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Viktoriánský vliv na carský dvůr prostřednictvím rodinných
vztahů mezi anglickým a ruským panovnickým dvorem na
konci 19. století

Victorian Influence on the Russian Imperial Court Through
the Family Ties Between the English and Russian Royal
Houses at the End of the 19th century

Vypracovala: Alena Dufková, Aj-Sv, III. ročník
Vedoucí bakalářské práce: Mgr. Linda Kocmichová

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Abstract

This bachelor thesis aims to point out and describe the consequences of influence of both Victorianism and the person of Queen Victoria on the lifestyle at the Russian Imperial Court at the end of 19th and beginning of 20th century. It describes historical events which shaped Russia and focuses on family relations binding the Romanovs and the English ruling house. The thesis defines the meaning of Victorianism and determines the difference between mentality of Russian and English high Society. It relies on analysis of letters, diary entries and memoirs of the participants of the events mentioned. A brief description of post-Victorian relationship between the two countries concludes the thesis.

Anotace

Bakalářská práce si klade za cíl popsat a poukázat na následky vlivu viktoriánství a osoby královny Viktorie na životní styl ruského carského dvora na konci 19. a počátku 20. století. Líčí historické události, které formovaly Rusko, a soustředí se na rodinné vztahy mezi Romanovci a anglickým panovnickým dvorem. Práce definuje viktoriánství a ukazuje rozdíl v mentalitě ruské a anglické vysoké společnosti. Vychází z analýzy dopisů, deníkových záznamů a memoárů účastníků zmiňovaných událostí, objasňuje okolnosti, za nichž vnučka královny Viktorie, carevna Alexandra, nastoupila po boku cara Nikolaje II. na trůn, a její neúspěšné pokusy aplikovat viktoriánské standarty do života ruské aristokracie. Část práce se věnuje výchově carských dětí dle viktoriánských principů. Stručný popis vztahů mezi Ruskem a Anglií v post-viktoriánském období práci zakončuje.

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1. Introduction

The main interest of this thesis lies in research, identification and description of Victorian values and lifestyle on Russian imperial court life and its participants, which flourished due to a series of marriages that took place in the second half of the 19th century, bringing the two countries considerably close. Through diary entries and letters accessible, I shall attempt to reveal and describe the traits of character, which can only be called “Victorian”, within the figures of the Imperial family of Russia, most importantly the last Empress, as well as explore the events during which the bond between the two royal houses was formed and strengthened.

Considering the limited source, mostly due to a large part of correspondence having been burned by its participants at one time or another, I shall also rely on first-hand accounts of people of the Court, who had the opportunity to observe the members of the family on daily basis, and often lived with them in close proximity for years. In one of the chapters I touch upon the subject of autobiographies and epistolary literature, explaining the choice of material and the value and characteristics it holds.

The Victorian influence over the last Romanovs, however, reaches far beyond mere personality features. It manifested itself also in the matters of war time efforts, when many royal women took inspiration from the work of Florence Nightingale, ideas of marriage, which no longer loomed over royal heads as a loveless political institution only, or in education and upbringing. The latter was caused by the fashion of the day to hire English nannies, who imposed the basic rules and morals of their world into the heads of little Russian aristocrats. That all apart, the direct English heritage of the last Imperial children proved disastrous with a severe illness of haemophilia being passed on to the Tsesarevich from his great-grandmother, which later triggered a tragic chain of events leading up to the downfall of the Russian royal house at large. Such claim may appear to be too simplistic given the historical development of Russian Empire, which too I present, albeit only in form as complex as the format of the thesis allowed me. However, I intend to present intimate reasons for some of the decisions taken, and explain the vital role the influence of Queen Victoria both as a person and a representative of a specific 19th century culture, which fostered high ideas of morality and cultivated a sense of duty, over the last Empress, played, together with the physical ailment the Queen unknowingly transmitted to her descendants.

The idea of the thesis occurred to me during my extensive studies of the Russian Imperial family, which have dominated among my personal interests for years. Believing the English and Victorian influence over certain people being one of the major causes of the abrupt death of Russian monarchy, I would like to utilize this opportunity to explain my stance and perhaps provide a basic insight and understanding of significant historical events.

2. The Romanovs

The second and last ruling dynasty of Russia can be traced back to 14th century, when its members belonged among the aristocracy of the country. Through marriage they became direct relatives to the Tsar Ivan IV. Called "the Terrible", he ruled between the years 1547 and 1584, entering a matrimony with boyarina Anastasia Romanovna in the very first year of his reign. The choice of the bride would eventually prove crucial for Russia, as the first Romanov Tsar could support his claim to the throne as a son of Anastasia's nephew. Tsar Ivan died and was followed into the grave by his only son Fyodor I in 1598, the ancient ruling line of the Ruriks came to an end with their demise. The period between the death of Tsar Fyodor and the rise of the Romanovs in 1613 is commonly known as Смутное время, generally translated as "the Time of Troubles". During this relatively short span of time more than four pretenders claimed the throne, which led to several uprisings. The country was twice occupied by the Poles, who pillaged and burned wherever they set foot, and a great famine killed over one-third of Russian population. The nation was drowning in chaos, completely disorganized. In the search for a new monarch, who was to ensure improvement of the affairs, the final choice fell upon the House of Romanovs.

2.1. Rise to Power, Building the Romanov Empire

In the spring of 1613 Mikhail Fyodorovich Romanov¹, barely 16-years-old, was elected by a national assembly as a new Tsar.

"His young age ensured independence when confronted with intrigues and base actions of the Court.... He reigned assisted by his father who was named patriarch. The task before him was difficult. He had to re-establish order, reform the administration, recreate the financial system, draw up a budget and sign a peace treaty with Poland and Sweden." (MONTCLOSS, B. Moscow Splendours of the Romanovs. Skira, 2009: 17)

Intelligent and therefore doubtful, Mikhail may have been very apprehensive and reluctant about the turn of events that bestowed the crown upon him, however he proved to be an able ruler. When his son Alexei succeeded him in 1645, he continued his father's work by promulgating new law codes, among which the "Oulojenie" from 1649 "recorded the definite attachment of the peasant to the land, in other words, serfdom." (Montclos 2009: 17) Alexei displayed piousness and earned a nickname of "Meek". Yet his reign marked a schism between the Patriarch of the Orthodox Church and the monarch, concerning the introduction of amendments into the Russian liturgy, which resulted in significant changes

¹ Majority of people concerned in following pages were Russian either by birth or by marriage and as such their names are presented as true to their original form as possible, even though in direct quotes anglicized versions may appear. To prevent any confusion that may arise from different individuals of the same first name patronymic names, commonly used in Russia, are also given. They serve as an invaluable way of distinguishing one person from another by implying the identity of their father.

in the relationship between Church and State and ultimately led to the abolition of the patriarchate in Russia altogether. Perhaps the greatest contribution to the building of a new Empire Alexei ensured was the incorporation of Ukraine into the realm in 1645. (YERMILOVA, L. *The Last Tsar*. London: Sirocco, 2002: 8).

The achievements of the first Romanov rulers remain overshadowed in public mind by triumphs of their successor Pyotr I, who reigned at first alongside his brother Ivan² during the years 1682-1696, after which he emerged as the sole ruler, determined to transform Russia into a modern country and a power to be reckoned with. In his view the greatest setback Russia suffered was the absence of Baltic seaboard, which he viewed as an entry gate to the West. He seized the Baltic lands³ and established a new capital, St. Petersburg, on the Gulf of Finland. Strongly inspired by England and Netherlands Pyotr strived to completely reorganize the military and establish the navy, as well as to introduce many reforms to the life of ordinary Russians, for example he set up an administrative system of education, a poll-tax, and marriage by coercion on the part of parents or landlords was prohibited. (Yermilova 2002: 10) His plans were often achieved by sacrificing thousands of souls for the cause. For example the speedy construction of St. Petersburg, the new capital, claimed lives of hundreds of thousands peasants and ordinary workers, who died out of exhaustion, untended wounds sustained during the work, or from diseases spreading in the marshy region selected for the city. But Pyotr never looked back. He longed for an organized and prosperous country, but his inspiration by the West did not change his views on supreme autocracy, the God-given right of Russian rulers. His admiration towards England and the technical achievements only grew during his visit of the country in 1698.

"Although he never returned to England, Peter had enjoyed his taste of English life. He found there much that he liked: informality, a practical, efficient monarch and government, good drinking and good talk about ships, gunnery and fireworks... Peter was grateful and carried away the highest respect not only for English ship design and workmanship, but for the island as a whole." (MASSIE, R. K. *Peter the Great*. Suffolk: Cardinal, 1989: 216)

However, in spite of all the generously expressed admiration, Pyotr never even considered adopting English system of monarchy and division of power, believing he could achieve the same progress as the English while being an autocrat. For long years Pyotr remained the only Russian monarch who attempted to bring England and Russia into closer contact. Up until the second half of the 19th century both countries were mostly just carefully eyeing each other in fear the other one might become uncomfortably influential in international matters.

To common folk Pyotr seemed cruel and his reforms made little sense, which is why they were only accepted with great reluctance and sometimes not at all. In 1721 Pyotr

² Ivan Alexeievich (1666-1696) was elder brother of Pyotr's, however he was differently abled both physically and mentally. His reign was only symbolic and he died young.

³ Pyotr gained the Baltic upon winning the Great Northern War (1700-1721) against Sweden.

abandoned the traditional title of Tsar and proclaimed himself Emperor.⁴ From the broader political perspective Russia emerged in the East of Europe exactly as Pyotr had intended: a mighty realm with immense potential to outgrow other nations. Pyotr's rule prepared way to greatness for the Russian state, however his death in 1725 signalled a temporary end to his efforts. Pyotr died without a male heir⁵ and subsequent years witnessed several palace coups with both men and women siezing the crown only to be overthrown in a similar manner themselves.

Pyotr III's Romanov blood came from his mother, but it fell to his wife, the German Princess Sophie of Anhalt-Zernst-Dornburg, to rise above all others and continue to rule in the spirit of Pyotr the Great as Ekaterina II. She did so for 34 years. With the support of Imperial guards Ekaterina had her husband arrested and proclaimed herself Empress in 1762, both because of personal ambition and out of fear of being banished from Russia by her husband, with whom she shared an extremely strained, hateful relationship. Somehow childish and prudent Pyotr was later murdered, possibly on her order, while the official statement indicated that the Emperor died of haemorrhoids. Although German by birth, Ekaterina adopted the religion and culture of Russia with great dedication and passion. She did not lack ambition or vision, and was perhaps the first of her kind to understand that above all, the absolute power meant above all responsibility towards her subjects. She intended to issue laws that would further improve the living conditions of common people, and also realized the dangers of serfdom. "She repeatedly voiced the opinion that, if there were no steps taken towards the abolishment of peasants' enslavement, the State was bound for a crisis." (Yermilova 2002: 16) Ekaterina, however, bound her own hands, preventing herself from taking this vital step, by initiating a war with Ottoman Empire, for which she needed the support of aristocracy, who in their turn demanded even more control over the serfs. The Empress sacrificed her desire for abolishment of serfdom, gained the Crimea⁶ and with it an outlet to the Black and the Mediterranean Seas. As her power grew, so did her unpopularity. Instead of liberation her new laws increasingly oppressed the population. Rebellions troubled the country with people flocking to various leaders, among whom Yemelyan Pugachov boasted the greatest acclaim. His rebellion, fueled by promises of freedom to the serfs, assumed the scope of a veritable peasant revolt, and it took Catherine much time and effort to suppress it." (Yermilova 2002: 16)

Ekaterina longed to be recognized as an enlightened sovereign and her reign restored Russian greatness in the field of international politics. Within the country, however, it brought only more restrictions and introduced strict censorship. When she died of stroke in 1796 few mourned her passing, least of all her son Pavel. Since the time of Ekaterina the

⁴ After 1721 the correct way of adressing the Russian monarch was Emperor and his consort Empress. However the titles of Tsar and Tsaritsa, deeply rooted in consciouness of common people, would still be used on regular basis when indirectly referring to the monarch and his wife. The heir to the throne held the title of Tsesarevich, other male descendants of the Emperor bore the title of Grand Duke, female descendants and daughters-in-law that of Grand Duchess. In a hierarchy of European royal titles these figured higher than those of regular Princes and Princesses, which occasionally leads some authors to use a form "Grand Prince/Princess", which however is incorrect.

⁵ Pyotr had his only son Alexei executed for alleged treason in 1718.

⁶ Ekaterina annexed the Crimea in 1783, following the first Russo-Turkish war (1768-1774).

Romanovs strengthened the relationships with Germany more than any other country, an aspect brought on by the fact that all but one of Ekaterina's ruling descendants married German Princesses.

For most of his life Emperor Pavel I stood as a rival to his own mother, whom he loathed with a passion and she reciprocated. Mother and son clashed because of both family and political issues. Ekaterina took it upon herself to raise and educate Pavel's two eldest children, severing the ties between them and their parents almost completely. Moreover Pavel believed in a different form of autocracy than the one executed by Ekaterina. After her death he revoked the succession laws set by Pyotr I.⁷ and established a more traditional method of patrimony, passing the crown from father to son or the closest, eldest male relative. Pavel's hostility towards Ekaterina disclosed itself in his decision to completely omit the female line of the family from succession rights, the only possibility of a woman ruling Russia again was conditioned by a complete extinction of the male line. This decision was to cause great distress and worry to the last Empress over a hundred years later.

Emperor Pavel suffered from a mental disorder and due to his uncontrollable temper and emotional outbursts he soon found himself isolated.

"The emperor strove to put things in order by using his unlimited power. The fact is that his government bounds in anecdotal innovations... Emperor not only introduced ridiculous wigs in the army and tight-fitting footwear...but also stopped indulgence in luxury among officers of the Guards." (Yermilova 2002: 18)

Ekaterina's reputation had suffered badly with the common people, but she ensured the favour of those who actually mattered – the Guards and the aristocracy. Pavel failed to understand the true power behind the throne, humiliating the very people who put his mother in the centre of power. The murder of his unfortunate father forever loomed over him, justifying and encouraging deep mistrust in the Guards and he attempted no enterprise to win their affection or gratitude. Less than five years after his accession this mistake proved fatal, instigating a secret conspiracy among the guards regiments, resulting in Pavel's humiliation and murder by their hand in his own palace in the dead of the night on March 11/March 23 1801⁸. His eldest son Alexander was a part of the conspiracy, which among other reasons led to no punishment of the murderers. The official statement claimed Emperor Pavel died suddenly of apoplexy. (RADZINSKY, E. Alexander II. The Last Great Tsar. New York: Free Press, 2006: 17)

⁷ According to Pyotr's will the ruling Emperor could choose his successor rather than just leaving everything in hands of his own offspring.

⁸ Until February 1918 the Julian calendar was used in Russia. In the 19th century it lagged 12 days behind the Gregorian calendar in use in the West: by the 20th century the gap grew to 13 days. When possible in this thesis, events described in Russia are given two dates: the old style Russian date and its Western equivalent. When only one date is given, it is in the old Julian style, unless stated otherwise.

2.2. The Romanov Rulers in the First Half of 19th Century

Russia entered the 19th century with a new Tsar on the throne. His contemporaries perceived Alexander I as a sensitive man endowed with a bright mind and kind heart, as well as a love for peaceful, quiet life.

"In early days of his reign he sought to merge the fundamentals of monarchical power with the principles of freedom and equality. This programme took shape in 1804 and was the basis of his international policy. Alexander was carried away by his far-reaching plans for restructuring his empire and Europe on fundamentally new principles... He planned to draft laws to reconstructure the State and social system and improve education, production and culture." (Yermilova 2002: 19)

Alexander concerned himself with the ever-burning peasant question too, issuing a decree which permitted all those on estates to buy the land. This first step towards the freedom of serfs remained the last for a long time after. The political tension generated by Napoleon throughout Europe and the subsequent open war with Russia not only stalled any further plans for reform, it witnessed a change in Alexander's political inclinations and aspirations too. The "Patriotic war" broke out in 1812. After fierce fighting, at the battle of Borodino, the burning of Moscow, and a national uprising, Napoleon retreated, suffering a defeat. Alexander felt disappointed with Napoleon and the whole outcome of the French revolution disillusioned him greatly. However, "the intellectual officers had caught revolutionary fever." (Radzinsky 2006: 21) Before, the nobles and guards conspired over whom to elevate to the throne, this time they pined for a republic. During the planning, however, most of them began to question the goal, finally settling on a new one: to force the Emperor to create a constitutional monarchy. In 1825, before they could strike, Alexander left the capital to travel to the small city of Taganrog, where he died unexpectedly, leaving the throne unoccupied since he had not produced a son. His sudden death and the fact that his body was not displayed in an open coffin according to custom, raised suspicion and gave birth to a popular legend that Alexander only staged his own demise to be free of the burden of ruling. He was then supposed to have taken the identity of a wandering monk, repenting for his sins.

According to the succession laws the Imperial crown now belonged to Alexander's younger brother Grand Duke Konstantin Pavlovich. As soon as he received the news, Konstantin renounced the throne. He nurtured no political ambition. Instead he immediately swore an oath of allegiance to another brother in line, Grand Duke Nikolai Pavlovich, insisting such was the will of the late Emperor. Indeed, it turned out that upon learning about Konstantin's reluctance to ever accept the throne, Alexander I had issued a secret manifesto in which he named Nikolai his successor. Not many were aware of the document, which caused great confusion to the public. Nikolai grasped power with reluctance but also determination and had to face a trial on the first day of his reign. Still in pursuit of a constitution, the ever-plotting guards gathered a great number of troops whom they had convinced Konstantin was the rightful ruler and Nikolai only an usurper, ordering them to march on Winter palace, where the Imperial family resided. Nikolai's military

experience and logical thinking led to triumph. He defeated the rebellion⁹ and punished the leaders with exile, dispersing the last remains of the Guards who had played such a vital role in the rapid changes of sovereigns for over a hundred years. (Radzinsky 2006: 38) Nikolai ensured stability for his family and dynasty, and he followed strict principles in every aspect of his reign. He ruled for 30 year and earned a reputation of a true unyielding autocrat, determined to maintain the ancient order of affairs. No new reforms aiming for liberalization were passed or even discussed. For Nikolai "model military discipline and firm religious principles were his first priorities." (Yermilova 2002: 22). Few intellectuals of the time acknowledged Nikolai's achievements in the field of industrial growth and enterprises, but many complained bitterly about the harsh censorship and omnipresent secret tsarist agents which he, as the first Russian leader, used to their full potential. His religious and military calling urged him to engage in a war with Turkey in 1854. Unfortunately the "Crimean war", which witnessed Russia in a direct conflict with both France and Britain, was marked with heavy Russian losses Nikolai was not able to bear. Over-stressed and feeling immediate responsibility for the failure he died in February 1855.

2.3. Alexander II and his Inspiration by the British Constitution, Opposite Views of Alexander III

It fell upon Nikolai's son Alexander II to end the shameful war the following year. The peace treaty, however, deprived Russia of the right to own a Black Sea fleet. This restriction was lifted only after another war with Turkey in 1870s¹⁰. His military actions apart, Alexander remains the only true initiator of social reforms that were so urgently needed.

"On February 19, 1861, Alexander II published an Act of Emancipation according to which serfdom, the system the majority of Russian population has been living under for almost 300 years, was abolished. It was this act that won for Emperor Alexander II the epithet of 'Tsar Liberator'." (Yermilova 2002: 43)

The educational system underwent modernization. The annulment of restrictions formerly executed in the field allowed further studies for women. Alexander even entrusted one of his most respected advisers, Count Loris-Melikov, with the creation of a draft of a Constitution. The idea of a constitution may have been inspired in the Emperor's mind by prosperous Victorian England, which he had visited as a young man in 1839, leaving the yet unmarried Queen absolutely charmed. (Radzinsky 2006: 68) While his stay at the English court lasted for only few days, he could observe the example of flourishing British economy during the long years of his reign through ambassadors, reports and finally his own daughter, who married Queen Victoria's second son in 1874. With the constitutional

⁹ The rebels came to be known in history as the "Decembrists", as the rebellion took place on December 14 1825.

¹⁰ 1777-1778. The war resulted in weakening of the Ottoman empire, creation of new European states (i.e. Romania, Bulgaria) and annexation of Bosna and Herzegovina by the Austrians.

monarchy of Victorian England as an example, Alexander realized the changes to the political system in Russia were necessary for the future preservation. While there was no question of establishing a model identical to the British one, with two Houses of representatives, the Emperor entertained the idea of a Parliament and public voting. A number of reforms of judicial and administrative character preceded as preparation for the ultimate change, including the establishment of *zemstva*, elective local assemblies. However, Alexander II was assassinated only days before he could sign the Constitution.

Ironically the reforms and general thawing of control over public life left an opening for the creation of the first organized groups of revolutionary terrorists, who viewed Tsarist Russia as evil. No amount of reforms could ever be enough for them. Alexander survived more than five direct attacks on his life (PERRY, J., PLESHAKOV, C. *The Flight of the Romanovs*. New York: Basic Books, 1999: 4), and still he met a violent end on Sunday May 1/May 13, 1881, when a terrorist hurled a bomb at him as he was returning from the weekly ceremonial military roll call at Mikhailovsky Manège like every Sunday. The terrorists' hope that the monarchy would crumble were not fulfilled. In fact their momentary triumph only moved Russia back into the times of Nikolai I, since the new Emperor Alexander III distanced himself from the liberal politics of his father, adopting his grandfather's stance on ruling instead. Censorship, secret surveillance and repressions thrived again, because Alexander never felt safe enough. Constitution and democracy in his mind served only criminals and were at the root of all chaos.

Yet his attitude towards war represented a marginal difference between him and Nikolai I. Alexander III earned the epithet of "Peacemaker" and stood out as the only Russian Emperor who never engaged in a war. On the contrary he focused on strengthening alliances with France and Britain, at the same time undermining aggressive Prussian militant efforts. (Yermilova 2002: 71) For all the imperial splendour and autocratic power he exercised like few before him, Alexander led a remarkably simple life. In the palace of Gatchina he and his family occupied the rooms originally intended as servant quarters. He disapproved of opulence and venerated everything Russian, from simple clothing to food. "The Peasant Tsar" ruled over his widely branched out family as imposingly as over his Empire, the very last person to possess the personal strength to do so. It was not long after he died in the autumn of 1894¹¹ and his eldest son Nikolai II succeeded him, that the Romanov family disintegrated, unknowingly weakening the monarchy in pursuit of their individual agendas. (VORRES, I. *The Last Grand Duchess*. Toronto: Key Porter Books, 2001: 105)

¹¹ The 49-years-old Emperor died of kidney disease brought on by both his fondness for drinking and an injury he suffered during a railway accident in Borki in 1888.

2.4. The Fall of the Dynasty

Upon his ascension in 1894 Nikolai II was not endowed with any particular strength of character or charisma. Ill-prepared and ill-suited for the responsibility of autocratic ruling he disappointed one and all from the start. (Yermilova 2002: 124) Raised in the belief of supreme autocracy as the only acceptable and applicable form of government in Russia, he only consented to the creation of an advisory organ with legislative rights, the State Duma, in 1905 under the pressure of the political situation. Aware of the poor living conditions of peasants and especially factory workers who had moved into big cities hoping for a better life, the imperial government decided to divert the attention of people from these problems by engaging in what everybody expected to be a small, victorious war against Japan in 1904. However the war proved disastrous with the Russian fleet suffering irreparable losses and losing to the Japanese. The warfare only further deteriorated the situation at the home front and led to strikes and demonstrations, finally turning into the first Russian revolution. The formation of the Duma as a promise of more reforms and a first step toward genuine constitutional monarchy relieved the country from heavy political tensions. Soon after, though, it became clear that next to nothing had changed. Nikolai stood by his beliefs and undermined the importance and power of the Duma as soon as he found it safe to do so.

His contemporaries asserted Nikolai was above all a very hard-working, immensely patriotic, well mannered, honest man with an unfortunate inclination to fatalism. When faced with difficult circumstances he often assumed a pious, but not very productive attitude. Minister Sergei Witte¹² once remarked that "the character of Nicholas II combined the traits of Paul I and Alexander I." (Yermilova 2002: 124)

The year 1913 marked 300 years of the Romanov dynasty on the throne, an event lavishly celebrated and standing in stark contrast to happenings of the years to come. Upon the outbreak of what came to be known as World War I in summer 1914, Russia supported Serbia in the fight against the Habsburg Empire, which served as an excuse for military-oriented Prussia to declare war on her Eastern neighbour. The Russian army suffered a devastating defeat in the battle of Tannenberg and for long months was forced to retreat, until in 1915 Nikolai himself decided to take over the supreme command¹³. His presence did boost the morale of the army for a while (Yermilova 2002: 127), but at the same time every defeat and strategic mistake was blamed on him from that moment on. With the Emperor on the front the matters of state became largely a responsibility of his consort, Empress Alexandra, who in the eyes of many proved to be even less capable of understanding the situation and mood in the country than her husband.

¹² Count Sergei Witte (1849-1915) was the first Prime Minister of Russia.

¹³ Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaevich (1856-1929) handled the responsibility as a Commander-in-Chief from the outbreak of war until August 1915.

2.4.1. Empress Alexandra Fyodorovna's Influence on Russian Politics

The Empress' best intentions, inspired by her maternal grandmother Queen Victoria of United Kingdom, met with misunderstanding and disdain. Trying to uplift the Romanovs, Alexandra effectively managed only to weaken the family even further. Her views, which mixed both Russian and English ideas, distanced her and her husband from Russian nobility, and, as time went by, also from the common people. Historians often blame Alexandra for the tragedy of the Romanovs, which gave way to the rise of the Bolshevik Russia. However to understand the Empress and her fate it is vital to research her character development and upbringing, to evaluate the years she spent primarily as a granddaughter of Queen Victoria. Furthermore it remains an interesting twist of fate that she would even sit on the throne, given the amount of opposition she faced from her grandmother. By inheriting some of her prominent character features as well as a defective gene causing haemophilia, Alexandra was indeed the least ideal Russian Empress. Her association with a peasant, Rasputin, who gained her trust and exploited her good will to meddle into State politics, ruined the reputation of the Imperial family almost completely, and together with a disastrous war gave way to public unrest.

2.4.2. The Revolution and Exile

By 1916 the situation within the country showed considerable destabilization.

"...the enormous loss of human lives and shortage of food created favourable conditions for revolutionary agitation.... The tsar regarded rallies, demonstrations and strikes as consequences of food crisis. When the revolutionary unrest and demonstrations flared up in St. Petersburg in February 1917, it was decided to deliver 48 tons of bread to the capital. The tsar was informed that the danger of revolution had been warded off..." (Yermilova 2002: 128).

The news given to Nikolai was false though and the situation in the capital further deteriorated with mass mutiny of regiments stationed in St. Petersburg and elsewhere. On March 2/March 15 1917 Nikolai was forced by the Duma and his generals to abdicate, hoping his younger brother, Grand Duke Mikhail Alexandrovich, might become a constitutional monarch. However, the newly formed Provisional government¹⁴ decisively refused any kind of monarchy.

Abdication transformed Emperor Nikolai II into an ordinary citizen. He reigned during a troubled time that more experienced and determined monarchs would find difficult to handle. While his character traits made him unfit for the high post he occupied for twenty-three years, he is often condemned too unjustly. Many years later Winston Churchill expressed his view on Nikolai and his actions, criticizing the system he represented, yet defending him as an individual faced with extremely difficult choices, pointing out that

¹⁴ Led by Alexander Kerensky, it was an organ of power trying to establish a democratic republic. It was overthrown and prosecuted by the Bolsheviks after October revolution (October 25/ November 7 1917)

many others, better equipped and suited to be leaders, could hardly behave in a different, better way than the Emperor did, and acknowledging his efforts:

"He had made many mistakes, what ruler has not? He was neither a great captain nor a great prince. He was only a true, simple man of average ability, of merciful disposition, upheld in all his daily life by his faith in God. But the brunt of supreme decisions centered upon him.... The devoted onset of the Russian armies which saved Paris in 1914; the mastered agony of the munitionless retreat; the slowly regathered forces; the victories of Brusilov; the Russian entry upon the campaign of 1917, unconquered, stronger than ever; has he no share in these? ... He is about to be struck down. A dark hand, gloved at first in folly, now intervenes. Exit Tsar. Deliver him and all he loved to wounds and death. Belittle his efforts, asperse his conduct, insult his memory; but pause then to tell us who else was found capable." (MASSIE, R. K. Nicholas and Alexandra. New York: Ballantine Books, 2000: 420)

After he abdicated, Nikolai, his wife and five children found themselves under house arrest, first in their home at Tsarskoe Selo, after which they were transferred to the Siberian city of Tobolsk, and later, on order of the new Bolshevik government, to Ekaterinburg, where they spend several weeks in ever-worsening conditions before being brutally executed during early morning hours of July 17 (Gregorian calendar).

Their bodies were disposed of at an undisclosed location in the woods surrounding the city, and only recovered in 1991, when Soviet Union fell and with it the ban of absolute secrecy previously imposed on Imperial history in general and murder of the last Tsar in particular. The remains were given a state funeral in 1998, and so Nikolai II, Alexandra and three of their daughters finally found their rest among their ancestors in Petersburg. The remains of two Imperial children, however, were missing, and only discovered in summer 2007, in a second grave located near the first one. Their separation from the rest of the murdered group was to serve as a deception. In case the graves were found, the number of reported victims would differ from the number of dead bodies and so hinder the identification of the murdered. The remains of the two missing Imperial children, Tsesarevich Alexei and Grand Duchess Maria Nikolaevna were subsequently found in another nearby grave in summer 2007.¹⁵ (COOK, A. The Murder of the Romanovs. Chalford: Amberley, 2010: 221) The last Imperial family has been recognized by the Russian Orthodox Church as passion bearers and canonized.¹⁶

The last Emperor and his immediate family were not the only Romanovs to perish by the hand of revolutionaries. Nikolai's younger brother Grand Duke Mikhail Alexandrovich was shot in the woods near Perm on June 13. His body was never recovered. Grand Duchess Elizaveta Fyodorovna, Grand Duke Sergei Mikhailovich, Princes Ioann, Konstantin and Igor Konstantinovich and Prince Vladimir Pavlovich met their end on July 18, when they were all thrown into an abandoned mine shaft near the small Ural city of Alapayevsk. (Perry, Pleshakov 1999: 194-195) The only official, but still hushed execution of the

¹⁵ The DNA testing of the remains was made possible thanks to H.R.H. Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, who provided samples needed for comparison. His grandmother and Empress Alexandra were sisters.

¹⁶ In 1981 by Russian Orthodox Church Abroad, in 2000 by Moscow Patriarchate.

Romanovs took place on January 28 1919 in St Petersburg, ending the lives of Grand Dukes Pavel Alexandrovich, Dmitri Konstantinovich, Nikolai and Georgiy Mikhailovichi. Their bodies were subsequently thrown into a mass grave. (Perry, Pleshakov 1999: 209)

Members of the Imperial family who managed to escape Russia found themselves in exile for the rest of their lives. Seventeen senior Romanovs survived the revolution, most notable among them the Dowager Empress Maria Fyodorovna, her two daughters Olga and Xenia, Xenia's husband Grand Duke Alexander Mikhailovich, Grand Duchess Maria Pavlovna the Elder, three of her sons and their families, Grand Dukes Nikolai and Pyotr Nikolaevichi and family and finally siblings Maria Pavlovna the Younger and Dmitri Pavlovich, as well as Grand Duchess Elizaveta Mavrikievna with three of her children.

The Dowager Empress was offered a shelter with her sister, herself the dowager Queen of England. However, after several months spent in Sandringham she moved to Denmark, her original homeland, dying there in 1928. (HALL, C. Little Mother of Russia. Teaneck: Homes & Meier, 2006: 349) Her daughter Xenia chose to stay behind, her existence relegated to that of a poor relative living off mercy of the English royal family. In an attempt to raise some money, Xenia and her sister Olga offered whatever jewels they had smuggled out of Russia to Queen Mary, who delighted in adding them to her own impressive collection. While the value of the jewels in question was professionally estimated to be over £ 250 000, the sisters only received £ 100 000 from the English monarch, with the rest of the money never being seen or mentioned again. (Vorres 2001: 182-183) Xenia lived a quiet life in England, tended only by a Russian nun, and passed away in 1960. Her sister Olga opted to live in Denmark. However after World War II she permanently relocated to Canada. Upon a visit of Queen Elizabeth II to the country in 1959, the former Grand Duchess received an invitation to dine with the Queen and her husband, both being grandchildren of her cousins. (Vorres 2001: 221) The occasion marked the last meeting between Olga and her royal kin, as she died a year later.

Other of the Romanov survivors did not share direct relations to the English ruling house, and chose France, Switzerland or even the United States of America to settle down.

3. The Writing of Romanov Lives

There is arguably no better way of analysing characters of people from the past than turning the attention to their very own literary creations. Be it a novel, a collection of poems or a philosophical treatise, every author puts his own views, beliefs as well as personal traits into his work. While it is impossible to guess how much of their own selves they imprint into the work purposefully or unconsciously, a careful observation based on both basic knowledge of psychological processes and intuition can uncover these traits, even more accurately so if one is familiar with the author's background, life experience, era and purpose for which the work was created. The most obvious literary sources for discovering a character are biographies and autobiographies, both rooted in a very popular conviction that "each individual possesses a unified selfhood which is also the expression of a universal human nature" which originates from the end of 18th century and thrived for literally hundreds of years even to the present day. (ANDERSON, L. *Autobiography: The New Critical Idiom*. Routledge, 2001: 5) The literary genre of biography, also known more poetically as Writing of Lives and defined as a non-fictional account of somebody's life, emerged as an independent form in the 18th century, but its foundations reach back to the times of Ancient Egypt, where "the formulaic accounts of Pharaoh's lives praised the continuity of dynastic power. Although typically written in the first person, these pronouncements are public, general testimonials, no personal utterances." (PARKE, C. *Biography. Writing Lives*. London: Routledge, 2002: 1) Over the centuries it evolved into a personal, even intimate way of not only presenting the account of events experienced by historical characters, but in the form of autobiography also uncovering their psyche.

In case of the last Romanovs and their literary activity, the State Archives of Russian Federation (Государственный архив Российской Федерации, also referred to as GARF) have proven to be an invaluable source allowing historians and even the public of today to create their own picture of the members of the last Imperial family. Numerous volumes of diaries, letters, telegrams and photo albums have been preserved, providing an intimate perspective of the inner world of the last Romanovs. Keeping a diary was considered a virtuous habit by people of high society and in spite of technical wonders developing throughout the 19th century hand-written correspondence held its position as the most personal and reliable means of communication.

3.1. Autobiography and Epistolary literature

In an on-going discussion about an exact definition of autobiography there is one condition that needs to apply in every case. As formulated by Phillipe Lejeune: the narrator, the author and the protagonist needs to have just one identity, be just one specific person (Anderson 2001: 2). For this to actually happen though there apparently needs to be an intention on the part of the author, which further carries a problem of how much of the content of autobiography is indeed a faithful representation of the facts and how much of it

is purposefully controlled and probably also modified. A certain level of faith in the author is necessary, a willingness of readers to put their trust in somebody's word. Not every author has gained this trust. The different treatment was usually received by men and by women. The sexist, patriarchal views that have been the backbone of society for hundreds and thousands of years have influenced the thinking to the point that in the past a mere implication of virtuous qualities like sincerity already suggested a masculine subject rather than feminine. (Anderson 2001: 3). The question of female virtue comes into focus also if we turn our attention to another literary genre, which in cases of non-fictional work can be related to autobiography: epistolary literature.

The traditional old view of what it meant to be a virtuous lady resided in belief that she needs to be "modest, self-effacing, above all not talked about, and most certainly not published." (Goldsmith, E.C. (ed.) 1988. *Writing the Female Voice. Essays on Epistolary Literature*. Northeastern.: VII) Thus publishing women's letters means disrupting her integrity, even though their literary works deserved admiration and were considered as exemplary pieces of the genre, first thought of as such from the beginning of the 16th century. Trying to protect the lady's good name, her letters would often be published anonymously. Male writers, inspired by the way women were able to construct their letters and express themselves through them, would in time try to pass off their own writings as female epistolary works and Laclos, Rousseau and others chiselled it to perfection (Goldsmith 1989: VII).

Publication of letters of the last Romanovs and their relatives has occurred frequently, even during their lifetime. One such instance is a short collection of letters Alice, Grand Duchess of Hesse, wrote to her mother Queen Victoria, which were published, even if only after careful selection and some censoring, shortly after her death as a memorial book.¹⁷ That in itself shows how sentiments changed in the progress of time, as the publication in question was used to glorify the person of Princess Alice and no question of blemishing her image by making her personal messages accessible to common reader arose from the decision. Apart from few women of natural talent among the royal relatives, the correspondence the topic of this thesis is concerned with does not hold much of an artistic value, as the women in question were not schooled in writing style more than absolutely necessary.

What is the purpose of autobiography and what leads one to write it? It would not be wrong to say that among the main reasons is both fear of being forgotten and desire to project one's own persona and deeds in a desirable light in both present and future context, since some of the autobiographies from political past have worked that way. However according to Karl Weintraub, the task autobiography sets out to fulfill is primarily not to serve as a delusion of grandeur but to help to come up with a form of self-realization (Anderson 2001: 4). This particular goal is not reached every time, as there are no firmly

¹⁷ The publication "Alice: Grand Duchess of Hesse – Biographical Sketch and Letters" found its way to print in 1885. It was dedicated to her children and included a short nostalgic biography of the deceased woman by her sister, Princess Helena of United Kingdom.

set rules which autobiographies must obey as a literary genre apart from the joint identity of the three subjects as mentioned above.

"Autobiography is a biography written by the subject about himself or herself. It is to be distinguished from the **memoir**, in which the emphasis is not on the author's developing self but on the people and events that the author has known or witnessed, and also from the private **diary** or **journal**, which is a day-to-day record of the events in one's life, written for personal use and satisfaction, with little or no thought of publication.... In recent years, the distinction between autobiography and fiction has become more and more blurred, as authors include themselves under their own names in novels and autobiographies are written in the asserted mode of fiction, or... mingle fiction and personal experience as a way to get at one's essential life story." (ABRAMS, M.H. A Glossary of Literary Terms. Heinle & Heinle, 1999: 22-23)

While all the Romanovs kept a diary and many of their contemporaries, retainers and friends left behind memoirs, only few consented to pen their autobiographies. Most notable of them were Grand Duke Alexander Mikhailovich¹⁸, Grand Duchess Maria Pavlovna¹⁹ and Grand Duchess Olga Alexandrovna²⁰.

¹⁸ Brother-in-law to the last Tsar. His autobiography "Once a Grand Duke" was published in 1933. Encouraged by its success Alexander followed the book with another titled "Always a Grand Duke" the very same year.

¹⁹ First cousin to the last Tsar. Grand Duchess Maria described her life in Imperial Russia in "Education of a Princess" (1930) and her consequent struggle post Russian revolution in "Princess in Exile" (1932)

²⁰ Youngest sister of the last Tsar. Apart from a series of articles written for Danish newspaper during 1940s, published in 2009 as "25 Chapters of my Life", Olga narrated her life story with an intention of publishing it to Ian Vorress. His book "The Last Grand Duchess" (1960) is thus a semi-autobiography.

4. Defining Victorian

When young Princess Victoria became the Queen of the United Kingdom after the unsatisfactory rules of her paternal predecessors²¹ in June 1837, the machinery of a new era was set in motion, which would eventually be celebrated as an age of prosperity, peace and changes that touched people in every aspect of their lives. Within two years of her coming to power Victoria gave her hand in marriage to her cousin Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, thus forming one of the most successful royal matches in history and one which further nourished a resurgence of moral and the creation of veritable codes of society rules that functioned like a backbone of a precise system of living for the majority of the English population for several decades. The young royal couple desired above everything to correct the record of debauchery and improvidence displayed by their forefathers and Prince Albert especially condemned "the most humiliating indignity the flippant Society of his adopted country could have thought of casting on him. He was utterly horrified and bitterly disappointed." (MARGETSON, S. *Victorian High Society*. London: Batsford, 1980: 29) Albert dominated his wife in private and through her influenced the upper classes deeply, his widespread unpopularity notwithstanding. The code of conduct he and Victoria instilled in their subjects became the chief characteristics of the period, more than any other feature of the same time frame.

The inclination to tradition, so characteristic of England, served as a nutritious soil for embracing rules and codes and substituting those for nature. Within those set rules the Victorians shaped their outlook on circumstances, environment, their own feelings and themselves. Prime Minister Disraeli²² explained the reasons of advancement of new, strict manners and morale promoted by the royal couple:

"The nation is represented by a family – the Royal Family; and if that family is educated with a sense of responsibility and a sentiment of public duty, it is difficult to exaggerate the salutary influence they may exercise over a nation. It is not merely an influence upon manners; it is not merely that they are a model for refinement and good taste – they affect the public adversity, or in the anxious conjecture of public affairs, the nation rallies round the Family and the Throne, and its spirit is animated and sustained by the expression of public affection." (ST GEORGE, A. *The Descent of Manners*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1993: xii)

The advocated Victorian values sprouted from Christianity. Dutifulness, perseverance, piety, moderation and patience were particularly encouraged. On the other hand idleness and frivolity needed to be frowned upon and those who indulged in them forfeited the good will of the Victorian Court and subsequently suffered ostracization from the proper society by not being invited to share in the delights of dinner parties and obligatory visits. Apart

²¹ Victoria's grandfather and uncles whom she succeeded were known for their loose manners more than their political actions, out of which few were of positive significance.

²² Benjamin Disraeli, Earl of Beaconsfield, occupied the post of Prime Minister of the United Kingdom between the years 1874-1880, and later in 1886.

from the decadent pre-Victorian era the resentment of love of pleasure and absence of moral code stemmed from the example of French nobility before the revolution of 1789.

"An arrogant, frivolous and worldly aristocracy paying no heed to its obligations towards the rest of the nation could well have been toppled... Only the English genius for compromise, combined with the flexibility and good example set by the governing class, gave a much needed stability to the people of Britain..." (Margetson 1980: 90)

It remained a regretful matter to the royal family that their own son, the future Edward VII, defied the high ideals and norms set by his parents and projected the exact qualities they fought to extinguish, thus creating an antithesis to Victorianism, which bloomed years later under his rule into the mentality of the Edwardian era, where pleasure was no longer a sin and society learned to turn a blind eye to many a failing of character. Following the death of Prince Albert in December 1861 the Queen largely disappeared from public view and high society regrouped itself around her bohemian son, adjusting their way of life to his. Moral principles previously pressed upon people were embraced wholeheartedly by British middle-class, which had already out-weighted the nobility by numbers and in time also by decisive influence. Victorianism thus gained an image of being a distinct bourgeois trait rather than one dictating the lives of upper classes.

The centre of all thoughts, duties and stability for the Victorians was home.

"It was a place of peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt and division.... The mid-Victorians were most afraid of the idea of non-home: the street, the workhouse, the shame of not belonging. Home itself proved a tangible representation of the values of married life." (St George 1993: 101)

True to stereotypical gender roles a woman shouldered the responsibility of running the household, if not executing the chores herself then organizing and supervising others who did. To marry meant above all to procreate

"...motherhood was an absorbing preoccupation with the ladies of the nineteenth century not wholly devoted to the razzle-dazzle of fashionable Society, and large families of eight, ten or twelve children, even with nurses and nursery maids to look after them, were a great responsibility." (Margetson 1980: 121)

Home also epitomized the place where manners were taught and children, from the earliest age, underwent often unnerving and insensitive training on good behaviour. The little freedom they enjoyed in a nursery did not extend into their parents' dining and drawing rooms, where they would be occasionally summoned and put on show in front of the guests, and expected to act in an absolutely rational, restrained way befitting their social position, like little adults. (Margetson 1980: 141)

Good manners were the key to living and etiquette books were carefully stored on shelves of every decent household. Art succumbed to the belief that it must be connected to morality. An approach to life had evolved from a newly constructed religious method, that

sought the moral certainty in Holy Scripture. (St George 1993: 25). Most probably religion and the quickly changing world of the 19th century gave birth to the famous, morbid Victorian obsession with death. Death represented an inevitable certainty and a connecting point to the other world, inhabited by the deceased loved ones. Needless to say the lack of medical knowledge and medicines, as well as poor living conditions of lower classes, ensured that death was omnipresent. The etiquette of mourning during the Victorian era evolved into an elaborate system of rituals, incorporated into the formal social code.

"The social importance of the deceased was indicated by the degree of mourning: the length of time mourning was worn (and thus restricted social intercourse), the kind of clothing and accessories and the numbers and station of members of the household who went into mourning. As might be expected, widows put on the deepest mourning and wore it the longest. 'First mourning' was worn for a year and a day. This meant black clothes covered with crêpe, no ornaments and a widow's cap with veil. Second mourning then lasted for the next twelve months, black with less crêpe, without a cap and jet ornaments only, called 'slighting' the mourning. The third year was half-mourning when grey or mauve could be added for colours. Some widows chose to remain in mourning for the rest of their lives..." (DAVIDOFF, L. *The Best Circles. Society, Etiquette and The Season*. London: Croom Helm, 1973: 54-55)

Queen Victoria stands as the best example of such a widow. In fact until her own death in 1901 she never emerged from the first stage of mourning, dressing only in black and almost completely withdrawing from public life, for which she faced severe criticism. (STRACHEY, L. *Queen Victoria*. London: Bloomsbury, 1987: 147) As she remained plunged into her grief, she insisted her whole family should share in the tragedy that was Albert's demise, viewing herself as hardly more than a burnt-out individual whose main goal was to uphold her husband's legacy. (Strachey 1987: 145) Births in the family never excited her, but deaths she occupied herself with endlessly, turning mourning into a morbid art form.

The ideals Victorianism promoted, however, often remained unfulfilled and as such a source of sheer hypocrisy. The general belief that character can be judged by conduct allowed men and women to appear respectable, while their private actions often stood in opposition to their social image. In private Queen Victoria herself fell short of being a perfect lady with ideas and inclinations considered proper. While the moral code instructed women to suppress any sexual desires, she never hid her passion. Motherhood she viewed as a joyless necessity, at least until the children grew up enough to become companions and caregivers. Behind the mask intended for others the Victorians as people remained human, in view of which it is compulsory to differentiate between the Victorian influence and Victoria's influence, even though the two closely intertwine.

Although some of the Victorian features were carried on into other countries and foreign courts by marriages, no other but English society accepted and assimilated them as wholeheartedly. Victorianism thus attained a special status in history as a unique way of life based on unwritten agreement of what was held as acceptable and what could only bring dishonour and downfall of both individual and society.

5. Family Ties between English and Russian Royal Houses in the 19th century

The 19th century may easily be called an age of Empires and also their swan song. By the beginning of the new century most of them would collapse with the former rulers being overthrown, banished, even killed, others would shrink considerably in size and power, adopting a new form of government for the sake of at least titular survival. Before the turmoil of World War I which swept away nations and buried the old times, the countries of Europe were tightly knit by a network of blood relations rather than formal contracts. Family ties bound together almost all royal houses from Denmark to Greece and beyond. One of the most notable and intriguing relationships of the kind was the one between Victorian England in the West and the vast Russian Empire in the East.

5.1. The Danish Sisters: Queen Alexandra and Empress Maria Fyodorovna

The first link of kinship between the Romanovs and British royal family was created through the daughters of Christian IX of Denmark²³. The eldest Alexandra, called Alix, married the heir to the British throne, Prince Albert Edward of Wales²⁴, in 1863. The couple produced five children and enjoyed relatively happy married life, if only due to Alexandra's willingness to overlook her husband's numerous affairs with other women. From political point of view they held no power or position as long as Queen Victoria lived (ARONSON, T. *The King in Love*. London: John Murray, 1988: 4), yet they never hesitated to express their stance and as their popularity in society grew, they began to exercise a considerable influence on the public outlook toward state affairs, to the great displeasure of the Queen.

The issue dividing the royal family primarily concerned the relationship with Prussia. Queen Victoria viewed all German states favourably, not only because her beloved husband originated from Germany, but also because her eldest daughter was married to a Prussian. She had hoped for a German bride for her eldest son although after initial reluctance she accepted a Danish Princess instead. Her reservations toward inclusion of the young Princess into her own family were caused by the obvious difference of lifestyle and viewpoint on life. Victoria's proper court stood in opposition to famously loud Danish royal family gatherings, where entertainment and fun often reached levels the Queen openly considered immoral. "The mother's family are bad – the father's foolish. It would never do to have one of the 'Danish camp' in the family," stated the Queen. (Hall 2006: 11) Ultimately she let herself be swayed in favour of a Danish daughter-in-law, because her late husband wished it.

²³ Ruled from 1863 to 1906.

²⁴ Ruled as Edward VII from 1901 to 1910.

Alix loathed anything German with a passion as a reaction to the Schleswig-Holstein conflict²⁵ that had resulted in Denmark losing a considerable part of its territory to Prussia. In this view she found great support in her younger sister, Princess Dagmar. The two sisters shared a close bond from childhood and worked diligently on turning their husbands and social circles almost viciously anti-German, while at the same time they untiringly supported new friendship and alliance between their new homelands. "The sisters were determined to make sure that, in the event of a war, their adopted countries would be fighting on the same side." (Hall 2006: 48)

While Alexandra waited to become the Queen of England, Dagmar found herself a wife to Russian Tsesarevich Alexander by 1866. Originally she had been engaged to his elder brother Nikolai, however, when he unexpectedly died of spinal meningitis, Dagmar and Alexander found solace in each other. Theirs was a love match, approved by their parents because of the political advantages it brought. Unlike her sister in England, Dagmar gained the complete devotion of her husband and her new Russian relatives wholeheartedly welcomed her jolly nature and love of entertainment. She soon became the darling of society, never making a false step and winning affection wherever she went. (Vorres 2001: 45) Dagmar, taking the name of Maria Fyodorovna upon her conversion to the Russian Orthodox Church²⁶, became Empress and her husband Emperor Alexander III in 1881. Among all the official engagements she and her family – which in time grew to include three sons and two daughters – undertook, an annual trip to Denmark to meet with their English, Greek and other relatives took place without fail. Queen Victoria disapproved of these reunions at the castle of Fredensborg, suspicious that many political alliances and plans were hatched there without her consent or knowledge. When asked if Queen Victoria had ever made an appearance at Fredensborg, Grand Duchess Olga Alexandrovna, youngest of Maria Fyodorovna's children, stated:

"Never. I may be wrong, but she wasn't really fond of anyone except her German relations. She certainly did not like us. She loathed my grandfather and did not really want her son Alfred to marry my Aunt Marie, nor did my aunt have a very happy time in England. Victoria was always contemptuous of us. She said that we possessed a 'bourgeoiserie', as she called it, which she disliked intensely – but, come to think of it, the boot was on the other foot. My father could not stand her. He said that she was a pampered, sentimental, selfish old woman. Nobody felt sad because Victoria did not come to Fredensborg." (Vorres 2001: 41)

The influence of the Danish sisters on the English and Russian thrones in regards to spreading Victorianism was second to none, as neither accepted it for their own, it however formed the basis of political alliance and friendship between their husbands and later also their sons, for the first time in history ensuring the best intention of the English and Russian nations to support and help one another. The two sisters never missed an

²⁵ The dispute about Schleswig-Holstein duchies was a complicated matter marked with two wars. Ultimately Denmark lost to Prussia in October 1864.

²⁶ It was compulsory for every Russian Empress to be Russian Orthodox. Only a son born of such a mother could become an Emperor. Thus Russian rulers and members of their families tended to marry predominantly Protestant brides, who were easier to convince to a conversion than Catholic princesses.

opportunity to openly herald this desired union. For example during the visit of Dagmar and her husband in England in 1873, the Princess of Wales and Tsesarevna²⁷ would only wear identical gowns and accessories, a result of careful and long planning, which produced a curious effect that public found charming, though nobody could misread the intention behind it. (Hall 2006: 58)

5.2. Prince Alfred and Grand Duchess Maria Alexandrovna

Much as members of Danish royal family flocked to Fredensborg, the relatives of the grand-ducal family of Hesse annually met at Heiligenberg. The only surviving daughter of Emperor Alexander II, Grand Duchess Maria Alexandrovna, was part of these meetings since childhood, as her mother originated from Hesse. One such reunion marked her first meeting with Prince Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh, the second son of Queen Victoria, in 1868. While Maria could not by any stretch of imagination be called attractive, her title and dowry were. Neither Queen Victoria, not Emperor Alexander appeared too keen on the idea of their union, however on their children's insistence they both finally agreed, maintaining that the match held no political significance. (Hall 2006: 57) The couple was wed in January 1874 in St. Petersburg, where a lavish Orthodox ceremony was followed by a Church of England service, as the bride refused to convert and circumstances did not demand she do so.

Maria Alexandrovna failed to win the genuine affection of her new English family, to whom she appeared too proud and definitely too rich. Her trousseau had occupied the whole floor space of the ballroom in the Winter Palace, and she arrived in England with a magnificent jewellery collection that reportedly astonished even the Queen. That aside, Maria kept her Imperial title, claiming precedence at court over everyone but the Queen, a rather unpleasant situation, which had to be sorted out by her father. Finally, Maria had a yearly income of 75 000 roubles, which gave her an ability to lead a far grander life than most of her English relations. (Béeche, A. (ed.) 2004. *The Grand Duchesses*. Oakland: Eurohistory.com.: 46-47) Maria, in her turn, wasted no great effort on winning them over either, finding it difficult to adjust to the court life of Queen Victoria, which did not dwell as much on etiquette, but after pretentious life in Russia seemed dull and detached. She disliked Britain in general and when her husband inherited the title of Duke of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha in 1893 she relocated to Germany with little regret.

Only in her later years did Queen Victoria grow fond of her Russian daughter-in-law. In late spring 1900 Maria noted: "She is very dear and kind and has taken to me greatly this time. I think she will miss me as I try to be cheerful conversationally and a little more practical than her dear daughters." (Béeche 2004: 51) However much like Princess Alix, Maria remained true to her foreign roots and distant to Victorian ideas.

²⁷ Title of Tsesarevich's wife.

5.3. Hessian Princesses: Grand Duchess Elizaveta and Empress Alexandra

Queen Victoria's own daughters carried the legacy of their upbringing into their respective new homes too. After marrying her eldest daughter to a Prussian Prince in 1858, the Queen turned her attention to smaller German courts in search of a groom for her second daughter, Princess Alice. The choice ultimately fell upon Prince Ludwig, future Grand Duke of Hesse, and the two young people were wed in summer 1862. The ceremony, taking place in royal residence at Osborne, was a private, quiet and sad one as the court still mourned the passing of Prince Albert only several months before. Queen Victoria sobbed tragically throughout the whole event. (WARWICK, C. *Ella. Princes, Saint & Martyr*. Chichester: Wiley, 2006: 6) Darmstadt, the capital of Hesse, offered a completely different sentiment. The newlyweds were met with enthusiasm and joy. First as hereditary Princess, later as Grand Duchess, Alice fulfilled her duties meticulously, giving her best efforts to improve living conditions of the small duchy. For common people she was a *Landesmutter* – mother of the nation, however she never fully managed to establish contact with higher society of Hesse. In spite of all her best intentions Alice failed to change and always remained a Princess of United Kingdom, first and foremost favouring everything English and cultivating connections with English artists, musicians and philosophers. (MILLER, I. *The Four Graces. Queen Victoria's Hessian Granddaughters*. Eurohistory.com, 2011: 6) Alice put her love for England into everything she did.

"She was always thinking of England, and she built and furnished her new home to give her memories of the home she had left. 'I can't fancy I am in Germany, the house and all its arrangements being so English,' the Princess wrote to the Queen on March 20th 1866. All the family portraits were there, from those of King George III and his family to numerous pictures of the Queen, the Prince Consort, and of all her brothers and sisters. Sketches of Windsor, Balmoral, and of other places she had loved in her youth were treasured by the Princess at Darmstadt, and fostered in her children that love and admiration for England that was so strong a trait in all of them. Life in the Palace was organised on English lines, and was so carried on after the Princess's death." (BUXHOEVEDEN, S. *The Life and Tragedy of Alexandra Feodorovna, Empress of Russia*. London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1930: 2)

5.3.1. Upbringing and Education of the Hessian Sisters

During their 16 years of marriage Alice and Ludwig produced two sons and five daughters, among whom Elisabeth "Ella" born in 1864, and Alix born in 1872 would eventually marry into Imperial Russia and play a prominent part in its final days. The Hessian royal family shared a close, affectionate relationship and while the means of living were modest for a noble family, the children lacked nothing substantial. Since hiring nannies and governesses proved impossible due to lack of finances, the children spent more time with their parents than deemed customary at the time. Because of that Queen Victoria knew of the children's every little progress or ailment first-hand. Only later, when the financial situation improved

a bit, was the supreme rule over the nursery entrusted to Mrs. Mary Anne Orchard, who faithfully stayed with her youngest charge and later followed her to Russia after her marriage.

The early years of Princess Alix passed by peacefully. She was considered a happy, merry child, yet from her earliest days she was surrounded not only by love and affection, but also deep melancholy and a sense of solemn tragedy. This was due to their mother, who had observed the great mourning of Queen Victoria, and accepted it for her own, although without a tendency for hysteria. In 1873 Princess Alice watched in horror as her three-years-old son Friedrich, lovingly called Frittie, fell out of a window. His injuries did not appear grave, but the little prince was a haemophiliac and died several hours later of internal bleeding. Princess Alice turned even more spiritual than she already had been, and in true Victorian fashion made sure the dead child was never forgotten.

"For Alix and her family there were annual visits to the crypt where Frittie's body laid. Alice spoke endlessly of being reunited with her child and of the judgement of God, sowing deep seeds of fatalism in her young daughter's mind." (KING. G. *The Last Empress*. Toronto: Citadel, 1996: 14)

Alix reached six years of age when the annual visits of family tomb grew more regular and to her personally much more tragic. In December 1878 the Hesse children, with the sole exception of Ella, went down with diphtheria, at the time a dreaded and dangerous disease. Princess Alice personally nursed the patients back to health. However her youngest child, Princess Marie "May" who was just four, succumbed to the illness. Wearied and exhausted, Alice herself contracted diphtheria and passed away, being only 35 years old. Queen Victoria immediately sent a letter to her grandchildren:

"Poor Dear Children, for I write this for you all – you have had the most terrible blow which can befall children – you have lost your precious, dear, devoted Mother who loved you – and devoted her life to you and your dear Papa. That horrid disease which carried off sweet little May and from which you and the others recovered has taken her away from you and poor old Grandmamma, who with your other kind Grandmamma will try and be a mother to you. Oh! Dear Children, dearest beloved Mama is gone to join dear Grandpapa and your other dear Grandpapa and Frittie and sweet little May where there is no more sorrow or separation. I long to hear every detail. Poor dear Ernie²⁸, he will feel it so dreadfully. May he and dear Papa not suffer from this dreadful blow. Try and do everything to comfort and help poor dear Papa. God's will be done. May He support and help you all. From your devoted and most unhappy Grandmamma, VRI.²⁹" (King 1996: 18)

The letter was very typical of her, demanding details of her daughter's death that would give her further reason to weep. Asking this of children between ages 15 and 6 feels downright insensitive. Still, compared to the letters that were to keep coming for a long time, this one at least tried to offer some comfort. The letters exchanged between the

²⁸ Prince Ernst Ludwig, the only surviving son among children of Princess Alice.

²⁹ Victoria Regina Imperatrix

Queen and her grandchildren would invariably be in English. While French dominated the courts and noble families in various countries for most of the 19th century, as Victoria's children and grandchildren married and spread their own culture English became the predominant language all the relatives used among themselves.

Queen Victoria meant it, when she assured the children she would strive to attempt to replace their mother in every way possible. Because of their loss she doted on the Hessian half-orphans more than any of her other numerous grandchildren, her particular favourite being little Alix. Life in Darmstadt continuously followed the rules set by Princess Alice even after her death.

"Their children were brought up in accordance with old-fashioned English ideas of hygiene, which were, at that time, far ahead of those in Germany. Their dress was simple and their fare of the plainest; indeed they kept all their lives hated memories of rice puddings and baked apples in endless succession." (Buxhoeveden 1930: 5)

Tutors were instructed to report weekly and in detail their curriculum and how the children fared to Windsor, and received a steady flow of advice from the old Queen in return. The Queen selected the teachers, and for the girls, when they grew up, also suitable ladies as companions. Being the youngest and of the most impressionable age, Alix was formed by the tutelage the most, developing distinctly Victorian standards of taste and morality. Part of the education of Hessian Princesses defied the generally accepted Victorian opinion according to which women barely needed more than to write, read, draw and engage in handiwork and music. While still alive, Princess Alice insisted her daughters be given a proper education even in subjects like history, geography or world literature. Still, the Victorian values held preference, as shown by one of the letters Alice addressed to her mother:

"What you say about the education of our girls I entirely agree with and I strive to bring them up totally free from their pride of their position which is nothing save what their personal worth can make it. ... I feel so entirely as you do on the difference of rank and how important it is for Princes and Princesses to know that they are nothing better or above others and for being an example: good and modest. This I hope my children will grow up to be." (King 1996: 14)

In addition to constant exchange of letters between Windsor and Darmstadt, Queen Victoria invited the Hessian family to England every year, which meant both Ella and Alix spent weeks, sometimes even months in their grandmother's presence. When they were still little, these yearly visits symbolized especially playing with their English cousins, including future George V, and trips on foot to small sweet and bakery shops in the country, where they learned how to bake bread from the owners. (Buxhoeveden 1930: 7) As they matured they would attend balls and social gatherings. Particularly invested in the future of her favourite, Alix, Queen Victoria recognized her weaknesses, among which paralyzing diffidence stood most prominent. The Queen consistently attempted to cure this shortcoming by making Alix go around an empty room and converse with chairs or by forcing her to play the piano in front of a small gathering of people. While Alix dutifully

obliged, she suffered dreadfully while fighting her bashful nature and remained extremely self-conscious among other people throughout her life. This would eventually stand as the starting point of her unpopularity in Russia, where the courtiers mistook her shyness for pride and considered her haughty. While a true lady in her bearing, Alix resisted the Victorian submission of women in society. Obstinance, decisiveness and unwavering trust in her own judgement featured among her most prominent character traits, and unlike many other ladies of her era Alix believed women were as capable as men. After all, her own grandmother was the ruler of the greatest kingdom in the world.

For the Hessian sisters the mourning never ended. While their mother lived, the memory of their little brother loomed over everything; after her death Queen Victoria imposed the gloomy mentality on them even further. Much like she ordered the room where her husband had died kept intact, she urged the Hessians to do the same with Alice's quarters, and appeared extremely pleased, and of course emotional, when she found the rooms in question without a smallest change upon her next visit of Darmstadt. (Miller 2011: 45) Over the years the tone of Queen Victoria's letters to the children, who in fact had soon turned into adults, reiterated the emphasis on how deeply pre-occupied they should be with their mother's dying. In September 1879 she wrote to the eldest of the Hessian siblings, Princess Victoria:

"Darling Victoria, I send you today 4 new photos for you, Ella, Irene & Alicky³⁰ which I hope you will like. Get 4 frames for them & let them go abt with you. Many loving thanks for you dear letter of the 17th. It brought the tears to my eyes! For it is so sad – terrible to think of you darling children being without precious beloved Mama! How I long for her & how impossible it seem to me that she shd be be gone from this world. Poor dear Papa, it is indeed sad that he shd be so often away! I wish I cd be with you often, and then unfortunately your lessons prevent your being as much with him as he & I wd wish. I hope you will not get at all Russian from the visits to Jungenheim! Dear Mama tho loving the language had such a horror of Russia & Russians!" (Hough. R. (ed.) 1975. *Advice to my Grand-daughter*. New York: Simon and Schuster: 18-19)

The last two sentences reveal Queen Victoria's fears. At Jungenheim the Hessians annually met with relatives, among whom figured the younger children of Emperor Alexander II, Grand Dukes Sergei and Pavel³¹. Queen Victoria frowned upon everything Russian, never hiding her opinion that it was a savage, violent country with an immoral high society, dangerous, uncertain, and with a climate damaging to the health. Her conflict with her daughter-in-law Maria Alexandrovna did little to endear Russia to her. The Queen favoured no further relations with the Romanovs, and the presence of young Grand Dukes around her granddaughters filled her with anxiety. "Russia," she wrote at another opportunity, "I cd not wish for any of you." (Hough 1975: 41)

³⁰ To differentiate Princess Alix from her aunt, Princess Alix of Wales, she was commonly referred to as Alicky within the family.

³¹ Their mother, Empress Maria Alexandrovna, originated from Hesse. They were also younger brothers to Maria Alexandrovna, Duchess of Edinburgh.

5.3.2. Princess Elisabeth's Marriage to Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovich

Princess Elisabeth, born in 1864, possessed many qualities which easily won her affection of others. Aside from her kind, welcoming disposition and ability to converse on any topic imaginable, her great beauty attracted attention. She was, in fact, considered the most beautiful Princess in Europe, and she could not complain of a shortage of suitors. Her grandmother rightly suspected that Ella had set her mind on Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovich, seven years her senior, and while she wanted to honour the will of Princess Alice, who insisted her daughters should marry for love – a concept almost scandalous at the time – she also invested much of her time and energy to discouraging the relationship. Her first step was to find another, more suitable, groom. However Ella refused both her cousin Wilhelm of Prussia³² and Prince Friedrich of Baden, who had proposed to her. Wilhelm never forgave her. (Warwick 2006: 55) The Queen did not hide her disappointment and poured her heart out to Princess Victoria in a letter from March 7 1883:

"How very unfortunate it is of Ella to refuse good Fritz of Baden so good & steady, with such a safe, happy position, & for a Russian. I do deeply regret it. Ella's health will never stand the climate wh. killed you poor Aunt³³ & has ruined the healths of almost all the German Psses. who went there; besides the dreadful state Russia is in, & the very depressed bad state of Society." (Hough 1975: 44-45)

Other letters of the same tone followed. In September the Princess could read:

"I can't tell you how I dread that marriage for her. Believe me it wld. be misery for her as the climate, Society etc. are pernicious there – And darling Mama said again and again to me, nice as Serge was, she never wld. hear of one of her girls going there." (Hough 1975: 53)

Later the same month the Queen abandoned all diplomacy:

"Russians are so unscrupulous... I wish dear Ella shld look at all the difficulties & drawbacks until she embarks in what afterwards she might regret...Politics of no politics the Russians are totally antagonistic to England."(Hough 1975: 55)

As Queen Victoria furiously scribbled anxious letters, Ella accepted Sergei's proposal in October 1883 and informed her grandmother:

"I am afraid this letter will not give you as much pleasure as I should wish, but as it concerns my happiness & you have always been so kind to me, I wish you to know what I think about Serge. Those few days I saw him last month convinced me that I shall be happy with him... I am afraid you will think me very changeable but I think I know what I am doing & if I am unhappy, which I am sure will never be, it will be all my doing as you know. Please forgive me if you are vexed with what I shall do, &

³² Future Emperor Wilhelm II

³³ Empress Maria Alexandrovna

although I will have to begin a new life, I will always cling to those who have been dearer to me than I can say." (Warwick 2006: 84)

Queen Victoria was exasperated, however in the end she accepted Ella's choice, even if without enthusiasm. It became clear that part of her objections to the Russian marriage was fear she would lose contact with her granddaughter. The Queen did not enjoy pregnancies or little children, yet according to the sentiment of the era she nurtured possessiveness over her offspring. She further lamented to Princess Victoria that "Ella will be quite lost to me for a Russian Gd. duke is a person belonging to Russia, & Russia is our real enemy..." (Hough 1975: 56)

The wedding, set for June 3/ June 15 1884, took place in St. Petersburg. Although Ella was not required to convert to Orthodoxy, she nonetheless decided to do so seven years after her marriage, taking the name Elizaveta Fyodorovna. While the character of Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovich remains an enigma due to contradicting reports and a the lack of documents, his marriage proved to be a contented one. Ella brought with her into Russia high Victorian morals, at the same time projecting extreme tolerance and engaging charm. She was endowed with moral virtues, but combined those with diplomacy and social skills. Soon she won the affection of the Imperial family and society, even though her own personality corresponded only a little with theirs. The couple remained childless for reasons unknown. While rumours of Grand Duke's alleged homosexuality thrived, it is far more probable Ella suffered from a medical condition which prevented her from conceiving. The marriage abruptly ended on February 4/February 17 1905, when Sergei, at the time occupying the post of Governor of Moscow, fell victim to a terrorist bomb attack. (Warwick 2006: 217) After his death Ella gradually withdrew from the society she had dominated and established a religious community of nursing sisters in Moscow, which the Orthodox church recognized as the Order of St. Mary and St. Martha. In 1909 she renounced the imperial splendour and entered the order as an abbess, devoting the rest of her life to the care of the sick and the poor. (King 2006: 81)

Princess Ella's decision to marry into Russia and her conversion to Orthodoxy shaped history. Indeed, had she settled on a groom of her grandmother's liking, her younger sister would never have sat on the Russian throne. Ella paved the way for Alix, and while their personal lives could hardly be more diverse, they still reached the same end.

5.3.3. Courtship and Engagement of Princess Alix to Tsesarevich Nikolai

Princess Alix and Tsesarevich Nikolai Alexandrovich met for the first time at the occasion of Ella's wedding in 1884. Alix was twelve, Nikolai sixteen. The Imperial children lived a sheltered life due to the constant threat of assassination, which contributed to Nikolai being childish and slightly immature for his years. Almost an adult, he joined the younger members of the family in games with the new Hessian relatives who were staying in the imperial summer residence of Peterhof for several weeks. Alix felt both flattered and slightly embarrassed by Nikolai's attention, a fact best illustrated by a short episode which

took place at the time. Tsesarevich presented the Princess with a small brooch. Overwhelmed and uncertain of what to do, she accepted, but later she secretly pressed it back into his hand during another evening. (Massie 2000: 31) The wedding celebrations over, Alix and her family returned to Darmstadt.

In 1887 Alix reached fifteen years of age and matured into a remarkably beautiful young woman. Queen Victoria, always preoccupied with marital plans for members of her large family, had already decided the ideal match for her favourite grandchild. The Queen revealed her plans to Princess Victoria:

"I must tell you, who have so much influence with Papa & generally in the family, that my heart and mind are bent on securing dear Alicky for either Eddie or Georgie³⁴. You must prevent further Russians or other people coming to snap her up." (Hough 1975: 89)

The Queen greatly desired to keep Alix as close as possible, in fact she already pictured her as the future Queen of England, in light of which she considered Albert Victor "Eddie" the most convenient match imaginable for the Hessian Princess. After losing Ella, the Queen was determined to disrupt any effort the Russians would make to ensnare Alix as well. Impressionable, weak-willed Eddie accepted the idea of being deeply in love with his cousin as soon as his grandmother suggested it. The prospective bride could not be as easily convinced. When Eddie proposed to her early in 1889, she respectfully but firmly declined, breaking her grandmother's heart rather than his, as the Prince quickly moved on to another of the love affairs he was famous for³⁵. The Queen inquired from Alix's sister:

"Is there no hope abt. E.? She is not 19 - & she shld. be made to reflect seriously on the folly of throwing away the chance of a very good Husband, kind, affectionate & steady & of entering a united happy family & very good position wh. is second to none in the world!... What fancy she got in her head?" (Hough 1975: 100)

Given Eddie's tarnished reputation, which the Queen conveniently ignored, it is doubtful Alix would have agreed to the marriage even if she had not already fallen in love. In January of 1889 she accompanied her father on a prolonged visit to Ella, now Grand Duchess Elizaveta, in St Petersburg. During this visit Tsesarevich Nikolai constantly participated in all the activities Alix did.

"They saw each other at receptions, suppers and balls. He came for her in the afternoon and took her skating on frozen ponds and tobogganing down hill of ice. Before Alix departed, Nicholas persuaded his parents to give her a special tea dance, followed by a supper of *blinis* and fresh caviar, in the Alexander Palace at Tsarskoe Selo." (Massie 2000: 31)

³⁴ Princes Albert Victor (Eddie was a nickname) and George, sons of Edward, Prince of Wales.

³⁵ Prince Albert Victor was a notorious drunkard and a playboy. His unhealthy lifestyle led to his premature death at the age of 28 in 1892, which made his younger brother George the heir to the throne.

Alix visited her sister again in 1890 as well, however Nikolai did not meet her. To his own despair he was forbidden to do so by his parents, who voiced their displeasure at the prospect of Alix as the future Empress. While Maria Fyodorovna found her too unsocial, cold and generally awkward, Alexander III hoped to strengthen the political alliance with France by marrying Nikolai to Helene d'Orléans, daughter of the pretender to the French throne. Even when Helene declined the offer on the basis of religious differences and Nikolai declared he would marry Alix or no one, his parents remained reluctant and for the time being the topic of marriage was abandoned.

The objections of the imperial couple diminished in comparison to Queen Victoria's reaction. After all the Hessian sisters married men she disapproved of³⁶, the Queen realized her mere dissatisfaction had only a limited effect on the choices the Princesses made. She pinned her hopes of Alix refusing a seemingly unavoidable Russian proposal on Maria Fyodorovna's opposition and the burning question of inevitable conversion to Orthodoxy, which the Princess would have to accept should she choose to marry the Tsarevich. Since an early age, surrounded by atmosphere of death, endless musings on God and all things sacred, Alix grew increasingly spiritual. Born and brought up as a Lutheran to abandon one church for another seemed an unacceptable concept to her. Queen Victoria relied on other means in her fervent attempts to distract her granddaughter from thinking about Russia, even suggesting yet another proper suitor in person of Prince Maxmilian of Baden, who unsurprisingly got rejected. (King 1996: 50) After Alix's father died in March 1892, the Queen summoned her to England for several months, to lift her spirits and as far as possible marriage was concerned, to keep her out of harm's way. At that point Princess Alix was quite resolved to sacrifice her love, declaring she would never change her religion. However Nikolai worked fervently to make the relationship a reality. In this he found a great support in Ella, who fancied the idea of having her sister in Russia, and mediated regular contact through letters between the young people. Queen Victoria raged upon finding out, informing her eldest Hessian granddaughter immediately:

"Darling Victoria, in my last letter I said I must write to you about a subject wh. I had no time for, then. It is abt. Alicky & N. I had your assurance that nothing was to be feared in that quarter, but I know it for certain, that in spite of all your (Papa's, Ernie's & your) objections & still more contrary to the positive wish of his Parents who do not wish him to marry A. as they feel, as everyone must do, for the youngest Sister to marry the son of the Er. [Emperor] - wld never answer, & lead to no happiness, - well in spite of all this behind all your backs, Ella & S. [Sergei] do all they can to bring it about, encouraging & even urging the Boy to do it! ... but this must not be allowed to go on ... there must be no more visits of Alicky to Russia... The state of Russia is so bad, so rotten that at any moment something dreadful might happen & tho' it may not signify to Ella, the wife of the Thronfolger³⁷ is in a most difficult & precarious position." (Hough 1975: 110)

³⁶ Apart from Princess Ella marrying a Russian, the Queen was also not pleased over Princess Irène marrying her cousin Prince Henry of Prussia, and neither the marriage of Princess Victoria to a man of lower rank made her happy.

³⁷ The Heir to the throne

To save herself more heartbreak Alix deliberately avoided Nikolai when he arrived in England for the wedding of their mutual cousin George in July 1893 and returned to Darmstadt. Moreover in writing she urged both Nikolai and his sister Xenia to stop tormenting her with their insistence. On November 8 she wrote to her suitor:

"You know what my feelings are as Ella had told them to you already, but I feel it my duty to tell them to you myself. I thought everything for a long time, and I only beg you not to think that I take it lightly for it grieves me terribly and makes me very unhappy. I have tried to look at it in every light that is possible, but I always return to one thing. I cannot do it against my conscience. You, dear Nicky, who have also such strong belief will understand me that I think it is a sin to change my belief, and I should be miserable all the days of my life, knowing that I had done a wrongful thing." (Maylunas A. and Mironenko S. (eds.) 1996. *A Lifelong Passion*. London: Phoenix Giant.: 25)

To his sister on March 30 1894:

"Darling, why did you speak about that subject, which we never wanted to mention again? It is cruel as you know it never can be – all along I have said so, do you think it is not already hard enough, to know you are hurting first the person whom of all others you would long to please. But it cannot be – he knows it – and so do not I pray you, speak of it again. I know Ella will begin again, but what is the good of it, and it is cruel always to say I am ruining his life – can I help it, when to make him happy I should be committing a sin in my conscience." (Maylunas, Mironenko 1996: 35)

Familiar with Alix's state of mind and actions, the Queen contentedly noted to Princess Victoria:

"I wonder if poor dear Alicky has talked to you abt. the end of Niki's hopes. At Alix & Victoria³⁸ say he is miserable & that our dear Ella always encouraged him instead of doing the reverse." (Hough 1975: 122)

However the events had already been set in motion which would result in crushing the last obstacles between Alix and the Tsesarevich. First his parents consented on account of Emperor's quickly declining health, which threatened that Nikolai might ascend the throne sooner than expected, and his father suspected the sudden weight of duty and power could prove too much to bear for him. By granting him the permission to propose to the Princess of Hesse Alexander III wished to create at least some sense of security for Nikolai. The opportunity arose soon after, as the Tsesarevich headed to Coburg to attend a wedding of another mutual cousin, Princess Victoria Melita, to Alix's brother Ernst, set for 19 April 1894. The event drew some of the most powerful monarchs of Europe proverbially under one roof. Among the most notable attendees were Emperor Wilhelm II, his mother Dowager Empress Victoria, Tsesarevich Nikolai and a whole group of Russian Grand Dukes and Duchesses, the Prince of Wales, and above them all presided Queen Victoria herself, like a true matriarch whom everybody respected, adored and feared.

³⁸ Princess of Wales and her daughter

"She must have sense an imminent danger, as each meeting between her granddaughter and the tsarevich brought forth a torrent of worry-filled letters. But Alix and Nicholas were adults, and the Queen's influence under the circumstances would prove negligible.... On his second day at Coburg, Nicholas asked to see Alix alone." (King 1996: 55)

His proposal and attempts to convince her to accept dragged on for two long hours, during which the Princess cried bitterly and adamantly repeated: "I cannot." Finally she sent Nikolai away, begging him to leave her at peace. The next day the wedding of Grand Duke Ernst and Victoria Melita took place, after which other relatives interested in the possible match between the Russian heir and German Princess did their bit of persuasion on Nikolai's behalf. Chief among them were Grand Duchess Ella and Nikolai's aunt Grand Duchess Maria Pavlovna, herself originally a Lutheran Princess from Germany. Gently, but firmly they insisted that Orthodoxy and Lutheranism were, in their cores, extremely similar, and conversion would not equal committing a sin at all. Under all the pressure of relatives, Nikolai and her own feelings, Alix yielded and on April 20, when Tsesarevich dared to repeat his proposal, she finally accepted. (Massie 2000: 35)

The last one to be told happened to be Queen Victoria, who recorded in her diary:

"I was quite thunderstruck, as though knew Nicky much wished it, I thought Alicky was not sure of her mind. Saw them both. Alicky had tears in her eyes but she looked very bright and I kissed them both." (King 1996: 57)

Disappointed, the Queen accepted the unavoidable, only insisting that Alix should spend the following summer with her in England. Nikolai was graciously invited to join her for a few days. In autumn he planned to visit his fiancée again, this time in her home in Darmstadt, however all plans needed to be altered, when it became clear Emperor Alexander III of Russia was dying. Only weeks separated Nikolai from his unwanted ascension, when his future bride was hurriedly summoned to the imperial residence of Livadia in the Crimea, where the Emperor and members of his family waited for the inevitable.

Alexander III passed away on October 20/November 1 1894, his son becoming Emperor Nikolai II. The following day Princess Alix of Hesse converted to Orthodoxy, adopting the name Alexandra Fyodorovna, and on November 14/November 26 she and Nikolai were married in St. Petersburg, amidst solemn funeral rites for the late Emperor.³⁹ (Miller 2011: 95)

Shortly before the marriage was celebrated, far away in England the Queen continued to lament to Princess Victoria:

³⁹ The official mourning was lifted for one day, at the occasion of Dowager Empress' birthday, which gave the only opportunity for the wedding to take place. Otherwise Nikolai would need wait for another several months, which he refused.

"...the more I think of sweet Alicky's marriage the more unhappy I am. Not as to the personality, for I like him very much, but on account of the Country, the Policy and the differences with us and the awful insecurity to which that sweet Child will be exposed...But I will try and bear it and make the best of it. Still, the feeling that I had laboured so hard to prevent it and that I felt there was no longer any danger and all in one night – everything was changed. Ella should never have encouraged it originally as she did... All my fears about her future marriage now show themselves so strongly and my blood runs cold when I think of her so young most likely placed on that very unsafe throne, her dear life and above all her Husband's constantly threatened and unable to see her but rarely; it is a great additional anxiety in my declining years. Oh! How I wish it was not to be that I should loose my sweet Alicky. All I most earnestly ask now is that nothing should be settled for her without my being told before. She had no parents and I am her only Grandparent and feel I have a claim on her. She is like my own Child as you all are my dear Children but she and he are orphans. ...I feel as it she was being carried off already." (King 1996: 66)

6. Empress Alexandra Fyodorovna on the Russian Throne

6.1. Alexandra's Attempt to Apply Victorian Standards at Court

Alexandra Fyodorovna came to the throne alongside her husband at the age of twenty two and without any time to adapt to her new country, to get familiar with its culture and people; neither was she given an opportunity to interact with high society before they became her subjects. These were all denied her, while her predecessors had whole years to prepare for their future role as wives of the Heirs. This was an unfortunate disadvantage, because in spite of her brief experience at the court several years before, Alexandra was nothing but deeply shocked when confronted with the real state of the Society in St Petersburg her grandmother had condemned so many times before. The aristocracy in Russia at the end of the 19th century was still largely untouched by industrialisation or the influence of middle-class, which struggled to be recognized. (Davidoff 1973: 101). They lived for pleasure, entertainment and glamour, that all enabled by their fantastic riches and the opulent lifestyle of the Imperial court. The comparison with the Victorians, who strived to at least create an illusion of decency, was hardly even possible.

A minor German Princess brought up in small, uneventful Darmstadt and formed since early childhood by the Victorian mindset found the loose morals of the high-born Russians appalling, and felt offended by the manner in which gossip, scandals and intimate affairs thrived and were accepted as the norm. Once during a ball Alexandra noticed a lady whose décolletage seemed indecently low to her. Distressed she ordered one of her companions to inform the lady that in Darmstadt women did not wear dresses like that. However the young woman, pulling her dress even lower, replied with sarcasm: "Pray tell Her Majesty that in Russia we do wear our dresses this way." (King 1996: 137) The Society refused to change just to please a single individual, and they unashamedly stood in bold opposition to the Empress.

Moreover, for Alexandra every public event represented a painful ordeal. Crippled by her own shyness she failed to make a favourable impression from the start, setting off an avalanche of harsh criticism.

"If she had felt shy and frightened at Darmstadt parties, where all the people were her friends, here in the unknown surroundings, facing hundreds of strangers (to the big ball 2000 people were asked, to the concert balls 800) she felt absolutely lost. She used to say that during the *cercles* she longed to disappear under the ground." (Buxhoeveden 1930: 58)

The fact that her mother-in-law, now Dowager Empress Maria Fyodorovna enjoyed extreme popularity, and that she was constantly compared to her, only lowered Alexandra

in the eyes of the courtiers and aristocrats. She gave the impression of being constantly unhappy, to the point that people believed she had been forced into the marriage by her ambitious grandmother. (VASILI, P. *Behind the Veil at the Russian Court*. New York: Elibron Classics, 2005: 224)

Alexandra was determined to prevent any further excesses at her new court. As she had witnessed in England, she demanded to be presented with a list of people frequently appearing in the palace and started crossing out the names. If gossip touted anyone guilty of immoralities, the young Empress put an end to any more invitations of the person to balls, dinners and other social activities. However in St Petersburg hardly anyone could boast of high moral reputation and after a while the list of suitable company for the sovereigns was decimated. (Massie 2000: 73) This naturally angered and insulted the aristocrats, who openly declared Alexandra a prude and a snob, and flocked to two rival courts – the one of Dowager Empress and the one of Grand Duchess Maria Pavlovna the Elder, both of whom knew how to entertain and enjoyed being the centre of attention. Alexandra in her turn became a target for jokes and mockery, with her every move and word being twisted and taken out of context. It took only two years for her to completely lose the good-will of the spoilt Society. She knew it and did not regret it, preferring to surround herself with several trusted friends instead, and only appearing when absolutely necessary.

She did make one last attempt to fight against the deplorable traits the Petersburg ladies displayed, particularly idleness. She tried to organize a handiwork society. Its members were supposed to knit three garments a year for the poor, by their own hands. However this project only created new opportunity to ridicule Alexandra, and the ladies dismissed any such idea as a waste of time. (Massie 2000: 73) A Russian Empress held no political power. Her role consisted of leading the Society and producing an Heir to the throne. Alexandra spectacularly disappointed the first, and for a long time it seemed she would fail in the latter as well.

6.2. Private Life of the Imperial Family

The intimate family life Alexandra Fyodorovna and Nikolai II led proved far more successful and satisfactory. Only a year after their marriage Alexandra gave birth to her first child, Grand Duchess Olga Nikolaevna. When Queen Victoria agreed to be the baby's God-mother, Nikolai sent her a grateful letter:

"Darling Grandmamma, I thank you deeply for your kind letter... We are both so pleased that you accepted to be Godmother to our first child, because I am sure it will prove a happiness to her after your constant signs of kindness and of motherly affection towards us... We shall send you some of baby's long hair; she is a wonderfully big child and promises to have large eyes. We both kiss you very tenderly and I remain your most loving and faithful grandson, Nicky." (Maylunas, Mironenko 1996: 123)

The baby travelled with her parents to Balmoral in Scotland several months later, where they all spent a few days in company of the old Queen. Much as she liked Nikolai she never stopped regretting his marrying Alix, fearing the possible upheaval of the Russian masses and a bloody end to the Romanovs, which all ultimately happened. Unfortunately the 1896 visit of Balmoral was the last time Alexandra would see her grandmother. Victoria passed away on January 22 1901, and to her great sorrow the young Empress, pregnant with her fourth daughter at the time, was not allowed to attend the funeral. To her elder sister Victoria Alexandra wrote:

"How I envy you being able to see beloved Grandmama being taken to her last rest. I cannot believe she is really gone, that we shall never see her any more. It seems impossible. Since one can remember, she was in our life, and a dearer kinder being never was. The whole world sorrows over her. England without the Queen seems impossible." (Buxhoeveden 1930: 90)

After the Queen's death all the letters Alexandra had sent her over the years were returned to the author, who destroyed them in March 1917, not wanting the eyes of revolutionaries to read some of the most private thoughts she had confined to the Queen. (Buxhoeveden 1930: 91) Being a grandchild to the mightiest woman in the world, Alexandra presumed that should she not give birth to a son, her eldest daughter would inherit the throne. However, the laws laid by Emperor Pavel a hundred years before spoke clearly and to avoid the power eventually passing onto another line of the family, a male offspring was needed.

In creating a home for her family, Alexandra displayed her tastes, heavily influenced by Victorian fashion. She treasured comfort and cosiness over opulence, which led the Imperial couple to choose the relatively small and modest Alexander Palace in Tsarskoe Selo⁴⁰ for their permanent residence, rather than the Ekaterinsky or Winter palaces, which were imposing, but somehow intimidating as well. The Alexander Palace reminded Alexandra of country houses in England. (KING, G. *The Court of the Last Tsar*. Hoboken: Wiley, 2006: 192) Before the couple settled in, Alexandra supervised an extensive redecoration of the private apartments. She entrusted the responsibility to the architect Roman Melzer, who transformed the interiors to reflect the middle-class fashion the Empress was so fond of, in Victorian and art nouveau style. The walls were newly covered in English chintz and new furniture, ordered by mail from Maples Department Store in London, cluttered the modest-sized rooms. The final effect was immensely cosy, but most of the relatives and guests secretly labelled it hideous. Prince Felix Yussupov noted in his memoirs (*The Lost Splendour*. London: The Folio Society, 1996: 73):

"In spite of its modest size, the Alexander Palace would not have lacked charm had it not been for the young Tsarina's unfortunate 'improvements'. She replaced most of the paintings, stucco ornaments and bas-reliefs by mahogany woodwork and cosy-corners in the worst possible taste. New furniture by Maples was sent from England, and the old furniture was banished to store-rooms."

⁴⁰ Today called "Pushkin", it is located about 24 kilometers south of St Petersburg.

Alexandra felt most comfortable in the so-called Mauve boudoir, which was a part of the private rooms. Few were allowed to enter. Mauve, traditionally considered a colour of mourning by the Victorians, happened to be her favourite colour, in sync with her serious and mournful nature.

6.2.1. The Grand Duchesses and Victorian Aspects of Their Upbringing

After her first daughter Olga in 1895, Alexandra bore three more daughters in quick succession: Tatiana in 1897, Maria in 1899 and Anastasia in 1901. Only in summer 1904 were the girls joined in the nursery by a son, Tsesarevich Alexei. Their upbringing followed the principles similar to the ones applied at Hessian court, however, given their position and high-level security measures they grew up completely isolated from the outer world. The Grand Duchesses, not neglected or unloved, but still relegated into secondary position because of their gender in favour of their much more important and often ailing brother, led a claustrophobic existence and were brought up in complete submission to maternal authority, a concept distinctly Victorian and practised by Alexandra.

"Mama knew the best and had a habit of saying so on every possible occasion, or of assuming an aggrieved air of martyrdom if she was displeased. Mama must not be hurt or upset. She was often resting on the sofa before, or after, one of her many confinements... it was not surprising if some of them became autocratic and unyielding." (Margetson 1980: 128)

The whole small world of the Grand Duchesses revolved around their mother, who was determined to protect them from all useless frivolities, loose manners and other harmful influences which might stain their characters. Alexandra's close friend Anna Vyubova admits in her memoirs (*Memories of Russian Court*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1923: 79):

"The Empress dreaded for her daughters the companionship of over-sophisticated young women of the aristocracy, whose minds, even in the schoolroom, were fed with the foolish and often vicious gossip of a decadent society. The Empress even discouraged association with cousins and near relatives, many of whom were unwholesomely precocious in their outlook on life."

The only frequent companion the the girls was Emperor's youngest sister Grand Duchess Olga Alexandrovna. The steps Alexandra took on behalf of her daughters and often her husband in the matter of contact with other Romanovs caused many a rift, ultimately leading to the family all but alienating itself from everyone. Dowager Empress Maria Fyodorovna openly criticized such treatment of her granddaughters, pitying them as "hostages to their mother's paranoia." (King 2006: 40) The Grand Duchesses themselves, all of amiable nature and taught to always please Mama, never protested, forming a unit so tightly-knit they even signed letters and gifts with an acronym OTMA, composed from the initials of their first names. Due to lack of contact with the world and their limited

interaction with other people, being deliberately kept out of touch with events occurring beyond the palace walls, they stayed immature for a long time, and even as 16-years-old would speak like 12-year-olds. Only after the revolution of 1917 and subsequently in exile the elder three adopted more mature views.

Since birth the children were entrusted into care of Russian and English nurses. Nannies from far away England had been a fashionable choice among Russian aristocracy for a long time.

"Their very toughness must have added to their popularity, for a woman who had overcome so many difficulties [on the way to Russia] was unlikely to be daunted by a troublesome toddler. The English were seen as phlegmatic and reliable, and in foreign Courts the distinction between the different races of Britain was never understood. Scottish and Irish nurses were considered equally 'English' and therefore desirable." (ZEEP VAT, C. Romanov Autumn. Phoenix Mill: Sutton, 2000: 84)

Furthermore these modest, ascetic women were seen as unlikely to indulge in extramarital affairs with various men. The Imperial nursery saw several English nurses in quick succession for they proved unsuitable in one way or another. Alexandra finally settled on Irish Margaret Eagar, who stayed with the Grand Duchesses for six years until the birth of the Tsesarevich. It was because of her that the girls spoke English with a strong Irish accent, and their official English teacher Charles S. Gibbes undertook great pains to correct the damage. (TREW IN, J. The House of Special Purpose. New York: Stein and Day, 1975: 17) After Miss Eagar left, the girls were assigned a governess, however she was dismissed after she protested against visits of Grigori Rasputin to the nursery. Alexandra felt jealous of the nurses, and as soon as the girls became more independent and were no longer in need of complete supervision, she decided not to employ any more governesses. Instead one or another of her ladies-in-waiting kept them company.

The children were led toward modesty, their tastes remained simple, and family friends remembered that they were never allowed to waste their time. Aside from time intended for play, their days passed by filled with lessons, long walks and manual work. In winter they helped to clean paths in the palace park of snow, and throughout the whole year handiwork was encouraged. Even little Tsesarevich was taught how to sew.

The children spoke Russian to their father and English to their mother; the Emperor and Empress conversed always in English. Another language used was French, however the children never completely mastered it. Nikolai and Alexandra both spoke German, but rarely used it. The children were introduced to it in later years, however found it too difficult to manage. (Buxhoeveden 1930: 156) Even though the children moved constantly around their parents, days went by without meeting them as well, either because of an illness or official engagements. In such cases the family members wrote each other small notes filled with affection, and in Alexandra's case often also with admonition and reprimand. On January 11 1909 she wrote to her eldest:

"Girlie mine, you must remember that one of the first things is to be polite and not rude, neither in manners nor in words. ... Be always thoughtful and frank. Listen to those who are older than you. Remember above all to always be a good example to the little ones... Be good and listen to your mother. Read this to Tatiana. Always beg pardon when you have been rude or disobedient. Now, try your best and I shall be happy." (Maylunas, Mironenko 1996: 309)

Eleven years old Maria Nikolaevna received the following letter on March 11 1910:

"My darling little Maria, your letter made me quite sad. Sweet child you must promise me never again to think that nobody loves you. How did such an extraordinary idea get into your little head? Get it quickly out again. We all love you very tenderly, only when too wild and naughty and won't listen, then must be scolded; but to scold does not mean that one does not love, on the contrary one does it so as that you may cure your faults and improve." (Maylunas, Mironenko 1996: 317)

As the Grand Duchesses grew into young women, the question of their marriage arose, however the Empress, much like her grandmother once did, was displeased by the prospect of losing her daughters. She supported the idea that they should eventually marry for love, however, this included a condition that the groom should be suitable enough from the material point of view, in addition to a spotless reputation and proper character. Given the isolation of the girls, it was hardly possible for them to develop relationships with suitable representatives of the opposite sex; they were merely allowed to nurture innocent crushes on military officers surrounding their father. Being the eldest, Grand Duchess Olga received several proposals, however not only did she care little for them, none of the suitors were acceptable to her parents either. A faint hope for an alliance with Prince Carol of Romania disappeared completely when in 1916 the Prince asked the Emperor for the hand of Maria, generally described as the most beautiful of the Grand Duchesses, instead. The Emperor refused, stating Maria was just a schoolgirl, even though she had already reached 17 years, a marriageable age. (Vyubova 1923: 86) The confinement of the Grand Duchesses was yet another topic the society seized to criticize the Empress, and even close family friends worried the girls might suffer the fate of many unmarried Victorian ladies, who "stayed in the family fold as unpaid companions to their ageing parents. There was nothing else for them to do." (Margetson 1980: 129) With passing years the Grand Duchesses did indeed become primarily their mother's companions, messengers and nurses, since Alexandra suffered from various maladies.⁴¹ It became a custom for the girls to take daily turns in staying with their mother, even though it often meant the one on duty had to sacrifice going out. In time the Empress relied more and more on her daughters. In February and early March 1917, when revolution broke out in St. Petersburg and the Emperor was away at war headquarters, Alexandra remained almost alone in Tsarskoe Selo, tending her children, who had gone down with measles. Grand Duchesses Olga and Tatiana with their brother Alexei were joined in the sickroom by Anastasia in few days, with Maria Nikolaevna resisting the disease for a time.

⁴¹ Alexandra suffered from migraine and sciatica, her other numerous ailments were of psychosomatic origin. (King 1996: 177)

"She was constantly with her mother, acting as 'her legs' as she said, running messages – the electric current for the lift had been cut off on the 13th – and trying to persuade others to rest. These days, in which she was her mother's sole support, turned her from a child into a woman." (Buxhoeveden 1930: 251)

Maria also bravely accompanied her mother during an extremely cold night, when the Empress personally went out and earnestly requested the remaining soldiers to stay at their posts, while the sound of machine guns could be heard in the distance. A few days later Maria paid for her dutifulness by falling ill with measles and pneumonia on top of it, of which she nearly died. (Massie 2000: 445) She was to repeat her role of the only support when she was chosen to accompany her parents on their journey from Tobolsk to Ekaterinburg, where they were transferred in the spring of 1918, leaving the rest of the family behind to follow later.

6.2.2. The Haemophilia of Tsesarevich Alexei and Alexandra's Association with Grigori Rasputin

For Alexandra as an Empress the foremost duty lay in producing an Heir to the throne. After four daughters and nine years of marriage, during which she grew increasingly agitated and spiritual, she finally gave birth to a son on July 30/August 12 1904. The joy of the parents lasted only for few weeks, before the baby started to bleed from his navel seemingly without a cause. Later, when he started to crawl, dark bruises appeared on his arms and legs, giving a clear signal that the little boy suffered from the dreaded haemophilia. The illness in medical terms means an inherited blood-clotting deficiency, transmitted by females but apart from extremely rare cases striking only males. The afflicted person lives in constant danger, for even a minor bump or bruise may rupture blood vessels beneath the skin, letting the blood flow into muscles and tissues for hours, causing a swelling which presses on nerves and bones resulting in acute pain. Eventually the blood has no more space to fill, creates pressure on the haemorrhage and a clot is finally formed. Gradually a slow process of re-absorption takes place. An open wound when treated quickly represents no greater harm to a haemophiliac than to an ordinary person, however even a minor internal injury may lead to death. (Massie 2000: 137)

How haemophilia starts or why, as well as cure for it, remains unknown even today. The cause of it is a spontaneous genetic mutation, which occurred in the family of Queen Victoria, who transmitted the defective gene to her children and their offspring. Queen Victoria's youngest son, Prince Leopold, was a haemophiliac, and two of her daughters, Alice and Beatrice, were carriers. Through Beatrice and her daughter Victoria Eugenia the haemophilia afflicted the royal house of Spain; through Alice and her daughters Irène and Alix, the royal houses of Germany and Russia. (Massie 2000: 147) It became known and referred to as "English disease". What Alexandra knew of the illness that had claimed the life of her uncle, brother Friedrich and finally one of her nephews, is not clear, although she must have been aware of the possibility of being a carrier herself. Alexei's haemophilia completely changed her life and constant worry for his life never left her at peace. Even in

appearance she changed, looking much older than her age, her famous beauty withering away.

When no doctor succeeded in providing a cure for her son, Alexandra, already extremely devout, turned to supernatural forces for help. In November 1905 the Imperial couple was introduced to Grigori Rasputin, a peasant from Siberia. Contrary to many reports Rasputin was neither a wandering priest nor a monk, he held no rank in the elaborate structure of the Russian Orthodox Church. Of himself Rasputin claimed he was merely an ordinary man advocating God's word. (NELIPA. M. The Murder of Grigorii Rasputin. Pickering: Gilbert's Books, 2010: 16) His permanent association with the Imperial family however did not start until two years later.

"Three year old Alexei had fallen while playing in Tsarskoe Selo. He suffered an injury which developed into a major medical crisis ... Alexandra then remembered Rasputin and requested his presence. [He] arrived very late in the night and by morning Alexei's temperature had fallen and the swelling in his leg had diminished. ... The distraught Empress, who firmly believed in powers of mysticism, associated Rasputin's prayer vigil with the alleviation of Alexei's condition. Her faith in Rasputin as a healer and saviour became absolutely and nothing else could have surpassed the fact that her '*sunbeam*' had returned from the depths of the other side." (Nelipa 2010: 26)

Over the years Alexandra became dependent on Rasputin, who gained a free access to the Palace, a privilege denied to all others including the other Romanovs. In exchange he offered not only his mystical healing powers – which worked without a fail without explanation – but also mental peace for the Empress. In his simple talks intertwined with biblical quotes, in his unassuming manner, Alexandra found a person she unwaveringly trusted. As long as this man of God, "Our Friend", watched over her son and family, all would end well. She perceived his interventions during Alexei's attacks of haemophilia as divine miracles. The Tsesarevich's condition was kept from the public, who soon began to wonder the reason for the peasant's visits to the palace. When no explanation was issued, malicious gossip spread, supported by Rasputin's dubious reputation, which was not unknown to the Empress. However, she considered it false and nothing but a low attack on Our Friend. Who dared to speak against him, became an enemy in Alexandra's eyes. (King 1996: 192)

During World War I Alexandra saw enemies everywhere and more than ever confined in Rasputin, ultimately starting to urge her husband to listen to his advice in state matters. After Nikolai left for the front and the Empress for most part assumed the role of a regent, she heeded Rasputin's requests and appeals, which resulted in drastic changes on high political posts and further crisis, which had already grasped Russia in the form of war and unrest. In December 1916 a group of young nobles, including the Emperor's first cousin Grand Duke Dmitri Pavlovich, secretly murdered Rasputin in a desperate and foolish attempt to save the reputation of the dynasty. (King 1996: 264) For Alexandra this meant a terrible blow and betrayal, and until her last day she never forgot the man God had sent to help her poor son.

The involvement of Grigori Rasputin in the turmoil of intrigues, political ambitions, war crises and the fall of the Empire, has been a matter of elaborate discussions and theories. The one matter which cannot be questioned however is the fact that association with him robbed the Imperial family of its good name, prestige, popularity and paved a path for damaging rumours. Had it not been for haemophilia, the "English disease", he would never had entered the palace, or history.

7. English and Russian Relations in Edwardian and post-Edwardian Era

The death of Queen Victoria in January 1901 shattered the Russian Empress, but the strong family ties sustained the relationship between the two royal houses. Nikolai, who had always been extremely fond of his uncle, wrote to Edward VII on his ascension:

"Dearest Uncle Bertie, I cannot let Misha⁴² go to London without a few lines to you as to express once more how deeply we all feel with you the terrible loss⁴³ you have sustained. My thoughts are much with you and dear Aunt Alix now, I can so well understand how hard this change in your life must be, having undergone the same six years ago. I shall never forget your kindness and tender compassion you showed Mama and me then during your stay here. ... May the new century bring England and Russia together for their mutual interests and for the general peace of the world." (Maylunas, Mironenko 1996: 188-189)

The decision to invest energy into an alliance with Britain rather than Prussia stemmed among other reasons from the fact that nobody in the family liked pompous and loud "Willy", Emperor Wilhelm II, who in his turn felt uncomfortably left out. He had hoped that the influence of his cousin Alexandra would steer Russian international politics to favour Germany, as had traditionally been the case. However he had to accept defeat in the matter.

In 1909 the Imperial family paid visit to their English relatives. Sailing from St. Petersburg aboard the yacht *Standart*, an extremely elegant and luxurious vessel, they arrived in Cowes and were welcomed by brass bands playing both the British and Russian national anthems. The visit lasted for a week and for Alexandra it consisted mainly of revisiting childhood memories. It was also the last time she saw her English relatives. (King 1996: 182) Neither she nor Nikolai returned to Britain ever again, although they regretted not being able to attend Edward VII's funeral the very next year. His death brought to the throne his son, George V, with whom Nikolai had shared a very warm relationship since childhood.

7.1. Russia and Britain as War Allies

Upon the very outbreak of World War I Europe divided into two major camps. The first was represented by Austria-Hungary and Germany, the second by Russia, France and Great Britain. The British were the last of the countries mentioned to enter the conflict, however from the start it was possible to assume to whom they would lend their support. On July 31 1914 King George informed his cousin:

⁴² Grand Duke Mikhail Alexandrovich, younger brother to Nikolai

⁴³ Death of Queen Victoria

"Dearest Nicky, both you & I did all in our power to prevent the war, but alas we were frustrated and this terrible war which we have all dreaded for so many years has come upon us. Anyhow Russia, England and France have clean consciences and are fighting for justice and right. ... I deeply sympathize with you in these anxious days and I trust that your troops will soon be able to move, ours will shortly be in France cooperating with the French. I trust for all our sakes that this horrible war will soon be over and peace once more exist in Europe. God bless and protect you my dear Nicky. With best love from May and myself to dear Alix. Ever your very devoted cousin and friend Georgie." (Maylunas, Mironenko 1996: 389)

During the years that followed busy communication lines were opened between Russia and England, including a regular letter exchange between the two rulers. The correspondence between "Georgie" and "Nicky" would invariably be filled with mutual support, hopes for a victorious ending of the conflict, and would end with assurance of deep friendship, devotion and above all loyalty.

On the other hand the relationships with Germany and relatives living there stopped completely, the war thrusting a wedge between Alexandra and her brother, sister Irène and many others. The family found itself divided by circumstances none of them approved of and the separation hurt the Empress intensely. Furthermore, because of her German origin she faced a new wave of displeasure from the patriotic Russians. Everything German was being spit upon, cursed and condemned, and while her allegiance to Russia was unwavering, it still pained her, even more so when the hate came from her own children. Grand Duchess Tatiana Nikolaevna once expressed her unfavourable view on the country of her mother's origin, repenting the mistake on the October 29 1914:

"Please forgive me, my Mama Sweet, if I ever hurt you involuntarily by saying something about your former home, but really if I do say something, it is always without thinking that I can hurt you, or something like that, because really, when I think of you I only think that you are our angel, Mama dear – a Russian, and always forget that it was not always so, and that you had another home before you came to Papa here." (Maylunas, Mironenko 1996: 399)

7.2. Empress Alexandra's Wartime Effort

Alexandra had dreaded the war, however when it became reality she passionately supported the Russian cause and urged her husband to crush the enemies. She desired to be useful, failing to recognize the fact that as an Empress the public expected her to finally break out of her shell and uphold the image of the Imperial family as a symbol of hope and a reasons to fight. Instead she chose a way of helping which more suited her shy nature and reserved character. She put into action an extensive plan for a system of hospitals and sanitary trains reaching from St. Petersburg to Odessa. (Vyrubova 1923: 108) On her request many Imperial palaces were transformed into hospital wards, including the magnificent Ekaterinsky in Tsarskoe Selo. Alexandra and her two eldest daughters

underwent training and at the end of summer received certificates as Red Cross nurses. The Empress proudly announced to her sister Victoria:

"We passed our exams and received the Red Cross on our aprons and got the certificates of sisters of the war time. It was an emotion, putting them on, and appearing with other sisters – 40 – who had finished their course." (King 1996: 229-230)

Grand Duchess Tatiana at 17 was considered too young, however she insisted on being allowed to work and over time she proved to be very attentive and dutiful, never shying away from the most difficult tasks and like her mother even directly assisting the doctors during gory operations, amputations and witnessing many patients die. Her sister Olga had to give up nursing after only two months, as her sensitive nerves could not bear the stress and suffering of the wounded. (Vyrubova 1923: 109) Together with younger sisters Maria and Anastasia she continued to visit the wards, all of them doing menial tasks to help the patients – writing their letters, reading aloud, holding their hands and in general trying to lift their spirits.

Alexandra's nursing efforts and hard work were, unfortunately, acknowledged and appreciated by few people, as general public and society had little to no idea of her occupation during the war time. Those who knew, however, gained a new respect for her. Her friend Anna Vyrubova remembered (1923: 109):

"I have seen the Empress of Russia in the operating room of a hospital holding ether cones, handling sterilized instruments, assisting in the most difficult operations, taking from the hands of the busy surgeons amputated legs and arms, removing bloody and even vermin-infected dressings, enduring all the sights and smells and agonies of that most dreadful of all places, a military hospital in the mids of war. She did her work with the humility and the gentle tirelessness of one dedicated by God to a life of ministration."

Other Romanov women who took up nursing during the war were Grand Duchess Olga Alexandrovna and Grand Duchess Maria Pavlovna the Younger.

7.3. Possibility of English Exile for the Romanovs

When the reports of revolution and Nikolai's abdication in March 1917 reached King George, he was naturally disturbed. He telegraphed to his cousin:

"Events of last week have deeply depressed me. My thoughts are constantly with you and I shall always remain your true and devoted friend as you know I have been in the past." (Maylunas, Mironenko 1996: 568)

The message, however, was withheld by the Provisional Government and never reached the intended recipient. Almost immediately the diplomatic talks about offering the deposed

monarch and his family a shelter in England started. On March 22 the British ambassador in St. Petersburg George Buchanan received a message that the King was ready to welcome his cousin in England, although, as it turned out, it was a group of his ministers who decided to offer asylum to the Imperial family, not the King. (King, 1996: 313) Meanwhile the "ever devoted and loyal Georgie" was already thinking of how to avoid the responsibility, hoping in vain that perhaps Switzerland or Denmark might offer to host the ex-Emperor instead and take the matter off his hands. (RAPPAPORT. H. Ekaterinburg. The Last Days of the Romanovs. London: Windmill Books, 2009: 148)

The reason for British apprehension was the expected public reaction. Many of yesterday's Allies had already congratulated Russia on tearing down the old oppressive regime, whose chief representative had lent them his support, often at cost of his own huge losses. The British public had already forgotten as well. Aside from the Romanovs not being popular in England, King George worried their presence might also ignite protests from the leftists and communists in his own country, maybe even destabilize the monarchy. The King's private secretary Lord Stamfordham, corresponded over the matter with British Foreign Secretary A.J. Balfour, informing him on March 24 1917:

"The King wishes me to write again on the subject of my letter of this morning. He must beg you to represent to the Prime Minister that from all he hears and reads in the Press, the residence in this Country of the Ex-Emperor and Empress would be strongly resented by the public, and would undoubtedly compromise the position of the King and Queen from whom it is already generally supposed the invitation has emanated. I would particularly call your attention to an article in last Thursday's *Justice* by Hyndman who condemns the invitation, and implies it has come from Their Majesties. And Hyndman is the person that Mr Henderson told the King he wished to send to Russia as one of the representatives of our Socialists in the Country! Buchanan should be instructed to tell Milyukov⁴⁴ that the opposition to the Emperor and Empress coming here is so strong that we must be allowed to withdraw from the consent previously given to the Russian Governments proposal." (Maylunas, Mironenko 1996: 586)

Terrified by the idea of losing the throne as well, George, not fully aware of the consequences, instructed his government to withdraw the invitation, and suggesting turning to France instead. (Rappaport 2009: 151)

The Russian Provisional Government appeared rather eager to send Nikolai abroad, resolved not to repeat the horrors of the French revolution. However as their own position was not strong and the longer the talks with the British lasted, the more difficult it grew for them to organize the proposed transfer of the Imperial family from Russia. By the end of March the window of opportunity closed and did not open again. The Romanovs, under house arrest in the Alexander Palace, had been told they would be sent to England and started sorting out and packing their things. On March 23 Nikolai noted into his diary: "I looked through my books and things, and started to put aside everything that I want to take

⁴⁴ Minister of Foreign Affairs appointed by the Provisional Government

with me, if we have to go to England." (Maylunas, Mironenko 1996: 585) Instead, in the beginning of August the whole family was moved to Siberian city of Tobolsk, where the Provisional Government hoped they would be out of reach of any harm from the Bolsheviks, who were already gaining power and ultimately seized the Russian state in October 1917.

The Imperial family seemed to be forgotten by all, first in Tobolsk, later in Ekaterinburg. Occasionally, during the long months between Nikolai's abdication and his execution King George expressed his concern. However only once the rumours and unclear messages about the Emperor having been shot did he realize the graveness of the situation he had allowed to happen. On July 25 1918, less than two weeks from the murder of the whole family, the King recorded into his diary:

"May⁴⁵ and I attended a service at the Russian Church in Welbeck Street in memory of dear Nicky who I fear was shot last month by the Bolsheviks, we can get no details, it was a foul murder, I was devoted to Nicky, who was the kindest of men, a thorough gentleman, loved his Country and his people." (Maylunas, Mironenko 1996: 678)

The more information and details, both true and inaccurate, came to his knowledge, the more aghast he was. At first the reports indicated that only the Emperor was shot in the basement of the so-called Ipatiev House in Ekaterinburg, while the Empress with the children were moved to another place. The truth eventually emerged, too horrible to comprehend. Neither Alexandra nor her children between the ages of 22 and 13 were spared. The Grand Duchesses in particular suffered a terrible death. Their dresses had jewels sewn into them, hidden for safe-keeping, and these acted like bullet-proof vests. Because of that Olga and Tatiana were shot to the head; Maria and Anastasia had to be bayoneted to death. (Rappaport 2009: 190-191) Added to these already gruesome truths the King was also presented with reports that the girls were brutally raped, of which thankfully in reality they had been spared.

For King George the murder of the Imperial family remained a life-long stain on his conscience. He extended his help to the rest of the Romanovs still in Russia, including his aunt the Dowager Empress and Nikolai's sisters. Eventually they escaped from Crimea aboard the British military vessel Marlborough in 1919. (Hall 2006: 323) Still, the memory of the Ekaterinburg murders haunted King George for the rest of his life.

⁴⁵ Queen Mary, consort of King George

8. Conclusion

The revolution of 1917 and the fall of the Romanov dynasty, which had ruled over Russia for over 300 years, was a product of many significant actions and the development of socio-cultural issues during a span of several decades, if not centuries. It is impossible to determine the exact moment or deed which finally made the Empire crumble, just as it is impossible to pinpoint prevention of which of these moments and actions would have changed the outcome of the crisis.

Empress Alexandra Fyodorovna stands as one of most poignant and important figures of the tragedy. Often historians judged her as a proud, hysterical woman who let herself be manipulated by a cunning charlatan. Such allegations though are born of ignorance. Her Victorian upbringing installed in her high morals and deep religiousness, and her grandmother was an inspiration for her strong, even obstinate nature. In many ways her personality was admirable, however her education failed to connect morality with tolerance, religiousness with common sense and strong will with ability of self-reflection. The Victorian influence she brought to Russia and under which she redefined the court life clashed violently with the mentality of her adopted country and its society. The Russians lacked the English inclination toward conservatism and much like the majority of Slavic nations had little sense of order and discipline, things Alexandra swore by. In this way Victorianism exercised beyond English borders only resulted in isolating the Imperial family, dividing society and shattering the reputation and respect the Imperial family had commanded and which were essential for its survival. It proved to be a lifestyle completely incompatible with Russian sentiment.

Victorianism, born partly as a defence mechanism against revolution, aimed to correct behaviour and thinking of decadent royals. Russian Society resented any such attempt, feeling safely enclosed in their wonderful palaces, where the plight of a peasant represented only a pitiful story from afar. Queen Victoria recognized this and the imminent dangers it would cause, and attempted to sabotage the relationships that eventually brought two of her granddaughters to Russia, but she was not successful. Where Grand Duchess Elizaveta, endowed with tactfulness and amiable disposition, managed to command not only respect, but genuine love and admiration, her sister, although of the same background and education, struggled without achievement.

On a more personal front Alexandra was an immensely loving wife and mother, however her children lived almost as prisoners of her affections, that again being a common concept in Victorian England, where at least one of the daughters was expected never to marry and to tend her parents. Had the Grand Duchesses been exposed to society life and allowed to grow up, at least one of them would have probably been safely married, either out of the country or with prospects to escape once the revolution broke out. Forever viewed and treated like children the four sisters were instead bound to perish, together with their brother, simply for the crime of their last name. In case of Tsesarevich Alexei and his

haemophilia, an illness inherited from Queen Victoria, the monarchy suffered a fatal blow, as it led to Alexandra's fatalism and reliance on Rasputin, who let the Empress be exploited through himself by politics for their monetary gains, quickening the disintegration of the state structure.

The ideology which upheld the English monarchy helped to bury the Russian one. For a short period of time the two large Empires stood united through both diplomacy and family ties, however that did not save the last Imperial family from its horrid fate. It remains a tantalizing prospect to imagine Nikolai II not as Russian autocrat, but an English King. In most probability he would have grown much like his cousin George V, and would most likely express the same views on important questions. There is no reason to doubt Nikolai would have made an excellent constitutional monarch. To the hypothetical question of whether he would have ensured the safety of exile for a deposed relative and his family who had extensively contributed to his own efforts in the most violent and drastic war then known to man, there is perhaps no answer.

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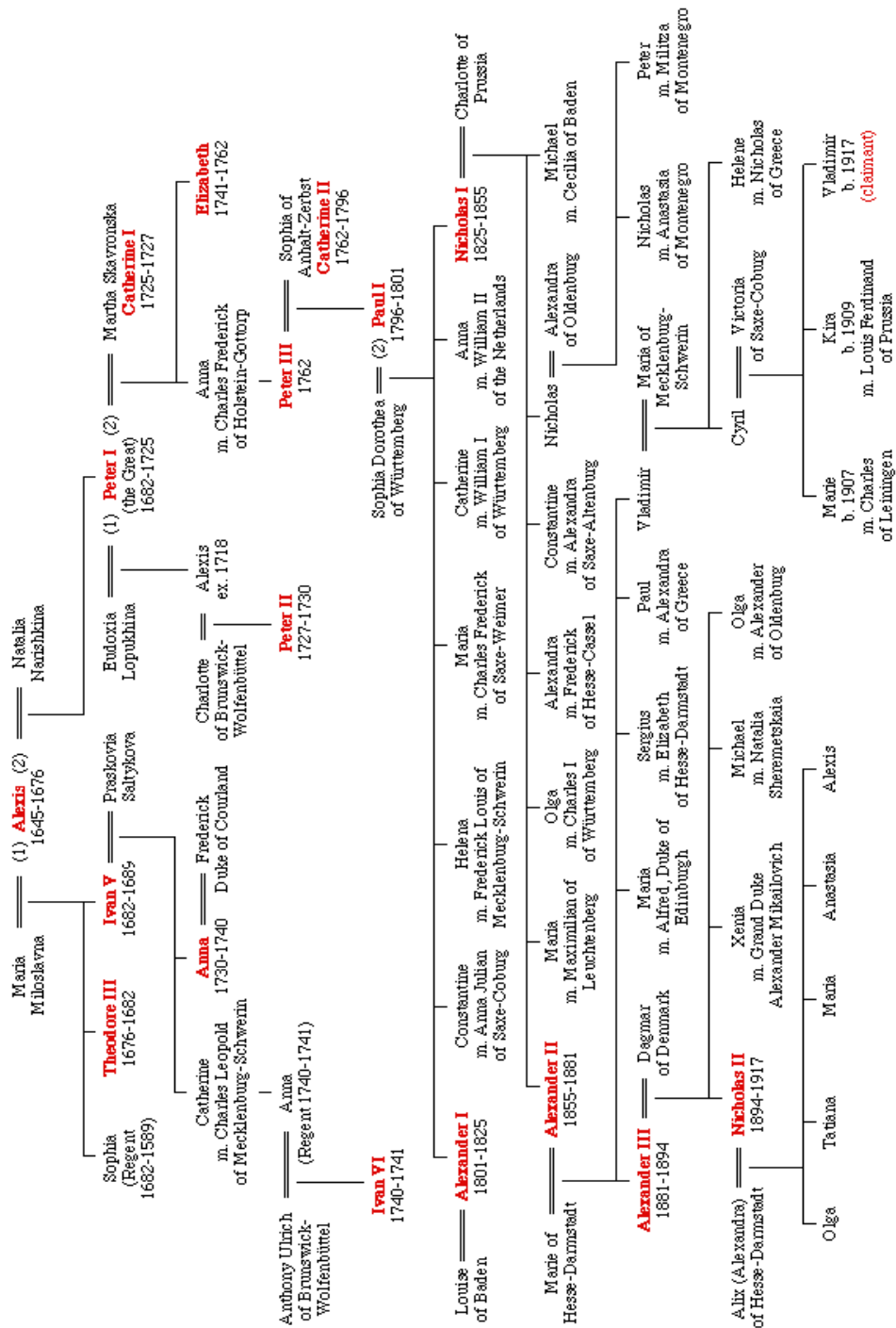
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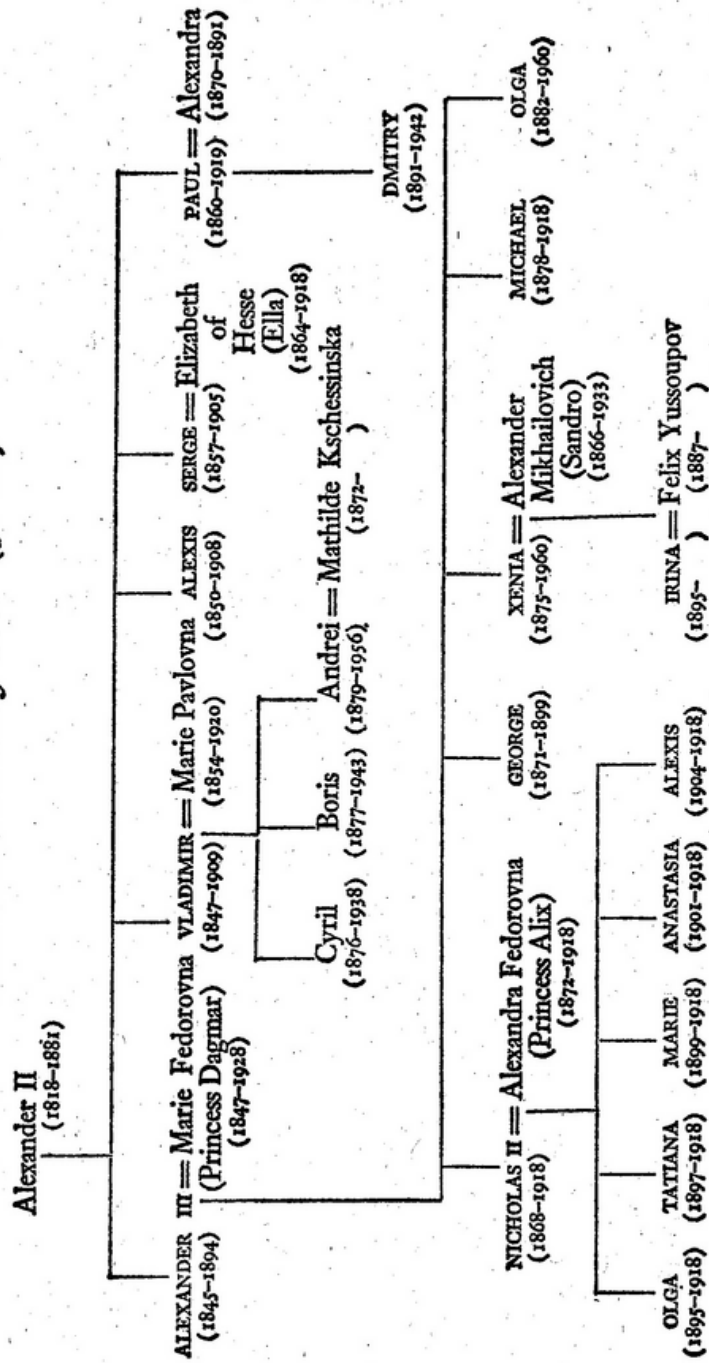
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Appendix A: Family Trees of the Romanovs



Source: <http://www.edstephan.org/Rulers/romanov.html> [21-6-2014]

Nicholas II's Family Tree (partial)



(Massie 2000: 534)

Appendix B: Images of English and Russian royals



Image 1: Queen Victoria of the United Kingdom, 1887
(Wikimedia Commons)



Image 2: Albert Edward, Prince of Wales, with his wife Princess Alexandra, 1865.
(Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2014)



Image 3: Tsesarevich Alexander Alexandrovich with wife Maria Fyodorovna and three eldest children, Grand Duke Nikolai, Georgiy and Grand Duchess Xenia, 1878.
(Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2014)



Image 4: Grand Duchess Maria Alexandrovna with husband, Prince Alfred of Edinburgh and their first son, 1875.
(Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2014)



Image 5: Princess Alice of the United Kingdom, Grand Duchess of Hesse, 1864.
(Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2014)



Image 6: Grand Duke Ludwig of Hesse with wife Alice and their children. From the left: Elisabeth, Ernst, Alix, Irène, Victoria; Marie in her father's arms, 1875.
(Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2014)



Image 7: Princesses Marie and Alix of Hesse, 1878.
(Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2014)



Image 8: Queen Victoria with granddaughters Victoria, Elisabeth and Alix, after death of their mother and sister Marie, 1879.
(Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2014)



Image 9: Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovich of Russia with his fiancée Princess Elisabeth of Hesse, 1884.
(Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2014)



Image 10: Grand Duchess Elizaveta Fyodorovna, 1897.
(Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2014)



Image 11: Queen Victoria with daughter Beatrice and grandchildren Albert Victor, Alix and Irène, Balmoral 1887.
(Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2014)



Image 12: Tsesarevich Nikolai Alexandrovich, 1893. The photograph was given to Prince George, Duke of York, future George V. (Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2014)



Image 13: Nikolai Alexandrovich and George, Duke of York, 1893.
(Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2014)



Image 14: Queen Victoria with descendants and relatives, Coburg 1894. Standing behind the Queen: Tsesarevich Nikolai, Princesses Alix, Victoria and Irène.
(Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2014)



Image 15: Tsesarevich Nikolai Alexandrovich and Princess Alix of Hesse at the time of their engagement, 1894.
(Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2014)



Image 16: Empress Alexandra Fyodorovna of Russia, 1895. The photograph was gifted to Queen Victoria.
(Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2014)



Image 17: Queen Victoria and Prince of Wales with Emperor Nikolai and Empress Alexandra, holding Grand Duchess Olga, Balmoral 1896.
(Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2014)



Image 18: Emperor Nikolai II with infant Tsesarevich Alexei Nikolaevich, 1904.
(Private collection)



Image 19: Grand Duchess Anastasia Nikolaevna knitting, Tsarskoe Selo 1906.
(Beckene Rare Book & Manuscript Library)



Image 20: The Imperial family with King Edward VII, Prince George of Wales, Queen Alexandra and Princesses Victoria and Mary, Cowes 1909. (Private collection)



Image 21: Alexandra Fyodorovna at the sickbed of Tsesarevich Alexei, 1912.
(Private collection)



Image 22: Imperial children, 1911.
(Private collection)



Image 23: Imperial family in a formal photoshoot at the occasion of Romanov Tercentary, 1913.
(Private collection)



Image 24: Tsesarevich Alexei Nikolaevich and his Spaniel Joy, 1915.
(Private collection)



Image 25: H.I.H. Grand Duchess Maria Nikolaevna as Honorary Colonel-in-Chief of the 9th Kazansky Dragoon regiment, 1915.
(Private collection)



Image 26: Empress Alexandra and Grand Duchesses Olga and Tatiana with a friend (on the left) in their nursing uniforms, 1915.
(Beckene Rare Book & Manuscript Library)



Image 27: Nikolai and Alexandra in a photo signed "Papa" and "Mama", 1917.
(Private collection)



Image 28: Maria, Olga, Anastasia and Tatiana in captivity, Tsarskoe Selo 1917.
(Private collection)



Image 29: The Ipatiev house, Ekaterinburg.
(Private collection)

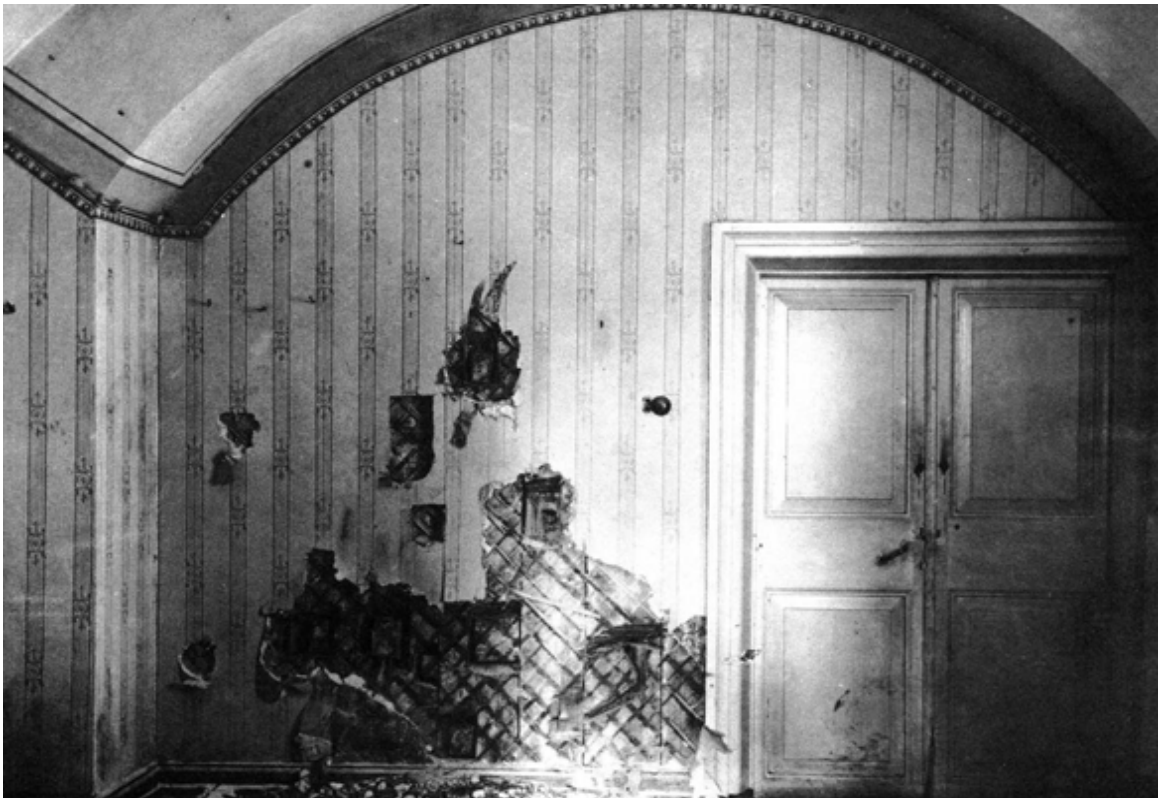


Image 30: The basement room of the Ipatiev house, where the last Imperial family was executed, photographed by the investigators of the White army, 1918.
(Private collection)