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Echa Przeszłości 12, 143-156

2011

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

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ALEXEI NIKOLAEVICH, TSAREVICH OF RUSSIA

This article does not aspire to give an exhaustive account of the life of Alexei Nikolaevich, not only for reasons of limited space. The role played by the young lad who was much loved by the nation, became the Russian tsesarevich and was murdered at the tender age of 14, would not justify such an effort. In addition to delivering general biographical information about Alexei that can be found in a variety of sources, I will attempt to throw some light on the less known aspects of his life that profoundly affected the fate of the Russian Empire and brought tragic consequences for the young imperial heir¹.

Alexei Nikolaevich was born in Peterhof on 12 August (30 July) 1904 on Friday at noon, during an unusually hot summer that had started already in February, at the beginning of Russia's much unfortunate war against Japan. Alexei was the fifth child and the only son of Nicholas II and Alexandra Feodorovna. He had four older sisters who were the Grand Duchesses: Olga (8.5 years older than Alexei), Tatiana (7 years older), Maria (5 years older) and Anastasia (3 years older). In line with the law of succession, Alexei automatically became heir to the throne, and his birth was heralded to the public by a 300-gun salute from the Peter and Paul Fortress. According to Nicholas II, the imperial heir was named Alexei to break away from a nearly century-old tradition of naming the oldest sons Alexander and Nicholas and to commemorate Peter the Great's father, Alexei Mikhailovich, the second tsar of the Romanov dynasty that had ruled over Russia for nearly 300 years from the 17th century. Nicholas II held Alexei Mikhailovich in greatest esteem from among all of his predecessors. A supreme manifesto was issued on the occasion, stating that in the event of the Tsar's premature death, Grand Duke Mikhail Alexandrovich was to become the regent, and it placed the imperial heir in Alexandra's care².

¹ For the unabridged version of this article, refer to: *Aleksy (1904–1918) – ostatni cesarzewicz i następcą tronu rosyjskiego* in the memorial book published by Adam Mickiewicz University of Poznań to commemorate the 70th birthday anniversary of Professor Artur Kijas. See: *Studia z dziejów Europy Wschodniej*, ed. G. Błaszczyk and P. Kraszewski, Poznań 2010, pp. 267–287.

² S.S. Oldenburg, *Tsarstvovanye Imperatora Nikolaya II*, Moscow 1992, p. 227.

The beaming father wrote in his meticulously kept diary: “An unforgettable and great day, on which we received so evident a sign of God’s love. At a quarter past one in the afternoon Alix had a son, who was named Alexei during prayers. [...] No words are adequate to thank God for the consolation he has bestowed on us in this year of difficult tribulations!”³ Alexei’s mother, Alexandra, wrote: “Weight – 4660, height – 58, head circumference – 38, chest circumference – 39”⁴. The royal family’s joy knew no bounds as the birth of four successive daughters left Nicholas II and Alexandra with little hope of producing an imperial heir. Various treatments, visits to the spa, pilgrimages to holy places and the assistance of venerated elders did not bring the desired results. Alexandra was even diagnosed with a false pregnancy. Suddenly, great happiness was bestowed upon the family.

The prolonged waiting for the birth of a successor to the monarch’s throne caused concern in the royal court and political circles across the country, turning into a serious worry that occupied the tsar’s mind. After Alexandra had given birth to their third daughter, Maria, in 1899, Nicholas II became so irritated that he had to take a long walk in the park before greeting his newborn child⁵. The tsarina’s every successive pregnancy raised hopes, and every delivery that did not meet expectations fuelled public speculations⁶. The inability to produce a successor became a state affair. In his coronation manifesto, published in Livadya on 3 November (21 October) 1894 directly after the death of Alexander III, Nicholas II requested an oath of allegiance not only to the monarch but also to Duke George “*who would remain his legal successor until God blesses his future marriage with Princess Alix of Hesse*”⁷. This was not an extraordinary request. During regular and

³ From Nicky’s diary, *Mikołaj II i Aleksandra: nieznaną korespondencją*, Selection, A. Maylunas, S. Mironienko, translated by M. Dors, Warszawa 1998, pp. 267–268. English translation: article by Augusta Pobedinskaja, Royal Russia – Directory, <http://www.angelfire.com/pa/ImperialRussian/royalty/russia/aleksei.html>. For the original Russian text of the cited excerpt, refer to: *Dnyevniki Imperatora Nikolaya II*, ed. K. F. Shachillo, Moscow 1991, p. 222.

⁴ From the diary of Alexandra Feodorovna, *Mikołaj II i Aleksandra*, p. 267.

⁵ G. King, *Imperatritsa Alexandra Feodorovna. Biografia*, Zakharov-Moscow 2000, p. 185.

⁶ During his stay in Gatchina on 10 June (29 May) 1897 when the tsar’s oldest daughter, Olga, was born, Grand Duke Constantine Constantinovich, the tsar’s uncle, wrote in his diary: “*The news traveled fast, but everyone was disappointed because this time, they were expecting a boy*” in: From KR’s diary, *Mikołaj II i Aleksandra*, p. 183. The tsar’s brother, George, also noted in a letter to Nicholas II “*I hope you will forgive me – I felt slightly disappointed that it was a girl. I was getting ready to retire [to give up his function of imperial heir], but it looks like I will not be able to do so for a while*”, George’s letter to Nicky of 14 (2) June 1897 from Abbas Tuman, *ibidem*. Similar attitudes are found in the letters written by other members of the tsar’s family, including tsarina Alexandra and Queen Victoria, upon the birth of successive daughters. Some of them, including Grand Duke Constantine Constantinovich, wrote after Maria’s birth: “*I do regret that it was not a boy. Poor Alix! Russia will be so disappointed by this news*”. From the diary of KR, 26 (14) June 1899, *ibidem*, p. 205.

⁷ See J. Sobczak, *Cesarz Mikołaj II. Młodość i pierwsze lata panowania 1868–1900*, Part I – *Młodość*, Olsztyn 1998, p. 326. About Nicholas II see also *idem*, *Nicholas II – the Last Emperor of All the Russias: the study of personage and the evolution of power*, translated by J. Hetman-Pawlaczyk, Olsztyn 2010, p. 329.

obligatory services for the imperial family in Orthodox and Catholic churches, members of the congregation raised their prayers to “*His Highness the Almighty Great Monarch, Emperor and Autocrat of All Russias, Our King Nicholas II Alexandrovich*” as well as “*His Successor, the Revered Tsesarevich Grand Duke George Alexandrovich*”⁸. After George’s death in 1899, the throne was passed down to the Tsar’s younger brother, Grand Duke Mikhail, yet the issue of royal succession remained unresolved. Some grand dukes argued that neither George nor Mikhail had formally used the titles of tsesarevich and imperial heir. As noted by Grand Duke Constantine Constantinovich during a mourning service for George on the morning of 10 July (29 June) 1899: “*the names of the tsar, both tsarinas and the entire royal family were mentioned, but not a word was said about the heir to the throne*”. The following statement found its way to the announcement of the tsarevich’s death: “*since God chose not to bless us with a son, under the sacred laws of the Empire, the right of succession to the Russian throne belongs to our dear brother, Grand Duke Mikhail*”⁹. The announcement did not resolve the matter. The problem of succession resurfaced in late 1900 when Nicholas II was stricken down with typhoid fever during his stay in Crimea¹⁰. The issue was discussed at length by Count Sergei Witte and the tsar’s mother who complained that neither of her sons had the character or the will power required of a monarch¹¹. An unrealistic suggestion was made to pass down the throne to Olga, the monarch’s oldest daughter. The matter was discussed with Witte in the company of several ministers and Grand Duke Mikhail Nikolaevich. Mikhail’s candidacy was considered as the natural and formally acclaimed choice. The question remained, however, whether Mikhail should give up the throne if the tsarina, who was once again pregnant, would produce a male heir. Court speculators turned their attention to Alexander III’s younger brother and Nicholas II’s uncle, Grand Duke Vladimir Alexandrovich, and his children as potential successors to the imperial throne in the event of formal complications. Alexei’s birth put an end to those speculations, but they had already reached tsarina Alexandra, making her resentful of Witte¹².

In these circumstances, it does not come as a surprise that Alexandra Feodorovna was very anxious to give birth to a male heir. But to her great

⁸ *Modlitwa za Monarchę i Dom Cesarski. Książeczka modlitewna do nabożeństw, b.m.w.* [1895], pp. 496–499. See J. Sobczak, *Mikołaj II – ostatni car*, pp. 105–106.

⁹ From the diary of KR, *Mikołaj II i Aleksandra*, p. 206; Y. Kudrina, *Imperatritsa Maria Feodorovna Romanova, (1847–1928 gg.). Dnyevniki. Pisma. Vospominanya*, Moscow 2000, p. 83.

¹⁰ *Mikołaj II i Aleksandra*, pp. 219–222.

¹¹ Y. Kudrina, *Imperatritsa Maria Feodorovna.*, p. 91. Although the book is excellently researched, the author is wrong in dating the tsar’s illness in Crimea to late 1902.

¹² See D. Lieven, *Nicholas II. Emperor of all the Russias*, London 1993, p. 162; *Mikołaj II i Aleksandra*, p. 220; S. Y. Witte, *Isbranye vospominanya, 1849–1911 gg.*, Moscow 1991, pp. 386–388.

disappointment, consecutive pregnancies produced daughters who could succeed to the throne only if all of the tsar's male relatives died or were removed from the line of succession. In 1900, Alexandra took the advice of Princesses Milica and Anastasia of Montenegro, the wives of Grand Dukes Nicholas and Peter Nikolaevich, and she became engaged in occult practices and hypnosis that were to guarantee the birth of a healthy son. The first alleged doctor who set out to help the tsarina was Philippe of Lyons, France. The performed treatments required Philippe's presence in Alexandra's private quarters which fuelled gossip about the tsarina's alleged affair. Maria Feodorovna, the tsar's mother and widow of Alexander III, demanded that the Frenchman be ousted from the court, but Nicholas II was unable to refuse his wife's pleas to receive treatment in which she vested high hopes. Philippe assured Alexandra that the position of the stars guaranteed a male heir, but in 1901, the tsarina gave birth to the fourth daughter, Anastasia¹³. The ridiculed Frenchman was first replaced by yurodivy ("holy fool") Dimitri and later by Daria Osipowa who suffered from epilepsy and was proclaimed a prophet by the grand duchesses. Next, for many days, the tsar and his wife prayed in solitude by the grave of Seraphim of Sarov. Nicholas II deeply believed that it was only thanks to the saint's assistance that Alexandra's fifth pregnancy produced the long awaited male heir¹⁴. The birth of a son, a successor to the throne, came as a relief to Russia's political elites who supported the monarchy¹⁵. Already upon birth, the infant was given the title of His Imperial Highness, tsesarevich, heir to the throne (the tsar's brother, Grand Duke Mikhail, ceased to hold this title) and grand duke.

The imperial heir was baptized on 3 September 1904 in the Orthodox chapel at the Peterhof court. The ceremony was attended by numerous member of the tsar's family, including his great-grandfather, Christian IX of Denmark, who was 87 at the time. Alexei's principal godparents were his paternal grandmother, Maria Feodorovna, and Grand Duke Alexei Alexandrovich Romanov. His other godparents included his eldest sister, Grand Duchess Olga, his great-grandfather Christian IX of Denmark, the Prince of Wales Edward Windsor later King of England as Edward II, William II Hohenzollern, Kaiser of Germany, and Grand Duke Alexei Alexandrovich Romanov. Nicholas II and Alexandra Feodorovna were not present because

¹³ E. Radziński, *Jak naprawdę zginął car Mikołaj II*, translated by E. Siemaszkiewicz, Warszawa 1994, pp. 88–90.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 91–94.

¹⁵ The atmosphere that accompanied the long waiting and the gossip surrounding the tsarevich's birth also gave rise to less joyous attitudes in the public. Alexander Suvorin quotes his carpenter in a rather spiteful entry of his diary dated 31 July 1904: "*Carpenter Mikhailov told me today: I'm riding the train to the city from my summer cottage. The passengers are talking about the newly born monarch. Suddenly, a man says out loud: 'Those Russians are strange. A new lice has infested their hair, it will soon start biting, but they're all happy.' Everyone suddenly went quiet. It is surprising how candid people can be about it*". A. Suvorin, *Dziennik*, translated by Jerzy Pański, Warszawa 1975, p. 521.

according to the Orthodox tradition, the parents do not attend the ceremony. Personal confessor to the imperial family, father Ioann Yanishev, dipped the infant in the baptismal font, evoking a loud cry of shock from the tsarevich when his head came into contact with cold water.

Alexei's birth was celebrated with revelry throughout the country. According to Sophie Buxhoeveden's memoirs, in a manifesto issued on the occasion, the tsar granted many favors to his subjects, including amnesties, shorter prison sentences, medals and cash prizes¹⁶. The tsarevich was appointed commander of several regiments formed in his honor. Alexei made the impression of a strong and healthy boy upon birth. Pierre Gillard referred to his student as a very lively and even naughty child who was more inclined to play than study. But unlike his sisters, Alexei was not allowed to play tennis or ride a bicycle, and he spent most of his days under the watchful eye of two guards, sailor Clemens Nagorny and retired boatswain Andrei Derevenko. Alexandra Feodorovna took personal care of her son when he was not feeling well. In consequence, Alexei was an extremely spoiled child, and any attempts at instilling in him the principles of court etiquette ended in failure. The tsarevich openly mocked his father's guests when he was allowed to attend official receptions. Sometimes, he would even jokingly slap the people who bowed before him in greeting¹⁷. Alexei was a whimsical child who gave frequent displays of rude behavior. When the tsarevich was 6, he saw Alexander Izvolsky, the minister of foreign affairs, waiting outside the tsar's office. The man did not rise from his chair at the sight of Alexei. The boy, completely taken aback by the lack of respect to which he had been accustomed, approached Izvolsky and reprimanded him loudly: "*when the heir to the Russian throne enters the room, people have to rise*"¹⁸.

Alexei was tenderly called Sunshine, Agunyushek, Little Man or Baby by his parents. Several weeks after birth, he was diagnosed with hemophilia, the *disease of kings*, which he had inherited from his mother, the carrier of a defective gene, and from his maternal great-grandmother, Queen Victoria. The disease was incurable at the time, and the young monarch was constantly at risk of premature death. The first symptoms of hemophilia, a sudden bleeding that was very difficult to staunch, surfaced when Alexei was only 6 weeks old¹⁹.

¹⁶ S. Buxhoeveden, *The Russo-Japanese War and the Birth of Alexis*, Wikipedia. Alexei Suvorin, who was very critical about the tsar in his diary, noted with sarcasm that on the joyous occasion of the tsarevich's baptism, the monarch did not announce the Russian fleet's another defeat in the war against Japan. He was referring to the sinking of the Russian cruiser Novik near Sakhalin: "*Defeats and disasters are not acknowledged when the tsar is rejoicing*". See A. Surovin, *Dziennik*, p. 530.

¹⁷ G. King, P. Wilson: *The Fate of the Romanovs*. John Wiley and Sons, 2003, p. 53; E. Heresch: *Mikotaj II. "Tchórzostwo, kłamstwo i zdrada"*. Gdynia 1995, p. 138.

¹⁸ R. K. Massie, *Mikotaj i Aleksandra*, translated by K. Kwiatkowski, Warszawa 1995, p. 126.

¹⁹ *Mikotaj II i Aleksandra*, p. 271; *Dnyevniki Imperatora*, p. 228.

On the third day, the blood flow from the navel stopped completely, but in the months and years that followed, every time the toddler, and later the little boy, tripped and fell, his arms and legs would become covered with bruises and bumps that turned into blue swellings. The blood under the boy's skin would not clot. When he was three and a half, Alexei tripped and hit his face which swelled so profoundly that he was unable to open his eyes. At one point, the parents had to become reconciled with the sad truth that the long-awaited heir to the throne suffered from hemophilia. The disease was long kept secret, and Alexei's personal physician was the only member of the court who knew the truth. But no secret can be kept eternally, especially if it concerns a monarch and those closest to him. With time, it became obvious that the tsarevich suffered from a health problem. The carefully guarded secret was gradually revealed to a broader public, although it was not officially communicated for a long time. Rumors began to spread. Already in mid December 1904, Alexandra Bogdanovich, the general's wife and a renowned scandalmonger in the royal court and not only, wrote in her memoirs that she had overheard Boris Stürmer, an influential politician, later the Russian prime minister, talk about the tsarevich's hereditary disease. She did not mention the name of the ailment, but went on to add that a surgeon was permanently stationed in the court on account of the disease²⁰. The gene responsible for the blood clotting disorder was passed down by mothers to their sons (tsarina Alexandra was the granddaughter of Queen Victoria, a hemophilia carrier)²¹. Every skin cut and nose bleed posed a threat to Alexei's life, but joint bleeding was the most painful and almost crippling experience. The tsarevich's illness severely depressed his mother. Ever since the disease had been discovered, Alexandra devoted every minute of her life to Alexei, even at the expense of her daughters. The life of the entire family became focused on the heir. United in their concern for Alexei's well-being, members of the family isolated themselves from social life and its elites. Pierre Gillard, the tsarevich's Swiss tutor, recalled that the atmosphere in tsar's court was largely dependent on Alexei's health and mood on a given day. For as long as it was possible, the tsar's family concealed the boy's disease, even from the servants and the children's tutors, and when the secret finally came out, they never told the entire truth about the severity of his condition and his attacks. Alexei was fully aware of the state of his health and the fact that he could die. During attacks of hemophilia, he welcomed the possibility of death as the much coveted relief from his suffering²².

²⁰ A. Bogdanowicz, *Tri poslednikh samodyertsa. Dnyevnik*, foreword by A. Bokhanov, Moscow 1990, p. 313.

²¹ See J. Thorwald, *Krew królów. Dramatyczne dzieje hemofilii w europejskich rodach książęcych*, translated by K. Jachimczak, Kraków 1994, p. 230.

²² "When I die, it won't hurt any more, will it, mum?" he asked one day. When he started to recover several days later, he told his parents: "When I die, build me a little tomb of stones in the park." G. King, *Imperatritsa Alexandra...*, p. 238.

Alexei received a well-rounded education, and he grew to become a handsome and energetic young man with a lively disposal, many talents and interests. The tsarevich's French tutor, Pierre Gillard, left behind detailed memoirs which he wrote only after the revolution of 1917. Initially published in English, they were later translated into many languages, including an abridged version in Polish²³. "*Alexei was the center of this united family, the focus of all its hopes and affections. His sisters worshipped him. He was his parents' pride and joy. When he was well, the palace was transformed. Everyone and everything in it seemed bathed in sunshine,*" wrote Gillard²⁴.

Just like his father, Alexei loved military parades. Upon birth, he was appointed hetman of all Cossack regiments, and he received a Cossack uniform, complete with a fur hat, boots and a dagger. In the summer, he donned the uniform of a sailor from the tsar's fleet. Alexei was a very musical child. His sisters played the piano, but he had a preference for the balalaika. He enjoyed playing with pets.

Nicholas liked to show his son off before the guests, emphasizing his good looks. The tsar sometimes took Alexei with him to regiment parades. The amused soldiers would cheer *Hurray*, and Alexei would smile sweetly. It seemed that after the rather unfortunate reign of Nicholas II, who despite many reforms and the successful transformation of Russia from a tyrannical state to a nearly constitutional monarchy was unable to gain social acclaim, a wise, energetic and popular monarch would finally ascend the Russian throne. There was just one problem – the above-mentioned disease.

Due to hemophilia, Alexei grew up under the close supervision of nurses. When he turned 5, physicians recommended that the young tsarevich be placed in the care of two male nurses, and sailors Derevenko and Nagorny were given the job. Their duty was to keep the boy safe from any physical injury, and they often took him for walks in the park and carriage rides. In some periods of his childhood, Alexei seemed to be free of the disease, and he would play boisterously with his sisters. He was a loud, lively and naughty child, but he also enjoyed *serious conversations* with adults. Like many boys of his age, Alexei collected treasures such as nails, pieces of string and pebbles in his pockets. Gilliard wrote in his memoirs: "*Alexei [—] was tall for his age. He had an oval, beautifully carved face with delicate features, auburn hair with a coppery glint and large grey-blue eyes like his mother's. He was a cheerful child, and he enjoyed life whenever he could. Alexei was a happy, mischievous boy. His preferences were not sophisticated, and he never drew*

²³ *Imperator Nikolay II i yevo semya (Peterhof, sentyabr 1905 – Yekaterinburg, may 1918). Po lichnym vospominaniyam P Zihlara, byvsheho nastavnika naslednika Alexeya Nikolaevicha*, foreword by S.D. Sazonov, Vienna 1921, reprinted in Moscow 1991; P. Zhiliar, *Imperator Nikolay II i yevo semya*, Moscow 1992; P. Gilliard, *Tragiczny los cara Mikołaja II i jego rodziny*, translated by J. P. Zajączkowski, Warszawa 1990.

²⁴ Robert K. Massie, *Nicholas and Alexandra*, Dell Publishing Co., 1967, p. 137.

false satisfaction from his position of imperial heir which was the last thing on his mind. [...] He was very bright and inquisitive, he took a lively interest in everything. Sometimes, he would take me by surprise by asking questions which showed that he was mature beyond his age, sensitive and highly intuitive"²⁵. This is not to imply that Alexei was unaware of his special status in the family. During formal occasions, he would occupy the seat by his father's side. The crowds in the streets would greet him with joyful cheers *Tsesarevich, successor to the throne*. Passers-by would gather around Alexei in hope of touching him, and delegations of peasants would drop to their knees before the tsarevich. It was Alexei, and not his sisters, who received regimental delegations and was showered with gifts.

Despite the above, Alexei was generally an obedient child, and he would succumb to his sisters' authority without much protest. Lively and curious as little boys are, he rarely remembered to exercise caution during play. He could not come to terms with the fact that unlike his peers, he was deprived of many pleasures of boyhood. Alexei was not allowed to ride the bicycle as it entailed a significant risk of falling. He ignored all bans and orders. In addition to his natural desire to play, it was also his way of protesting against the excessive care of his over-protective parents and tutors. During the tsar's inspection of the palace guard, Alexei took everyone by surprise by riding an appropriated bicycle into the center of the palace square. To make up for all the pleasures of childhood that Alexei was denied, his parents tried to bribe him with expensive and safe gifts. The boy's room was filled with extraordinary toys, but they could never compensate for unbridled fun outdoors. Alexei's education was frequently interrupted on account of his disease, and the boy grew to be somewhat lazy without much interest in books. He was intellectually mature beyond his age, and he was able to produce a clever and witty riposte that testified to the depth of his thought and judgment. He liked to think and wonder. When asked what he was thinking about, he would answer that he enjoyed the sun and the beauty of summer as long as he could because one of these days, he could be prevented from doing it. Alexei was a clever boy, but like his sisters, save for Olga, he was a reluctant academic. He often asked penetrating questions that testified to an intellect well beyond his years. Due to his disease, he was brought up in greater isolation than the tsar's remaining children. Next to his parents, the youngest of his sisters, Anastasia, was the family member he felt closest to.

Yevgeny Botkin, privat-docent at the Military Medical Academy in Petersburg, was the court physician for the tsar's family who was much liked by Nicholas' children. The Peterhof Palace and the imperial residence in Tsarskoye Selo were also visited by specialists. Vladimir Derevenko, a young doctor, personally attended to Alexei when his disease took a worse turn. Derevenko's daughter, Tatiana, wrote extensively in her memoirs about the

²⁵ *Z pamiętników Pierre'a Gilliarda, in: Mikołaj II i Aleksandra, p. 402.*

respect that Alexei and the entire imperial family bestowed upon the court physicians, including Botkin²⁶.

The constant fears that Alexei might be killed by the then incurable disease contributed to the much overrated influence of Grigori Rasputin, a self-proclaimed prophet, drunk and debaucher, in the imperial court. Rasputin was purported to have supernatural powers (which are explained by parapsychology today) that gave him the ability to alleviate pain and stop bleeding²⁷. Alexandra Feodorovna believed that Rasputin could heal Alexei even from a distance by speaking to the boy on the telephone or sending a soothing telegram. Skeptics attribute Rasputin's healing powers to hypnosis. Rasputin had a considerable influence on Alexandra who turned a deaf ear to any reports about his scandalizing life style and disastrous influence on the imperial family's reputation. Alexandra Feodorovna believed that only Rasputin could heal her son²⁸. The suggestion that tsarevich Alexei was the son of *starets Grigori*, made by Maxim Gorky in a letter to his friend Alexander Amfiteatrov in 1914²⁹, is completely absurd. Rasputin had been nowhere near the imperial court when Alexei was born in 1904.

The absolute trust that the neurotic and superstitious tsarina Alexandra had vested in Rasputin whom she believed to be the only man capable of keeping her beloved son alive, her ignorance of any evidence that pointed to Rasputin's immoral behavior and corrupt political practices undermined the public's trust in the imperial family. Rasputin's influence tends to be exaggerated in literature, but he undoubtedly exercised some control over the tsar's family, and he was responsible for the dismissal of at least two successive prime ministers, Pyotr Stolypin and Vladimir Kokovtsov³⁰. The above could substantiate a hypothesis that if it were not for Alexei's birth and hemophilia which initiated this chain of unfortunate events and demonic forces, if it were not for Rasputin's contribution to alleviating Alexei's suffering and the influence he exercised on Alexandra and Nicholas, if it were not for the mystic healer's attempts to undermine the reputation of the tsarist family, especially during World War I, the Russian monarchy would have

²⁶ See T. Mielnik (Razhdyennaya Botkina), *Vospominanya o tsarskoy semlye i yevo zhizny do e posle revalutsyi*, Moscow 1993, p. 208.

²⁷ For a broader reference, see E. Radziński, *Rasputin*, translated by E. Madejski, Warszawa 2000, p. 408.

²⁸ E. Heresch, *Mikołaj II. Tchórzostwo, kłamstwo i zdrada*, Gdynia 1995, pp. 241–242, 260, 278; E. Radziński, *Jak naprawdę zginął...*, pp. 252, 266.

²⁹ *Literaturnoye nasledstvo*, Vol. 95: *Gorky e ruskaya zhurnalistka nachala XX vyeku*, Moscow 1988, p. 453.

³⁰ W.N. Kokovtsov, *Is moyevo proshlovo. Vospominanya 1911-1919*, selection, ed., foreword by S.A. Volkh, Moscow 1991, pp. 410-418; A.P. Borodin, *Stolypin, Reformy vo imya Rasyi*, Moscow 2004; J. Sobczak, *Postać Griszki Rasputina w świetle ostatnich publikacji historycznych*, in: J. Sobczak, *Rosyjskie ścieżki Klio. Wybór szkiców i esejów historycznych oraz fragmentów "Dziennika" Autora wydany z okazji jego 75. rocznicy urodzin*, Pułtusk-Warszawa 2007, pp. 155–167.

survived for many more years, and the reforms initiated by Alexander II and Nicholas II would have advanced Russia's industrial, civilization and social development.

When Alexei was around 8 or 9, Nicholas II began to prepare him for his duties of a monarch. He would take Alexei to meetings with government ministers and military commanders, and he forced the boy to wear a gala uniform which is something that Alexei quickly grew fond of. From his earliest years, Alexei spoke only Russian, and his parents instilled in him a love for Russian cuisine, folk art and costumes. Advised by Gillard, they ceased to control Alexei's every move in hope of teaching their son to become responsible for his own safety. With age, Alexei suffered fewer life-threatening attacks of hemophilia. The most serious occurrence took place in the fall of 1912 when the Tsar and his family were at their hunting lodge in Spala, near the Koziencice Primeval Forest in Poland. Alexei injured himself, and the bruising caused a blood infection. The tsarevich was in suffering for 11 days, and the doctors began preparing his parents for the worst. An official statement about Alexei's condition was published. During daily prayers for the tsesarevich, the lodge was surrounded by crowds of Polish peasants weeping for a sick child³¹. Alexei recovered only after Rasputin's inexplicable, remote intervention. Prime minister Kokovtsov gave a detailed account of those bleak days in his memoirs. He wrote that all Russian officials had been frozen still, as if waiting for Alexei's death that would ultimately lead to a national tragedy. Even Kokovtsov did not have the heart to send urgent paperwork to the monarch, although Alexei's illness coincided with elections to the Fourth State Duma, and the tsar's attention was required to analyze the potential distribution of political forces in the new parliament³². The above example demonstrates that in a country where the autocratic system had been abolished, although Nicholas II undoubtedly continued to exercise his power in an autocratic style, the health of the imperial family's member had a staggering effect on state affairs. In an attempt to celebrate Alexei's recovery and, as Nicholas told Kokovtsov in Spala, to do some good, the tsar pardoned members of the security service who, during Kiev celebrations of September 1911, failed to preempt an assassination attempt on Pyotr Stolypin, General Pavel Kurlov, deputy minister of the interior and commander of the Gendarmes, Nikolai Kulabka, Chief of the Kiev Okhranka, Mitrofan Verigin, deputy director of the police department and assistant to General Kurlov, and General Alexander Spiridovich, chief of the tsar's personal police³³.

Alexei's disease had serious consequences for the imperial succession procedure in the Romanov dynasty. The rumors about the heir's premature

³¹ Y.W. Kudrina, *Imperatritsa Maria Feodorovna*, p. 134.

³² W.N. Kokovtsov, *Is moyevo proshlovo*, p. 166.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 175. See also: L. Bazyłow, *Ostatnie lata Rosji carskiej. Rządy Stołypina*, Warszawa 1972, pp. 448–450.

death forced Nicholas' brother, Grand Duke Mikhail, to take decisive action. Mikhail would assume the throne in the event of Alexei's death. The Grand Duke was convinced that under these circumstances, the imperial family would never consent to his marriage with Natalia Wulfert-Brasova, the former wife of an ordinary cavalry captain, who had been twice divorced. In 1908, Mikhail fell passionately in love with Natalia who gave birth to their son, George, already in July of that year. On 31 October 1912, Maria Feodorovna, the tsar's widow, received a letter from Cannes: "*My Dear Mother! [—] My heart is heavy with the news I have to share with you [—], but two weeks ago, I married Natalia Sergejevna. I might have never taken that step if it were not for little Alexei's illness*"³⁴. The wedding ceremony took place at the Serbian Orthodox Church in Vienna. Mikhail notified the tsar of his morganatic marriage. Nicholas II refused to acknowledge it, he banned Mikhail from re-entering Russia, he dismissed him from all posts in the army and exercised other sanctions, including financial. Mikhail's marriage to Natalia was legitimized only after the outbreak of World War I. Mikhail was allowed to return to Russia and continue his service in the army. Natalia and their son were granted the noble title of Brasov counts³⁵.

After the outbreak of World War I and Nicholas II's rise to the post of Chief Commander of the Russian Army, the tsar willingly took Alexei to the General Headquarters. The boy was fascinated by adult life, war and the company of men which differed radically from the predominantly female surroundings in Tsarskoye Selo. Wearing the army uniform, he took a great interest in cannons, riflemen training, he strolled down the trenches and other fortifications and learned more about daily life in the army. Alexei accompanied his father during trips to dislocated regiments of the army. In recognition of his visit to the south-western regiment that was stationed near the area of military operations, he received a 4th class Order of St. George as well as his first and last military rank of corporal. The soldiers warmed towards the little boy, their future monarch, who liked to play a soldier. Those experiences and the awareness of the deadly risks carried by hemophilia made Alexei more serious and sensitive to other people's needs.

In March 1917, Nicholas II decided to abdicate in favor of tsesarevich Alexei, and proclaimed his brother, Grand Duke Mikhail Romanov, as the regent. Nicholas signed the manifesto on the night of 15 (2) to 16 (3) March under which a 13-year-old boy would become the ruler of a giant empire. General Ruzsky, pleased that the monarch had easily made a historic decision, presented Nicholas II with an abdication statement from the General Headquarters. Nicholas signed it. The clock struck 3 p.m., and the document was dated 15 March. In line with the law of imperial succession, the Russian

³⁴ E. Radziński, *Rasputin*, translated by E. Madejski, Warszawa 2000, p. 181.

³⁵ The title refers to the grand duke's estate in the Orlov governorate. See W.I. Fiedorczienko, *Rasiysky Imperatorskyi Dom e yevropeyskiye monarkhi*, Moscow 2006, pp. 193–194.

throne would be passed down from father to son. But Petrograd officials insisted that the abdication statement be signed by witnesses. Alexander Guchkov and Vasil Shulgin, deputies to the Fourth Duma, were dispatched to Nicholas, and the document was not to be published before their return. While the deputies were on their way, Nicholas had the time to rethink his decision and answer a question that had been long occupying his mind: should he place the burden of power on the arms of his underage and sick son in those troubled times? He had a long and honest talk with the court surgeon, Professor Sergei Feodorov³⁶, who further asserted Nicholas' fears that Alexei was not a prime candidate for imperial monarch on account of his disease and the probability of premature death. The surgeon also pointed out that the young monarch would have to be separated from the family to prevent his dethroned parents from influencing his decisions. As the result of this sad consultation, the tsar changed his initial decision to make Alexei his successor and his brother Mikhail the regent. Having arrived from Petrograd which was engulfed by the revolution, Guchkov delivered an elaborate explanation relating to the abdication statement. The tsar interrupted him, saying that the abdication statement had already been drafted but in a new, changed form. Nicholas II abdicated the throne on behalf of himself and his 13-year-old son, tsarevich Alexei, nominating his brother, Mikhail, to succeed him. "*Since We do not wish to part from Our beloved son, We transmit the succession to Our brother, Grand Duke Mikhail Alexandrovich, and give Him Our blessing to mount the Throne of the Russian Empire,*" read the statement³⁷.

The statement spurred controversy and criticism among the monarchists who argued that Nicholas had no right to abdicate and deprive his underage son of the right to succession. Nikolai Basily, Director of the Diplomatic Chancellery at the General Headquarters of the Chief Commander of the Russian Army, who drafted the first version of the abdication statement, did not hide his indignation: "*The tsarevich's ascension to the throne was the only measure that could have stopped the revolution. The young Alexei Nikolaevich would have been backed not only by law, but also by the army and the nation*"³⁸. Perhaps this would have been the case. Sergei Sazanov, former (until 1916) minister of external affairs, confessed to the French ambassador, Maurice Paléologue, that: "*I do not need to assure you of my love and dedication to the tsar*" – he said with tears in his eyes. "*But until my dying day, I shall never forgive him for abdicating in his son's name. He hadn't the least right to do it. Is there a law anywhere in the world that can deprive a minor of his*

³⁶ Not with Yevgeny Botkin, as claimed by Mikhail Heller in *Historia Imperium rosjskiego*.

³⁷ *Akt abdykacji Mikołaja II*, in: *Mikołaj II i Aleksandra*, p. 571. English translation: Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicholas_II_of_Russia. Various Polish translations of this document are cited in many publications.

³⁸ J. Sobczak, *Mikołaj II – ostatni car Rosji*, p. 524.

rights?"³⁹ To this day, the Russian monarchists continue to argue that the abdication statement signed on Alexei's behalf was illegal because it violated the law of imperial succession, yet in their indignation, they fail to account for the fear of a father who trembled at the very thought of parting with his son. The tragedy that occurred in the basement of the special purpose house in Yekaterinburg on the night of 16 to 17 July 1918 could not have been foreseen by the best strategist. The story of this atrocious murder, committed 92 years ago, has been widely discussed in many publications, and there is no need to repeat the details. Let me only say that Alexei was two weeks shy of his fourteenth birthday when he was murdered⁴⁰.

The search for the bodies of the tsar's family, in particular the tsesarevich, continued for a very long time. The Romanovs' remains were discovered in June 1991, and they were buried in St. Peter and Paul's Cathedral in St. Petersburg on 17 June 1998. The excavated remains were never officially identified as those of Alexei and his sister Maria, however. Their skeleton fragments were found only in August 2007 near the mass graves where the remaining bodies had been buried.

The long search for Alexei's remains and personal belongings fuelled rumors about his miraculous survival and escape from Yekaterinburg. As a result of this, there have been men who pretended to be the tsarevich, among them Michał Goleniewski, a high-ranking official of the secret service in socialist Poland, who emigrated to Western Europe and proclaimed himself the son of former tsar Nicholas II⁴¹. There is also the sensational version by the three Russian authors of *The Escape of Alexei*⁴² who claimed that Alexei had miraculously survived the execution and went on to live as

³⁹ Ibidem. The original story of the tsar's abdication, enforced by a plot of Stavka generals headed by Mikhail Alexeiev, and an interesting portrait of Alexei as the imperial successor is given by: V. Kobylin, *Anatomiya ismyeni. Imperator Nikolay II e Gyeneral-adyutant M. V. Alexeiev*, ed. L. E. Bolotin, *Istoki antimonarkhicheskovo zagovora*, S.-Pieterburg 1998, pp. 288–335.

⁴⁰ See S. P. Mielgunow, *Sudba imperatora Nikolaya II posle otrycheniya*, New York 1991, pp. 422; V. V. Alexeiev, *Ghibel tsarskoy semly: mify e ryalnost, Noviye dokumenty o tragedii na Urale*, Yekaterinburg 1993; E.E. Alfieriew, *Pisma tsarskoy semly is zatocheniya*, Jordanville 1984; P. Benckendorf, *Last days of Tsarskoe Selo*, London 1927; Y. Bogosłowski, *Tayna tsesazhevicha: dlinnaya doroga k istnye*, *PiK*, 8 February 1997, No. 8(747); Y. Buranov, V. Khrustalov, *Ghibel tsarskovo doma*, Moskwa 1992; Y. Buranov, V. Khrustalov, *Uhbeytsy tsara. Uhnichtozhenye dinastyi*, Moscow 1997; *Tayna tsarskeh ostankov. Materyali nauchnoy konferentsy "Paslednaya stranitsa istoriy tsarskoy semyi: itogi isuchenya Yekaterinburhskoy tregedyi"*, Yekaterinburg 1994; P. Zylhiar, *Trahicheskaya suhdba ruhskoy imperatorskoy familii*, Tallin 1921.

⁴¹ See Z. Siemiątkowski: *Wywiad a władza. Wywiad cywilny w systemie sprawowania władzy politycznej PRL*, Warszawa 2009, pp. 93–97, 151–153.

⁴² G.B. Egorov, I.B. Lysenko, V.V. Petrov, *Spaseniye tsarevicha Alexeia. Istoriko-kriminalisticheskaya rekonstruktsiya rastryela tsarskoy semly*, St. Petersburg 1998, pp. 288. The story of the alleged escape of the tsar's children, including Alexei, exists in different versions. See A.N. Griannik, *Zaveshchanye Nikolaya II*, part I-II, Riga 1993; N. Wojtowicz, *Sehodnya kahzdy delayet vybor. Interviu s imperatorem Nikolayem III*, *Kaleidoscope*, January/February 1997, No. 5(236), p. 5.

a provincial teacher of geography under the name of Vasil Ksenfontovich **Filatov**. According to the authors, Filatov had revealed his true identity to his children and family shortly before he died in 1988. The assumption that a provincial teacher was the escaped monarch is highly improbable, even impossible, but it cannot be ruled out. The tsar's family were murdered and their bodies were transported to the grave at night and in complete organizational chaos where anything could happen. Most of the guards were drunk. It should also be noted that Russia has a strong and historically rooted tradition of "samosvanets", impostors who appear from nowhere and make claims to the Russian throne⁴³.

⁴³ A current manifestation of the enduring myth of survival of members of the Imperial Family is a book by the prominent Russian historian Vladlen Sirotkin, entitled: *Anastassia ili komu vygoden mif o gibeli Romanovykh*, Moskva 2010, p. 255.