

The Romanoffs You've Never Read About

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Grand Duchess Maria of Russia believes we need the courage to ask each other for forgiveness

In this year of the 100th anniversary of the Russian Revolution and of the abdication of the last Russian tsar, the Head of the House of Romanoff, Grand Duchess Maria of Russia, discusses the history and meaning of these events with *Rossiiskaia Gazette*.



The year 2017 is the 100th anniversary of the revolution and of the abdication of the tsar. The figure of the last emperor continues to loom large in the popular imagination. Public opinion about him swings back and forth like a pendulum. Some have long been certain that he was a weak-willed ruler who brought ruin to his country. Others point to the remarkable economic upturn and expansion that characterized Russia during his reign.

Grand Duchess Maria of Russia: I cannot accept the accounts we hear all the time about the emperor being weak-willed. He was a man of convictions and integrity, and he stayed true to his convictions and remained a man of integrity until the very end. He followed a path of conscience and duty. And all these accounts that paint him as far too soft or as a pawn who could be manipulated by one group or another are utterly dismissible. Of course, he had advisors, like any political figure does, as even presidents today have. One of the most exceptional of his advisors was Peter Stolypin. So exceptional was he that the people who wanted to bring down the Imperial government attempted to eliminate Stolypin from the political stage and murder him.

See also:



[Does the abdication of Nicholas II, which he signed in pencil, have any legal force?](#)

Unfortunately, they succeeded, and this was an enormous loss for the country. And none of the other advisors around the emperor could offer him the same kind of fresh ideas for addressing Russia's problems, despite their fervent desire and conscientious regard for their duty to serve tsar and country.

But of course, one must not forget that these were times of very active political agitation against the emperor and in favour of revolution—both inside Russia and abroad. And the emperor's reputation was consequently negatively affected by it. As so often happens, unfortunately, when something slanderous is concocted—a harmful myth or an outright lie—it tends to spread far and

wide, because it suits the very people who concocted it. And it is only now, when we have the opportunity to go into the archives and learn the facts directly from the documents, that we can see that not everything was as some have claimed. Of course, the emperor was surrounded by many who helped create some of these negative myths. And whether they intended it or not, they helped cast a shadow over the emperor.

And today there are myths of another kind swirling around the emperor. For example, some have now started to claim that the emperor's abdication was not legally valid or faked. When I am asked what I think about this, I direct them straight to the archives.

You can see everything you need to see there. You can even see how he made changes to the text of the abdication. The claim that the abdication never happened is born of a quest for "new theories" and of a wish to attract attention to oneself: I am the kind of person who tends to be cautious about so-called new discoveries anyway, but this claim—this is just pure fantasy. We knew everything we needed to know about it even in Soviet times.

It's more important today to consider instead the role played by those who convinced the tsar to abdicate. I of course consider them to be the most guilty ones. The emperor agreed to abdicate only because those around him were saying: sign, or blood will flow. And he very much wanted to avoid that. He also thought that by abdicating he might avoid a revolution. And he was presented by those around him with only one way to save the situation—abdication. The poor emperor! The poor man! So far from home, so far from his family.... And even some members of the Imperial Family urged him to abdicate, and he took their views into consideration. But whatever else may be true, one can never accuse him of not loving the Russian people. In no way whatsoever. Never! Even when it may be hard for us today to understand the actions of Russia's rulers, we would do well to remember that much of what they did do, they did out of love. All of us do the same thing sometimes—we often make mistakes out of love.

Right now in Russia there is a heated debate going on over the film by Aleksei Uchitel, *Mathilda*, about the affair of the future Emperor Nicholas II and the ballerina Mathilda Kshesinskaya. Some consider this tale merely an interesting side story about the tsar, but others consider it a deeply offensive portrayal of the tsar, especially in this year of the anniversary of his abdication.

Grand Duchess Maria of Russia: Of course, we in our family think it unfortunate that this story has been made the basis of this biographical film about Nicholas II. But to raise such a fuss about it or to prohibit the showing of it is, in my view, utterly unnecessary. All this will do is increase popular interest in the film. So I would recommend not giving this film as much attention as it has thus far received.

See also:



[Spring 1917 in Tsaritsyn, a city in joy and jubilation](#)

And should we reproach the emperor for this affair? Well, there was, we know, an affair between the emperor and Mathilda Feliksovna. She wrote about it herself years later. And I remember meeting and talking to her once. Though I was very young at the time, both she and my parents told me how things were then. She always carried with her a small photograph of the emperor. But to besmirch the emperor by alleging that he was still involved with her after his marriage to the empress is utter nonsense and untrue. Quite the opposite. As we all known, everyone reproached him for being too much of a loyal family man!

And as you know, there is another no less heated, and much more important, debate going on just now over the fate of the remains of the last emperor and his family and servants. The Church has taken a rather cautious position on this question.

Grand Duchess Maria of Russia: Of course, the Church, as an eternal institution, cannot but take this matter very seriously. And it has more than once in the past been criticized for deciding the question about the sanctity of relics too quickly. But now it is being criticized for doing the opposite. Both the Church and the Romanoff family want the remains of the Imperial family to be identified and buried. But you'll agree that it would be a very bad thing indeed if at some later date other remains were found and discovered to be the actual remains of the Imperial family. After all, the remains of the royal martyrs are holy relics, which are to be venerated by the Church and all the faithful. The relics of saints are something sacred, and so the people who approach and venerate them must not have the slightest doubt about their authenticity. But when politics intervene in the process, it often shows itself as an effort to "speed things up." And when that happens, something that should serve as an instrument of reconciliation and forgiveness sometimes becomes instead a source of conflict and dissension. May God let this matter be

resolved soon and this debate resolved. And if it is determined that these are indeed the remains of the Imperial Family, may they be treated with the respect and veneration they are due.



Grand Duchess Maria of Russia at the State Archives, attending the opening of the exhibition "The Last Empress," dedicated to the wife of Emperor Nicholas II, Empress Alexandra Feodorovna. Photo: Arkady Kolybalov / RG.

The Director of the Hermitage Museum, Mikhail Piotrovsky, says that the most popular of its exhibits abroad are those relating in any way to Russia's tsars. They always attract huge lines, and visitors to these exhibits love to hear tour guides talk about Catherine the Great or Peter the Great or Nicholas and Alexandra. Russia's tsars like nothing else help project a positive image of Russia. Piotrovsky explains this by pointing to the popular image of the

grand and glittering tsars and their court. And the style of the Romanoffs was impeccable and universally appreciated. Interest in the Romanoffs in Russia, as measured by all the films and documentaries, also runs very deep. And this interest is not rooted merely in some casual curiosity in the private lives of these historical figures, surely, but in a genuine desire to reconsider the way we have viewed our tsars in the past. And so, I wonder if one could say that the monarchy has symbolically become a kind of national asset?

Grand Duchess Maria of Russia: Yes, of course one can. One need only look at those countries, say Britain, for example, that still have a monarchy, and you'll see right away that its monarch is an important national asset. There you see a continuing display of respect for monarchy, for Queen Elizabeth II herself, and for the monarchical system generally. And so Britain provides an especially clear example of how to preserve traditions and foster pride in the country's ancient institutions.

And millions of people come to the UK to have themselves photographed in front of the symbols of Britain's monarchy. And just think how the souvenir shops profit from the sale of the various symbols and emblems of the monarchy!

Probably underlying this interest in monarchy is the natural human desire for grandeur and mystery. Very much like at Christmas or New Year's. And we must recognize that the grandeur and mystique of monarchy in past centuries is precisely the kind of thing that humanity continues to need, even today.

I am glad that the Romanoffs made a contribution to the grandeur and mystery of monarchy during their three centuries on the throne. These centuries produced many things to be proud of. The country was adorned with innumerable monuments of architecture and art which have enriched the culture and lives of people in Russia and around the world for many generations.

In the middle of the 20th century, unfortunately, there was a tendency to discard some of this aesthetic for grandeur and mystery, and to prefer instead the practical and, frankly, the ugly. And this new trend did nothing to elevate the human spirit, but rather only crushed it. No, it is essential, I think, to surround oneself with beauty and grandeur, which inspires and motivates one toward the Good, and fosters love for others. Beauty is always a path to love.

We should never forget, however, the mistakes that were made, as well. Every mistake is a lesson to learn from. Mistakes from the past teach us what to do and what not to do. And we learn, moreover, that we must forgive. Even so, it is this natural human craving for aesthetic beauty, grandeur, and mystery, so present in monarchy, that can prompt in us the quest for the Good.

How do the monarchs of Europe today feel about what happened to the Russian monarchy?

Grand Duchess Maria of Russia: The large family that was related to Queen Victoria—the ancestor of so many currently ruling monarchs and Heads of royal and imperial dynasties—was and remains, I think, shocked that a member of their broader royal family died so tragically, that he was murdered together with his family and children. Of course, each member of this broader royal family thought then, as now, about the interests of their own country first and foremost, but a family is a family, just the same. And for this sprawling royal family, this was a very painful event. I don't think that George V was at all indifferent to these events. And Queen Elizabeth II many years ago expressed her hope that she would one day be able to pay her respects to the remains of Nicholas II, after they had been found and positively identified.

We still have a Civil War in Russia—over our memory of the past: Who was right, the Reds or the Whites? How do we put an end to this Civil War?

Grand Duchess Maria of Russia: We have to find the courage and wisdom to forgive each other. And we need to establish a foundation for building mutual respect.

Both sides committed horrible acts. But if brothers do not love each other, then nothing good will come from our efforts. We cannot continue to live in this sad and sorrowful state, always in our hearts blaming the other side for the things they did. Even when the other side is blamed for good reason. Let's try instead to build love for the other side. Time has passed. The country needs us to establish peace and mutual understanding. And to do that, we must begin with good intentions.

See also:



[The site where Nicholas II's brother was executed has still not been found.](#)

No, we should not forget the things that happened. Every error, every mistake, I think, is a lesson for us. And one of the lessons is to learn to forgive the mistakes of others. And if we are people of faith, each of us with our own religious tradition, then we should all the more try to forgive each other, to extend a hand of friendship and kindness, and move forward together.

We have to learn not only how to forgive, but also how to ask for forgiveness. To have the courage to say: “Forgive us. We are also to blame.” I as a member of the Imperial House must be among the first to say: “In the name of God, forgive me. I am sure I have made mistakes. But we cannot turn the clock back. We can only move forward.”

We must have the courage to repent. Yes, courage, because to repent requires us to suppress our own pride. Some might say that doing so would be shameful and weak, but I say that it would actually be genuinely courageous—to overcome one’s own pride is to rise above oneself.

How much grief has this pride brought us! So it is all the more important to say: “Forgive me, accept my forgiveness, and let us work together for the good of our nation.”

The Key Question

How does the House of Romanoff help to increase the purpose and popular perception of monarchy in the life of modern Russia?

Grand Duchess Maria of Russia: Our position is that we do not involve ourselves whatsoever in politics, but rather we offer our support for our countrymen in every other way we can. We work to assure that our people do not forget their history and their traditions. We work to develop philanthropy and charity inside Russia, which, by the way, has always been important in Russia and which the Imperial family has always strongly supported.

I and my son have created the Imperial Foundation for Cancer Research, which is doing much to help the medical community battle this dreaded disease in our country. Much in Russia is of course being done to help those afflicted with cancer, but sometimes the doctors and researchers who are searching for new treatments are forgotten about. My son and I thought that it would be a useful contribution for us to make if we could help our doctors and other medical professionals find the means to support continuing medical training and the exchange of research and treatment discoveries in order to better battle this disease. This help could be important not only for cancer patients in our country, but around the world.

An Afterword To Our Interview

Unfortunately, the first thing that clings to the names of the Romanoffs today—like a pesky piece of adhesive tape—is the challenges that are often raised against their right to the succession to the throne. And this has been quite a vituperative matter for both sides of the debate. Yet this topic requires specialized knowledge which can get all too technical for the average person. Still, that you stand before a true grand duchess, someone who belongs to a royal family, is something you begin to feel almost immediately upon meeting her, even if you are not a royal genealogist: In her tone and intonation, which exudes kindness and decency. In her underlying optimism, rooted in a broad knowledge and perspective, which somehow stands in stark contrast to the almost universal proclivity these days for finding fault, blaming others, and gloominess. In her openness and her courage to think and speak boldly. In her ability to see past a worldview that has been deeply influenced by narrow Soviet and post-Soviet sociological perspectives. In her willingness to recognize the family as the heart and soul of the nation. In her proximity to so many different historical personages, whether it be Queen Elizabeth II or the unforgettable Mathilda Feliksovna—through personal knowledge or personal acquaintance. (And for us average moviegoers, we know only the character “Mathilda” from the film, but my interlocutor in this interview knew the actual “Mathilda Feliksovna.”) And, finally, in her regal dignity, witnessed by me only once before—in a documentary newsreel of the last tsar at the laying of the cornerstone of the Fedorovsky Cathedral. We need to listen to the last of the Romanoffs among us because of the unique perspective they have, which is discernible first and foremost in their capacity to preserve their individual view on the events and goings-on in this world. And the words “individual view” do not at all here connote “capriciousness” or the “imposition” of their point of view, but rather the opposite: a sense that the individual is a kind of universal principle, which lies at the very foundations of monarchy and of good government. And when the individual is most important in the eyes of the ruler—more important than institutions, procedures, or bureaucracies—then that ruler is most likely going to be a monarch, or someone who serves a monarch.

Photo Report: The Last Emperor of the Russian Empire, Nicholas II



Nicholas II after his abdication in March 1917 and exile to Siberia. Photo: Romanov Family Album.



Emperor Nicholas II and his daughters at the military field hospital. Photo: ITAR-TASS.



Grand Duchesses Maria, Olga, Anastasia and Tatiana during the house arrest in Tsarskoe Selo. Spring, 1917. Photo: Romanov Family Album.

<https://rg.ru/2017/05/14/velikaia-kniaginia-mariia-vladimirovna-ne-veriu-cto-nikolaj-by-slabyim-carem.html>