmal¹¹ insensitivity and weakness were revealed on the very day after his coronation.

To celebrate the occasion, the royal household prepared 400,000 packages each with candy, gingerbreads, a sausage, a mug and a bread roll, and set them, together with barrels of beer and mead, on hundreds of stands in a large field in Moscow. But when more than 700,000 peasants showed up, the gifts ran out, and a riot ensued in which an estimated 3,000 people were trampled to death, and thousands more were injured.

Informed about the disaster later in the morning, Nicholas thought he should perhaps skip the evening's grand ball at the French embassy in favor of visiting those injured at the riots in local hospitals. Instead, Nicholas' uncle persuaded him to attend the ball. Nicholas and Alexandra called on the victims the next day, but Russians always remembered that the new czar and his wife had danced until 2 a.m. while tens of thousands of their subjects were either dead, mourning, or injured in hospitals.

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5. Russia remained in a state of pseudo-feudalism well into the 19th century. Serfs worked the land for the land-owning nobility and were not considered free people. Serfdom was officially ended in Russia in 1861 by czar Alexander II, but this abolition was not always favorable for the landless, uneducated serf majority. In fact, it mostly served to provoke more feelings of revolution.
 6. **Astute (adjective):** showing the ability to accurately assess situations or people and use this information to one's advantage
 7. **Dismal (adjective):** showing or causing sadness; very bad or poor
 8. Alexandra, or Alix of Hesse, was the granddaughter of Queen Victoria.
 9. A divine being is a god.
 10. to manage to support oneself or make a living with difficulty
 11. **Abysmal (adjective):** extremely bad; appalling or shocking

Early Years as Czar

- [15] After his coronation, the royal couple took long vacation trips and, as Montefiori reports, did “essentially nothing” for almost ten years. He signed mostly unimportant documents and personally kept a meticulous¹² order in his office, where he sat all by himself, with no secretary.

Although a classical absentee landlord — Nicholas left the job of day-to-day governing to his strong-willed wife and his frequently incompetent ministers. The young monarch was a total autocrat.¹³ As he once put it, Russia was “a landed estate whose proprietor is the czar, the administrator is the nobility, and the workers are the peasantry.” In his 1897 census report, he described himself as the “master of the Russian land.”

And he made mistake upon mistake when dealing with his subjects.

When in the early 1900s anti-Semitic pogroms¹⁴ killed thousands of Jews, he openly sympathized with the mobs and made poor Jewish jokes at formal dinners.

In 1905, he showed the same poor judgment by refusing to meet peaceful demonstrators who came to ask for more rights for the *Duma*, the powerless Russian parliament. The guards stopped the 120,000 petitioners outside the czar’s Winter Palace in St. Petersburg, but they later killed or wounded several hundred of them in what came to be known as “Black Sunday.”

- [20] The “Black Sunday” incident added to the czar’s reputation as “Bloody Nicholas,” and triggered nationwide strikes and protests. Nicholas finally responded with vague promises of liberal reform, which he never carried out.

War and Imperialism¹⁵

When dealing with other nations, Nicholas showed his predecessors’¹⁶ penchant¹⁷ for extending the already oversized empire — but unlike the more successful Romanovs, he had unrealistic confidence in the strength of his regime and his military.

In 1900, he took advantage of the Boxer Rebellion — an anti-foreign uprising in China — to send 170,000 troops to occupy the Chinese province of Manchuria,¹⁸ and later broke his agreement to pull the troops out. This infuriated Japan, which had the same designs on the rich territory, but Nicholas paid no heed.

12. **Meticulous** (*adjective*): showing great attention to detail; very careful and precise

13. a ruler with absolute power; a dictator or tyrant

14. an organized massacre of a particular ethnic group, in particular that of Jewish people in Russia or Eastern Europe

15. **a policy of extending a country’s power and influence over another country/state/region, often through military force**

16. **Predecessor** (*noun*): a person who held a job or office before the current holder

17. **Penchant** (*noun*): a strong or habitual liking for something; a tendency to do something

18. Manchuria is a mountainous region that forms a northeastern portion of China. Control over this region would allow the Russian empire access to warm-water ports on the Pacific Ocean.

As he told his defense minister, he intended to also annex Korea and Persia (today's Iran) and take control of the international waterways of the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles.¹⁹ As for the possible threat of a war with Japan, Nicholas was unconcerned. He said "Yes, absolutely!" when the minister shrugged off the Japanese army as "a huge joke," and with his wife left for eight weeks to attend a wedding in Germany.

In February 1904 — less than four months later — Japan launched a surprise attack that destroyed a Russian fleet and threatened to seize Port Arthur, Russia's only warm-water port. In the war that followed, the Japanese army decisively won every battle and Nicholas was lucky when President Theodore Roosevelt in 1905 negotiated a peace treaty in which Russia had to give up only a half of an Asian island.

- [25] While dreaming about conquests in the Far East, Nicholas overlooked critical developments at home. One of them was the March 1898 founding in Minsk of a Communist party headed by Vladimir Lenin,²⁰ a charismatic revolutionary whose first and foremost goal was the overthrow of the czarist regime.

Another potentially more promising change was the increasingly urgent demands by the leaders of the *Duma* for real democratic reforms. This was probably Nicholas' last chance to save the monarchy and preserve the throne for his son, but he summarily dismissed all proposals. "I'll never agree to a representative form of government," he told his interior minister, "because I consider it harmful to the people that God has entrusted me to lead."

Nicholas also showed a puzzling disregard for a major uproar in his own court over the growing influence of a mystical faith healer named Grigori Rasputin. Brought into Nicholas' household because of his alleged ability to treat the hemophilia²¹ of the czar's only son, the monk had a profound influence on the royal couple and earned the hatred of several nobles in the czar's retinue.²² They eventually assassinated Rasputin, but not before his presence in the palace significantly added to the loss of confidence in Nicholas' judgement, and the opposition to his rule.

What sealed Nicholas' fate was his ill-considered decision to enter the First World War, for which his poorly armed army and unstable home front clearly were not ready. Following several military setbacks, the czar disregarded a warning that the Russian army was "unreliable," and in August 1915 took personal command of his demoralized²³ and increasingly rebellious troops.

It was another major blunder. With 15 million men at the front or POW²⁴ camps instead of farming, prices of food skyrocketed, millions of hungry Russians rioted or went on strike, and the entire military units were deserting en masse. By early 1917, Russia was on the brink of utter collapse, and Nicholas was blamed for it.

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19. The Bosphorus and the Dardanelles are known collectively as the Turkish Straits. Both are natural straits and internationally significant waterways located in northwestern Turkey and connect to the Black Sea.
 20. Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, better known by his alias Vladimir Lenin (1870-1924), was a Russian communist leader, politician, and political theorist. He served as head of the Communist Party following the abdication of Nicholas II and officially led the Soviet Union from 1922 until 1924. He developed a system of Marxism known as Leninism.
 21. a genetic disorder that impairs the body's ability to make blood clots, which is needed to stop bleeding
 22. **Retinue (noun):** a group of advisers, assistants, or others accompanying an important person
 23. **Demoralized (adjective):** having lost confidence or hope
 24. "prisoner of war"

Last of the Romanovs

[30] In March, the powerless czar had no choice but to give in to the demands of the *Duma* and the Communists. He abdicated²⁵ the throne on behalf of himself and his son, and the whole family was arrested. After the control over the country shifted from a provisional government to Lenin's radicals (the Bolsheviks), the royal couple, their son and four daughters, and the ex-czar's personal physician and three servants, were moved to a house in Yekaterinburg, a town beyond the Urals.²⁶

There during the night of July 17, 1918, with Lenin's approval, all eleven prisoners were executed with savage²⁷ brutality. They were killed by bullets, bayonets, and blows by rifle butts;²⁸ drenched with acid and gasoline; and burned in a deep pit.

The reason for the massacre was most authoritatively explained by Leon Trotsky,²⁹ a former Bolshevik leader and one of the founders of the Soviet Union.³⁰ In his 1935 book, *Diary in Exile*, he described the slaughter as:

“not only expedient³¹ but necessary. The severity of this summary justice showed the world that we would continue to fight on mercilessly, stopping at nothing. The execution of the czar's family was needed not only in order to frighten, horrify and dishearten the enemy, but also in order to shake up our own ranks to show that there was no turning back, that ahead lay either complete victory or complete ruin... This, Lenin sensed well.”

Trotsky, who made the mistake of antagonizing Josef Stalin,³² his rival for the leadership of the Soviet Union, provided another evidence that Communists stop at nothing. In August, 1940, while hiding in Mexico, he was on Stalin's order killed by an ice axe-wielding assassin, who split his skull in half.

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25. to renounce one's throne; to retire or stand down
 26. The Ural Mountains run from north to south through western Russia.
 27. **Savage (adjective):** fierce, violent, or uncontrolled
 28. The Romanovs always held out hope for rescue or foreign exile, and in preparation the Romanov women sewed jewels into their clothing to smuggle out with them. This somewhat shielded the women from the gunshots, thus leading to the various, awful ways of killing.
 29. Leon Trotsky (1879-1940) was an initial supporter of the Menshevik faction before joining the Bolsheviks in the October Revolution of 1917. He later became a commander of the Red Army in the Russian Civil War. Trotsky was an opponent of Stalin and his policies; Trotsky was removed from power in 1927 and was exiled two years later.
 30. The Soviet Union, or the USSR, was a socialist union of multiple Soviet republics, including the former Russia and other Eastern European satellites, that lasted from 1922 until 1991.
 31. **Expedient (adjective):** convenient and practical (although possibly improper or immoral)
 32. Josef Stalin (1878-1953) was the leader of the Soviet Union from the mid-1920s until his death in 1953. He worked among other original members of the Bolsheviks, such as Lenin and Trotsky. He is now well known for ordering political purges and imprisoning millions of people in the Gulag prison camps. The number of deaths caused by Stalin's regime is still debated, but it is largely agreed to be in the millions.

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which TWO of the following statements best describe the central ideas of the text?
 - A. Nicholas II was not a man suited to become the czar, nor did he want this power.
 - B. While the people thought of the czar almost like a god, Nicholas II considered himself more like an instrument of the people's will.
 - C. Had the Japanese not attacked Port Arthur, Russia would have likely won the Russo-Japanese War quickly and easily.
 - D. The strange holy man Rasputin single-handedly proved to be the fall of the House of the Romanovs.
 - E. The Romanovs' obliviousness to Russian poverty and suffering, combined with a number of bloody tragedies, contributed to their unpopularity.
 - F. The Bolsheviks were reluctant to permanently remove the Romanovs, considering their very new grasp on power and the people's love for the royals.

2. PART B: Which TWO of the following quotes best support the answer to Part A?
 - A. "Nicholas II, by contrast, was one of history's most dismal examples of the wrong man, at the wrong time, and in the wrong place. His reign seemed to be almost predetermined to end in a momentous tragedy." (Paragraph 6)
 - B. "They had ruled Russia for more than 280 years, and most of their subjects—as the czar's German-born wife, Alexandra, wrote to British Queen Victoria—practically worshipped them "as divine beings." (Paragraph 9)
 - C. "What the last Romanov did not have was an understanding and respect for the dirt-poor and frequently hungry peasants who eked out a meager living, and it was part of Nicholas' misfortune that his abysmal insensitivity and weakness were revealed on the very day after his coronation." (Paragraph 12)
 - D. "In February 1904—less than four months later—Japan launched a surprise attack that destroyed a Russian fleet and threatened to seize Port Arthur, Russia's only warm-water port. In the war that followed, the Japanese army decisively won every battle..." (Paragraph 24)
 - E. "Nicholas also showed a puzzling disregard for a major uproar in his own court over the growing influence of a mystical faith healer named Grigori Rasputin." (Paragraph 27)
 - F. "After the control over the country shifted from a provisional government to Lenin's radicals (the Bolsheviks), the royal couple, their son and four daughters, and the ex-czar's personal physician and three servants, were moved to a house in Yekaterinburg, a town beyond the Urals." (Paragraph 30)

3. Why does the author likely include the first paragraph in the text?
- A. The author likely included the first paragraph to further the argument that the czar's death is the most important event in his life.
 - B. The author likely included the first paragraph to frame the text detailing Nicholas II's life as a sort of tale of tragedy, culminating in his and his family's terrible murders.
 - C. The author likely included the first paragraph as a sort of red herring, considering the mystery of the missing Romanovs and the potential for the continuing line.
 - D. The author likely included the first paragraph to acknowledge that not only Nicholas II and his family died, but innocent servants and a doctor as well.
4. Which of the following statements best describes the relationship between the Russian people and the czar?
- A. The czar was considered to be an almost god-like figure to the peasant Russian majority; this status crumbled following many tragedies, namely Bloody Sunday.
 - B. The Russian people hated the czar, envious of his happiness and his wealth, and considered him an unfair leader; the majority of Russians wanted him assassinated.
 - C. The czar was thought of as the very embodiment of the empire; if he suffered, they believed the country and empire would as well, and therefore they never considered hurting him.
 - D. The royal elite believed the peasant Russian majority worshipped the czar almost like a god; in reality, the Russian people acted in this way because it was the only way to convince the czar to help them.
5. How did the relationship between Rasputin and the Nicholas II and Alexandra contribute to the downfall of the Romanovs?
- A. The Russian nobles resented Rasputin's power to cure Nicholas II's hemophiliac son; they were jealous of the czar's and czarina's gratitude towards to this strange, peasant healer, and they thought the royal couple was lowering themselves.
 - B. Rasputin, as the Russian people saw him, was a fake; the people lost faith in their rulers' intelligence for thinking Rasputin could cure their precious czarovich (the heir).
 - C. The nobility and Russian people were suspicious of and hated the mystic's influence on the royal couple; even after Rasputin's death, the czar's reputation was still damaged.
 - D. Rasputin became the savior of the people as the healer of their empire's heir, ironically undermining the Romanovs' own power.

6. What does the quote from Trotsky's *Diary in Exile* reveal about his and his like-minded comrades' point of view regarding the fate of the Romanovs? Cite evidence from the text to support your answer.
