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HUM 252H – Rasputin and His Russia

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I Want to Believe: The Impact of Grief, Isolation, and Religion on
Alexandra Feodorovna

It is a human trait to see what we wish to see, and to fervently believe in patterns and formulas. For an ordinary person, this tendency can lead to personal tragedy, but for the ruler of a country, if left unchecked, these tendencies can result in catastrophe on a national level. For Alexandra Feodorovna, born into a marriage and culture obsessed with death, raised by the pathologically morbid Queen Victoria, and married into a grieving, shaky dynasty, the devastating combination of isolation and progressive religious fanaticism would bring about her doom, and deliver the final blow to the failing Russian autocracy.

On July 1, 1862, Princess Alice of Great Britain and Prince Ludwig of Hesse were married, not in a sumptuous ceremony, but privately, with the celebrations darkened by the recent death of Prince Albert, Queen Victoria's husband and Alice's father. Queen Victoria wore black at the ceremony; most of the guests were also in deep mourning for Albert, whose sickness began during Alice and Ludwig's engagement period (King 3-4). Victoria's inconsolable behavior is well documented: Her mourning built up an entire culture entrenched in despondency, memorials, black crêpe, imposing an expectation of years of somber grieving for the death of a loved one. Victoria withdrew from society into her private world of sorrow, a chosen isolation that both her daughter and granddaughter, Alexandra, would later follow.

The marriage of Alice and Ludwig was haunted by further misfortune: Internal family rifts caused by the Franco-Prussian war, financial hardship, and extreme differences in temperament between the couple all led to Alice retreating into a cloistered world of her children, intellectual pursuits, and melancholy. She was an outsider in her husband's country, despite her best efforts to fit in (King 10). Like her mother, Alice's life was ordered by grief, chief among her losses being that of her son, Friedrich, who died at the age of three after falling twenty feet from a window. He regained consciousness, but could not survive the internal bleeding caused by his hemophilia (Alice 36). Female royalty bore a double tragedy with hemophilia: To give birth to a longed-for and needed heir to the throne, only to have his death sentence signed by the very body that bore him, brought shame, guilt, and suffering on the mother as well as her child.

Five years after Friedrich's tragic death, four of Alice's remaining five children caught diphtheria. The youngest daughter, Marie, died from the horrific complications of the disease, leaving Alice, already in a weakened state from her inconsolable grief and endless nights of nursing, utterly vulnerable. She also contracted diphtheria and died on the anniversary of Prince Albert's death, just one month after her first child fell ill (Baker). These sorrows clouded Alexandra's early life, setting a tone of morbid fatalism that would guide many of her later decisions (Buxhoeveden Ch. 2).

The socially required grief of the Victorian period is partially to blame for a retardation in Alexandra's emotional maturity, since the social mores surrounding "proper" mourning meant that Victoria, Alice, and Alexandra spent the majority of their lives in mourning—from six months for the death of a brother or sister to a year for one's children, to two full years for the death of a husband, complete with a black veil worn over the face

for three months. Additionally, all mirrors in the home were covered in black fabric—a tradition appropriated from the Jewish practice of *shiva*. Mourning affected more than just what a person wore; it was also customary for a woman in mourning to retreat completely from society for up to a year (White 308-310). As a result, Alexandra was not given time or encouragement to pursue self-discovery. Her life, both as a member of the aristocracy, and as a witness to two lifetimes of tragedy, did not truly belong to her. One could argue that, symbolically, her mother and her grandmother were the only mirrors she was allowed. It is in this morose and oppressive atmosphere that Alexandra, future Empress of Russia, must be understood.

Alexandra spent a great deal of her life under the tutelage and influence of Queen Victoria, a woman who never stopped grieving for her husband, or her daughter. Their rooms were left exactly as they were when they died; Victoria never took off her mourning garb; she slept under a portrait of Albert on his deathbed; her extreme melancholy became part and parcel of the lessons in *noblesse oblige* that she passed down to Alexandra (King 20-21). This combination of perpetual gravity and repressive duty was toxic to the sensitive and shy nature of a princess who had already lost her mother and two brothers at an early age.

As Alexandra grew older, she had a brief chance to break out of this environment—she was a beautiful girl, ready to be a part of the world of royal engagements, weddings, and balls. In particular, she was thrilled with her first adult trip to St. Petersburg in 1889, where the allure and spectacle of the Russian court kindled a romance between the sensitive princess and the handsome, engaging heir to the throne of Russia, Nicholas II

(King 30). While her shyness and upbringing still prevented her ease in society, those she met were charmed by her wistfulness, beauty, and charity (Buxhoevden Ch. III).

In 1892, however, another tragedy tore apart the fragile security she had rebuilt as a young woman: Her beloved father collapsed during a luncheon she was hosting, and died a few days later without regaining consciousness. Alexandra was inconsolable in her grief (King 39-40). This was the final blow to her ability to move comfortably in normal, public society—her serious demeanor and behaviors would be thereafter seen as a sign of coldness and reproach to the society of St. Petersburg. According to her lady-in-waiting, Baroness Sophie Buxhoeveden, “Her father's death was perhaps the greatest sorrow of Princess Alexandra's life. For years she could not speak of him, and long after, when she was in Russia, anything that reminded her of him would bring her to the verge of tears” (Ch. 3).

Tsarevich Nicholas fell in love with a beautiful princess who had not yet become an orphan, and perhaps, in part, it was the distance from her memories that Alexandra sought in her betrothal to Nicholas. The Russian court, and the undeniable love of Nicholas were a way for her to start over, out of the shadow of death that lingered over her family.

Alas, the Russian court was its own labyrinth of custom and suspicion, and was still reeling from the whiplash effect of Tsar Alexander II's assassination, followed by the retraction of his reforms by his successor, Alexander III. Alexandra and Nicholas were engaged for a scant seven months when Nicholas' father died, and instead of having a long period to prepare for her new position as wife of the heir to the Russian throne, Alexandra was plunged headlong into a world she barely understood, with a husband who was equally unprepared to rule. Their marriage took place one month after the death of

Alexander III, and their coronation was just six months later (King 77, 103). All told, Alexandra had a little more than a year to convert to a new faith, and learn two new languages, along with the often Byzantine Russian court customs, expectations, and obligations that accompanied her new position. The swiftness of her movement from a happily engaged princess to the exalted, but lonely Empress of All Russia made it extraordinarily difficult for her to make friends or allies among her new court and society (Buxhoeveden Ch.6).

Alexandra was also isolated by how radically different the court at St. Petersburg was compared to the reserve and formality of both the British court of her grandmother, and the Hessian court of her father. What was so enchanting as a young girl when she first visited, was daunting to a woman thrust into a position of immense power, influence, and expectation. Her mother-in-law, the Dowager Empress Maria Feodorovna, contributed to this alienation by leaving Alexandra to fend for herself, instead of mentoring her in her new role. Maria was a vibrant woman who relished every party, engagement, and social activity that Alexandra did not, and who did not wish to step back from society after her husband died (Beeche). Unlike the expectations of profound mourning in Alexandra's upbringing, Maria had no intention of burying herself away after Alexander the III's death, which must have seemed a shocking breach of propriety to the new Tsarina, brought up as she was in the black crêpe of Queen Victoria's world. In addition to this offense, Russian court etiquette meant that Maria, as Dowager Empress, took precedence over Alexandra in formal situations. Tsar Nicholas escorted Maria to balls and functions, while Alexandra followed behind (King 88).

Maria's dismissal of Alexandra had profound repercussions. As Alexandra withdrew from Russian society, she drew the Tsar and her children closer to her, wielding influence in the only sphere she could. In addition to the insults and slights caused by her mother-in-law, Alexandra was in confinement for much of St. Petersburg's social seasons for the first seven years of her reign, as her rapid succession of pregnancies and uncommon decision to nurse her children herself handicapped her ability to function within the Russian court (King 122).

In 1901, Queen Victoria died, and with her, the counsel and wisdom that Alexandra trusted. Her death, in a long succession of deaths and mourning, brought the Empress to her knees. From this point forward, Alexandra was never encouraged to reconcile being a public figurehead with her internal, private reserve and lifetime of gravity (Tomaszewski 56; King 91).

As her seeming coldness and unsocial behavior pushed the Russian court away from her, she clung even more tightly to the rituals of the Russian Church, burying herself in the mysticism of her faith, spending hours at a time in earnest prayer for an heir—a sign to her and to the Russian people that she was worthy of their trust and blessed by God. It should be no surprise that the predictable, protective rituals of the Russian Orthodox Church appealed to a woman who was lonely and frightened in a country that was suspicious of her. One gets the impression Alexandra believed her conversion would be admired and respected far more than it was. Instead, we see letters like that of Baron de Rothschild to Serge Witte, Russia's envoy to France, contemptuously stating that: "Great events, especially of an internal nature, were everywhere preceded by a bizarre mysticism at the court of the ruler" (Rosenthal 12).

Alexandra's conversion from the Lutheran church to Russian Orthodoxy was not a decision she took lightly. She almost decided to not marry Nicholas, the man she loved, because she could not reconcile herself to changing her religion. However, once she made her choice, she devoted herself to her new faith with fervor and zeal, taking for granted that what was so vital for her was shared with equal conviction by the Russian people (King 162; Ashton 3). She must have also taken a particular comfort in the theology of the Russian Orthodox Church which emphasizes holiness and redemption through suffering, believing her earthly trials and sorrows were "but the preparation to yonder real life where all will be made clear to us" (qtd. in Ashton 19).

Alexandra had Tsar Nicholas venerate a mystic named Serafim of Sarov, and bathed in the pool where the man had once bathed and prayed, all in the hope that her faith would be strong enough to produce the miracle of a son (Radzinsky 66; Buxhoeveden Ch. 6). The intensity and outpouring of religious emotion found in the Orthodox church filled a desperate need in Alexandra for companionship, and assurance that she did not need to worry about worldly approval, so long as she had God's (Buxhoeveden Ch. 10). The Empress' faith allowed her to take comfort in being alone, since she could use her spirituality to believe she was above petty social expectations, and instead focus on the life to come. The outpouring of her sensitive spirit had few safe outlets, and consequently her family and her faith were the only havens in which she felt sure of herself.

It was not just the Russian Orthodox Church that called to Alexandra, however. During this period, she was also exposed to a religious movement called Spiritualism through two of the only friends she made at court, the Montenegrin sisters, which expanded Alexandra's reliance on mysticism and trust in spiritual advisors (Simanovitch

16). The late 1800s saw an unprecedented rise in interest in this religious movement, often to the point of obsession. To better understand the environment that contributed to an inherited melancholy that permeated three generations of women and its devastating culmination in the last Empress of Russia, we need to briefly examine this fascinating cultural phenomenon.

Spiritualism is borne out of the Occult, in its most traditional sense of hidden forms of knowledge, and can be defined simply as the belief that the spirits of the dead can communicate with the living. The first accepted instance of Spiritualist behavior is dated to 1848, when Kate and Maggie Fox allegedly contacted spirits in their New York home who had been attempting to communicate via rapping and knocking (Goldsmith 28). During a time period when men dominated pulpits and seminaries, a religious movement sparked by two teenage girls is extraordinary. Their experiences came at an ideal time and place—just after the second Great Awakening, and in New York, which was called the “burned-over district” by revivalists, because of how many revivals crossed back and forth across the state. It was on-trend and desirable to be deeply and emotionally connected to the divine.

Spiritualism allowed an unprecedented opportunity for women or young girls to be in control of a situation in a world that was set up to take away their agency. If one could connect to the spirits of the departed as a medium, one could be in control of séances, a voice of authority and leadership, sought out for divine advice and guidance (Tromp 68).

This fervent religious movement spread globally, spurred onward by the new rage in mourning after Prince Albert’s death, and the desire to connect with one’s dearly departed. By the late 1850s, Spiritualism was firmly entrenched in Russia, with the first group of believers centered around the home and salon of Count Grigory Kushelev-

Bezborodko (Rosenthal 136). For many upper-class Russians, this revival of Occultism was due to a cultural shift towards distrust of the Russian Orthodox Church, which was no longer seen as adequate to meet the needs of an industrialized, unstable country and her people (Rosenthal i). For Alexandra, however, the heady influence of Spiritualism simply intensified her already fervent religious expressions, particularly after the birth of her longed-for heir, Alexei.

Imagine then the dismay of Nicholas and Alexandra when they found out that instead of the assurance and relief an heir promised, their son had inherited a death sentence in the form of hemophilia, and for his mother, another black mark against her character in Russian eyes, since the disease was known even then to be passed down through the mother's side. The Tsar and Tsarina made a fatal decision: They kept their son's illness a secret (Buxhoeveden Ch.14).

It is at the discovery of her son's disease that Alexandra's morbidity, isolation, and religious fervor collide in the strange person of Grigori Rasputin. It was historically common for both members of the Russian court and the Tsar to consult mystics, wise men, and "holy fools." While we might be baffled by how an illiterate peasant with a gift for horse-whispering and hypnotism made a meteoric rise from the poverty of Siberia to the halls of the Winter Palace, Rasputin's access to the throne was in character and keeping with Russian aristocratic tradition (Ivanov 104, 358). His influence was also considerably helped along through a cultural climate in which any ability to reach beyond the mortal coil was desired and sought after. Combine this with the desperate need of a lonely empress to save her sick son, and one can see how appealing, and even necessary, a holy fool like Rasputin was to the royal family.

In 1905, when Tsarevich Alexei was just a year old, Rasputin arrived in St. Petersburg and was introduced to the royal family. His letter of introduction to the royal couple assured them he was a man of the people, and that Russia herself spoke through him—all in keeping with Alexandra's convictions that the true soul of Russia was found in the peasants and everyday people, and not in the aristocracy, as represented by the Dowager Empress (King 169). It is not known when he was first taken into the confidences of the Tsar and Tsarina, but his ability to heal the Tsarevich, however he managed it, was enough to convince Alexandra that his presence was required (Fuhrmann 43).

Because Nicholas and Alexandra were determined to keep their son's illness a secret, wild rumors began to spread regarding Rasputin, which he encouraged through his own shameless behavior; that he was behaving inappropriately with the young Grand Duchesses; that he manipulated the Tsar's decisions; that he was the illicit lover of Alexandra herself (Simanovitch 56-58). Alexandra was offended and hurt by these rumors, but because she chose to reject Russian society, she did not have friends who knew her character well enough to defend it. Her disastrous response was to scornfully ignore the slander, believing it was beneath her notice (Furhmann 62). She refused to realize that a ruler is not protected from her people simply by virtue of being a ruler. Alexandra chose to believe that only the corrupt, vain aristocracy believed such terrible lies; that the real heart of Russia, found in the peasant class and the person of Rasputin, still loved and honored their Tsar and Tsarina (Hosking 86; Tomaszewski 57). Her dogmatic Orthodoxy was her refuge, and ultimately, her condemnation. There was no place in the secular, proletariat revolution for the profoundly Orthodox, grave, and tragically inflexible Empress.

Alexandra Feodorovna was reared to believe in the divine right to rule, in ritual and etiquette above all. Considering this, her dogmatic approach to the Russian court is not surprising. She was frequently stubborn, and took offense easily at the slightest breaches in protocol. Alexandra wanted to believe the Russian people loved her and Tsar Nicholas because they were their divinely appointed rulers. The Russian people, as represented by the Bolsheviks, wanted to believe that the Tsarina was another decadent Marie Antoinette, that every misstep she made was proof of her aristocratic or bourgeoisie decadence, and that she and Tsar Nicholas deserved to die *because* they were their rulers (Trotsky 69; Simanovitch 224).

Alexandra, Nicholas, and the autocratic ruling system can be seen as icons of the Russian Orthodox Church, a physical representation of Divine Will. The coup d'état of 1917 didn't merely remove one government for another. Rather, by murdering the royal family, these new iconoclasts systematically destroyed connections and veneration of their autocratic past and Orthodox faith. After a lifetime of tragedy and sorrow, Alexandra died as she lived: Isolated, rejected, and frightened, condemned by her own history to repeat it.

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