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A PEOPLE'S TRAGEDY

A HISTORY OF
THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION



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officers) largely precluded this. During the tour Nicholas filled his diary with the same banal and trivial entries with which he usually filled his diary at home: terse notes on the weather, the distances covered each day, the times of landfall and departure, the company at meals, and so on. It seems that nothing in his travels had encouraged him to broaden his outlook and observations on life. The one lasting effect of the tour was unfortunate. At Otsu in Japan he narrowly escaped an attempt on his life by a deranged terrorist. The experience left him with an ingrained hatred of the Japanese (he called them 'monkeys', *makakt*), and it is often argued that this made him vulnerable to the influence of those at his court who promoted the disastrous war with Japan in 1904-5.

Had Alexander lived three score years and ten then the fate of the Russian Empire might have been very different. But as fortune would have it, he died from kidney disease in 1894 at the age of only forty-nine. As the crowd of relatives, physicians and courtiers gathered around the death-bed of the great autocrat, Nicholas burst into tears and exclaimed pathetically to his cousin, Alexander, 'What is going to happen to me and to all of Russia? I am not prepared to be a Tsar. I never wanted to become one. I know nothing of the business of ruling. I have no idea of even how to talk to the ministers.'¹⁸ Louis XVI, with whom Nicholas had much in common, made a strikingly similar remark when he first learned in 1775 that he was to be the King of France.

The reign of Russia's last Tsar began disastrously. A few days after the coronation, in May 1896, a celebratory fair was organized on the Khodynka Field, a military training ground just outside Moscow. By the early morning some half a million people had already assembled, expecting to receive from their new Tsar gifts of souvenir tankards and biscuits embossed with the date and the occasion. Vast quantities of free beer and sausage were to be distributed. As more people arrived, a rumour went round that there would not be enough gifts for everyone. The crowd surged forward. People tripped and stumbled into the military ditches, where they were suffocated and crushed to death. Within minutes, 1,400 people had been killed and 600 wounded. Yet the Tsar was persuaded to continue with the celebrations. In the evening, while the corpses were carted away, he even attended a ball given by the French Ambassador, the Marquis de Montebello. During the next few days the rest of the scheduled festivities — banquets, balls and concerts — went ahead as if nothing had happened. Public opinion was outraged. Nicholas tried to atone by appointing

a former Minister of Justice to look into the causes of the catastrophe. But when the Minister found that the Grand Duke Sergius, Governor-General of Moscow and the husband of the Empress's sister, was to blame, the other Grand Dukes protested furiously. They said it would undermine the principles of autocracy to admit in public the fault of a member of the imperial family. The affair was closed. But it was seen as a bad omen for the new reign and deepened the growing divide between the court and society. Nicholas, who increasingly believed himself to be ill-fated, would later look back at this incident as the start of all his troubles.¹⁹

Throughout his reign Nicholas gave the impression of being unable to cope with the task of ruling a vast Empire in the grips of a deepening revolutionary crisis. True, only a genius could have coped with it. And Nicholas was certainly no genius.* Had circumstances and his own inclinations been different, he might have saved his dynasty

by moving away from autocratic rule towards a constitutional regime during the first decade of his reign, while there was still hope of appeasing the liberals and isolating the revolutionary movement. Nicholas had many of the personal qualities required to be a good constitutional monarch. In England, where one needed only to be a 'good man' in order to be a good king, he would have made an admirable sovereign. He was certainly no dimmer than his look-alike cousin, George V, who was a model of the constitutional king. Nicholas was mild-mannered, had an excellent memory and a perfect sense of decorum, all of which made him potentially ideal for the largely ceremonial tasks of a constitutional monarch. But Nicholas had not been born to that role: he was the Emperor and Autocrat of All the Russias.⁺ Family tradition and pressure from the crown's traditional allies compelled him not only to reign, but to rule. It would not do for a Romanov to play the role of a ceremonial monarch, leaving the actual business of government to the bureaucracy. Nor would it do to retreat before the demands of the liberals. The Romanov way, in the face of political opposition, was to assert the 'divine authority' of the absolute monarch, to trust in the 'historic bond between the Tsar and the people', and to rule with

* There used to be a nice Soviet joke that the Supreme Soviet had decided to award the Order of the Red Banner to Nicholas II posthumously 'for his services to the revolution'. The last Tsar's achievement, it was said, was to have brought about a revolutionary situation.

+ The full titles of Nicholas II were: Emperor and Autocrat of All the Russias; Tsar of Moscow, Kiev, Vladimir, Novgorod, Kazan, Astrakhan, Poland, Siberia, the Tauric Chersonese and Georgia; Lord of Pskov; Grand Prince of Smolensk, Lithuania, Volhynia, Podolia and Finland; Prince of Estonia, Livonia, Courland and Semigalia, Samogatia, Belostok, Karelia, Tver, Yugria, Perm, Viatka, Bulgaria and other lands; Lord and Grand Prince of Nizhnyi Novgorod and Chernigov; Ruler of Riazan, Polotsk, Rostov, Yaroslavl', Belo-Ozero, Udoria, Obdoria, Kondia, Vitebsk, Mstislavl and all the Northern Lands; Lord and Sovereign of the Iverian, Kartalinian and Kabardinian lands and of the Armenian provinces; Hereditary Lord and Suzerain of the Circassian Princes and Highland Princes and others; Lord of Turkestan; Heir to the Throne of Norway; Duke of Schleswig-Holstein, Stormarn, the Dithmarschen and Oldenburg.

force and resolution. In spite of her Anglo-German background, the Empress adopted with a vengeance all the medieval traditions of Byzantine despotism, and constantly urged her mild-mannered husband to be more like Ivan the Terrible and Peter the Great. The veneration which Nicholas felt for his father, and his own growing ambition to rule in the manner of his Muscovite ancestors, made it inevitable that he would endeavour to play the part of a true autocrat. As he warned the liberal nobles of Tver shortly after his coronation, he saw it as his duty before God to 'maintain the principle of autocracy just as firmly and unflinchingly as it was preserved by my unforgettable dead father'.²⁰

But Nicholas had been blessed with neither his father's strength of character nor his intelligence. That was Nicholas's tragedy. With his limitations, he could only play the part of an autocrat, meddling in (and, in the process, disrupting) the work of government without bringing to it any leadership. He was far too mild-mannered and shy to command any real authority among his subordinates. Being only five feet seven inches