

British Perceptions of Tsar Nicholas II and Empress Alexandra Fedorovna 1894-1918

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I, Claire Theresa McKee confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

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Abstract

Attitudes towards Tsar Nicholas II and Empress Alexandra Fedorovna can be characterised by extremes, from hostility to sentimentality. A great deal of what has been written about the imperial couple (in modern times) has been based on official records and with reference to the memoirs of people who knew the tsar and empress. This thesis recognises the importance of these sources in understanding British perceptions of Nicholas and Alexandra but it also examines reactions in a wider variety of material; including mass circulation newspapers, literary journals and private correspondence. These sources reveal a number of the strands which helped form British understanding of the tsar and empress. In particular, perceptions were influenced by internal British politics, by class and by attitudes to the role of the British Empire in world affairs, by British propaganda and by a view of Russia and her society which was at times perceptive and at others antiquated. This thesis seeks to evaluate diverse British views of Nicholas and Alexandra and to consider the reasons behind the sympathetic, the critical, the naïve and the knowledgeable perceptions of the last tsar and empress of Russia.

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Preface

Until February 1918 Russia adhered to the Julian (Old Style) Calendar, which in the nineteenth century ran twelve days, and in the twentieth century thirteen days, behind the Gregorian (New Style) calendar in use in Western Europe. The dates in this thesis are given in the New Style since the sources used are, in the main, British and the perceptions under discussion are those of British commentators.

Russian names are spelt in this thesis using a modified version of the Library of Congress Transliteration which retains anglicised versions of well known names, including those of Russian tsars and empresses. In addition, the towns and cities of the Russian empire are referred to by their English names as they were in contemporary correspondence and publications. I have also retained the name of St Petersburg throughout this thesis rather than using Petrograd for name of Russia's imperial capital after August 1914.

Contemporary British sources referred to Nicholas II as both tsar and emperor and to Alexandra Fedorovna as both tsarina and empress. In this thesis I have used the terms tsar

and empress to refer to Nicholas and Alexandra.

Abbreviations

Bagenal: Leeds Russian Archive University of Leeds.

Churchill: Archive Centre, Churchill College Cambridge

CUL: Cambridge University Library.

IWM: Imperial War Museum.

Lambeth: Church of England Record Centre.

Lords: Lloyd George Papers.

Morier: Baliol College Library Special Collections University of Oxford.

ODNB: Oxford Dictionary of National Biography.

OSP: Oxford Slavonic Papers.

RA: Royal Archives.

SEER: Slavonic and East European Review.

SSEES: Archive of the School of Slavonic and East European Studies UCL.

Shropshire: Shropshire County Archives.

Surrey: Surrey History Centre.

TNA: The National Archives.

Introduction: Sources, Personalities and their World

Since the demise of imperial Russia a vast library of books has been published on the subject of the fall of the Romanov dynasty. In the more serious studies historians have naturally concentrated on Russian responses to the last tsar and empress and on their attempts to deal with the crises they faced.¹ Historians who have made a study of Britain's political relations with Russia during this period, most notably Michael Hughes and Keith Neilson, have analysed the workings of the British diplomatic service, the variety of British attitudes towards Russia, the means by which these were formed, and the role these opinions played in an international context.² More widely, as we shall discuss in Chapter One, Anthony Cross has revealed the web of Russo-British commercial, artistic and cultural interaction.

The vicissitudes of Russo-British relations and the manifestations of political debate within Russia provide key markers and form a framework to our discussion. However, this thesis differs significantly from what has been written hitherto since we have sought to focus more specifically on British attitudes towards Nicholas and Alexandra as ordinary people in extraordinary roles: as autocrat, as a military leader, as husband and

¹ Andrew M. Verner, *The Crisis of Russian Autocracy: Nicholas II and the 1905 Revolution* (Princeton, 1990), Richard S. Wortman, *Scenarios of Power, From Alexander II to the Abdication of Nicholas II* (vol. 2), (Princeton, 2000), Dominic Lieven, *Nicholas II: Emperor of all the Russias* (London, 1993), Lindsey Hughes, *The Romanovs: Ruling Russia 1613-1917* (London, 2008), M.D. Steinberg, and V.M. Khrustalev, (eds.), *The Fall of the Romanovs: political dreams and personal struggles in a time of revolution* (London, 1995).

² See, for example, Michael Hughes, *Inside the Enigma: British Officials in Russia, 1900-1939* (London, 1997). Michael Hughes, *Diplomacy before the Russian Revolution: Britain, Russia and the Old Diplomacy 1894-1917* (Basingstoke, 2000). Keith Neilson, *Britain and the Last Tsar: British Policy and Russia 1894-1917* (Oxford, 1995).

wife, as parents, as royal kinsfolk and as heirs to Russia's past, often viewed through the prism of centuries of British impressions of a despotic, Asiatic and exotic regime. In addition, for many British commentators the role of monarch in the political and public life of the nation, as head of state and as a 'celebrity' provided an example against which commentators could reflect on Nicholas and Alexandra's roles as tsar and empress.

For British observers of Russian affairs Nicholas was simultaneously self-effacing and he was stubborn, he was both a reforming tsar and a determined autocrat, he was weak and he was all powerful. The tsar was at once a peacemaker and a warmonger. By the same token Alexandra was a helpmate and an evil influence, she was of English descent and pro-German, she was well educated and narrow minded and she was more autocratic than the most absolutist Romanov ruler. It was said that the mass of their subjects loved the imperial couple and that the bonds of unity had been broken on Bloody Sunday. Journalists and others who met with Nicholas and Alexandra in one palace or another reported that the imperial couple lived a simple existence yet others bemoaned the luxury and extravagance of the Russian court.

For the purpose of analysing those who commented on the imperial couple, and who formed British perceptions of the tsar and empress, we have divided them into four categories. The first includes members of the British royal family. The attitude of individual British monarchs towards the imperial couple as kinsmen, as human-beings and as rulers of a rival empire was reflected in the British public's perceptions of the tsar and empress.

The second group whose opinions we consider is formed of British diplomats and members of the government who interpreted and reacted to the tsar's political decisions. The perceptions of these men were affected by factors ranging from the views of the government they represented to their education and their position in British society. The third group is made up of a variety of authors and journalists whose ranks include popular writers, political activists. As we shall discuss their views ranged from the vitriolic to the adulatory as some propogandised in the tsar's favour and others actively campaigned against his regime. The fourth group consists of travellers, tourists and expatriates whose work and curiosity took them to Russia. The boundaries between members of group two to four are not concrete. They sometimes overlap, so that members of one may have features of another. As Keith Neilson has noted, those whose profession or employment took them to Russia such as 'businessmen, journalists, novelists and financiers [...] often knew each other'.³ As a result, although they did not necessarily form a homogeneous community, the world they inhabited was a relatively small one where insider news, gossip and views might play an unseen part in informing perceptions of Nicholas and Alexandra.

In order to represent a mixture of views we have used a variety of materials published and unpublished, public and private. They include newspapers and periodicals held at the British Newspaper Library and in the periodical collections housed in Senate House Library and the London Library. In the chapters concerning Nicholas and Alexandra's wedding, their visit to the Isle of Wight as well as the Dogger Bank Incident we discuss

³ Neilson, *Britain and the Last Tsar*, p. 106.

the responses of the local press. In the main however, with some notable exceptions such as the *Manchester Guardian*, we have considered the perceptions of the London based press. There are three main reasons for this. Firstly, London was the centre of government and the capital of the Empire with a large population whose views newspapers and journals sought to reflect and to challenge. Secondly, although during wartime national newspapers made ad hoc sharing arrangements thus affording smaller publications the prestige of having their ‘own foreign correspondent’, only publications with a substantial circulation could afford to send correspondents to Russia for a long period of time.⁴ Thirdly, although there was a thriving provincial press, much of its international coverage was simply lifted from the columns of London newspapers.⁵ In addition to the many newspapers we have also made use of a number of periodicals ranging from the Tory leaning, *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* to the anti-tsarist *Anglo Russian Review*.⁶

Alongside the many public sources of comment on Nicholas and Alexandra we have made use of Foreign Office correspondence, minutes of Cabinet meetings and the diaries and letters of members of the diplomatic corps located at the National Archive in Kew; material in the Royal Archive Windsor, the Hardinge Papers at Cambridge University Library, Sir Nicholas O’Conor’s correspondence in the Churchill Archive at Churchill College Cambridge, R.B.D. Morier Papers held by Balliol College Archives, Oxford, material in the collections of the Imperial War Museum and the House of Lords archive. Others are recorded in the bibliography.

⁴ Lucy Brown, *Victorian News and Newspapers* (Oxford, 1985), p. 115.

⁵ Stephen Koss, *The Rise and Fall of the Political Press in Britain* (1981), vol. 1, p.416.

⁶ John Plunkett, *Queen Victoria: First Media Monarch* (Oxford, 2003), p. 20.

Although historians are increasingly making use of national distinctions in discussing the peoples of the United Kingdom using ‘British’ as term of reference has enabled us to include material written by commentators such as the journalist E.J. Dillon and the ambassador Sir Nicholas O’Conor whose Irish birthplace now lies outside the borders of the twenty-first century United Kingdom. In addition, this thesis discusses the opinions of naturalised British subjects such as Carl Joubert, who wrote in English for a British audience, and Jaakof Prelooker whose periodical, *Anglo Russian Review*, contributed to the public debate about the autocracy. No single person, ideology or event was responsible for the formation of the kaleidoscopic perceptions of the last tsar and empress. However, British commentators may be said to have been influenced by at least three key factors. One of the most significant centred on British understanding of Russia, Russian history and Russian society. Accumulated over centuries of Russo-British contact; differing reactions to the nature of, and challenges to, Russian despotism; as well as widely established images of loyal, if naïve, peasants influenced British views of the imperial couple. Together with a variety of political and geographical images which presented Russia as both an Asiatic and a European power, these factors contributed to British perceptions of the imperial couple.

A second influential factor in forming British perceptions of Nicholas and Alexandra was a commentator’s absorption of British national myths including those which narrated the history of the United Kingdom combined with a frequently positive understanding of the characteristics of British society. As Keith Neilson tells us, one of the most striking features of British attitudes towards Russia and her rulers was a feeling of ‘cultural

superiority, not to mention hypocrisy'.⁷ Thus, even commentators who were sympathetic to the challenges facing Nicholas and Alexandra, had lived in Russia and were fluent in the language inevitably saw the imperial couple through British experiences, with all the political and cultural baggage that entailed. As result many commentators viewed the tsar and empress in British terms against British standards and the norms of British society.

A third factor involved elements of the previous two: an understanding of Russia against the backdrop of British society. Thus, although some commentators compared Russian society against that which existed in Britain and found it wanting, others believed that the two nations shared a number of positive characteristics. Such commentators identified apparently common features including the fact that both were monarchies and ruled over a multitude of peoples to whom Russia and Britain could bring the benefits of Christianity and trade. The British monarchy provided a template against which both British commentators and public could construct their perceptions of Nicholas and Alexandra. The regime over which Nicholas presided was an absolutist one but at times such as coronations, jubilees, military commemorations and dynastic celebrations, it fulfilled a similar role to the British Crown as a focus for popular celebration and national pride. During wartime, in Britain and in Russia, the monarch identified with their armed forces and the national struggle against a foreign enemy. On occasion, when Britain or Russia suffered military defeats, the monarchy could be the focus of antagonism and discontent.

⁷ Keith Neilson 'Only a d...d marionette'? The influence of British ambassadors on British Foreign Policy 1904-1914' Michael Dockrill and Brian Kercher, (eds.) *Diplomacy and World Power Studies in British Foreign Policy 1890-1950* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 67.

(i) The British Royal Family

The ‘exotic’ nature of the Russian monarchy proved a focus of fascination, but interest in the tsar and empress was part of a wider British curiosity about the crowned heads of Europe.⁸ Biographies, travelogues and even books of royal speeches were published to meet the public appetite.⁹ In 1871, when the Prince of Wales (the future Edward VII) fell gravely ill, reporters flocked to his Norfolk estate eager for news and in 1884 when Queen Victoria published extracts from her private diary, the monarch was besieged by journalists in the Scottish highlands.¹⁰ Not all accounts of royalty were obtained in a decorous manner even the death of a monarch could result in an unseemly scramble amongst journalists desperate for an ‘exclusive’. At Victoria’s death, in 1901, as many as 500 reporters and photographers clamoured for the extra bit of news that would make their journey to Osborne worthwhile and sell more newspapers.¹¹ Not content with reporting the passing of a monarch, reflecting on her long reign or looking forward to that of her successor, some reporters invented interviews with her doctor and regaled their readers with fictitious accounts of Victoria’s deathbed reconciliation with the Kaiser.¹² Somewhat less sensationally, when George V was crowned in 1911, ‘100,000 people

⁸ See for example, C. Lowe, *The German Emperor William II* (London, 1895). A.E.O. Klausmann (ed.), (trans. L. Elkind) *The German Emperor’s Speeches* (London, 1904), Poultny Bigelow, *The Private life of two Emperors: William II of Germany and Francis Joseph of Austria* (London, 1904).

⁹ See for example, Sir Joseph Fayrer, *Notes of the visit to India by their Royal Highnesses the Prince of Wales and Duke of Edinburgh* (London, 1879), James Macaulay (ed.) *Speeches and Addresses of H.R.H. the Prince of Wales 1863-1888* (London, 1889)

¹⁰ Brown, *Victorian News*, p. 162.

¹¹ Ronald Pearsall, *Edwardian Life and Leisure* (London, 1973) p. 15.

¹² Plunkett, *Media Monarch*, p. 242.

“witnessed” the ceremony in the pages of the illustrated press’.¹³ Although some press coverage of the British monarchy could be intrusive in 1903 a biographer of Edward VII reasoned that the interest in the minutiae of court life, far from detracting from, or trivialising the role of the monarch, was ‘an argument in itself in favour of monarchy’.¹⁴

The centrality of the monarch and his family in British life, as a focus for unity and national pride, marked by solemn ceremonial and joyful celebration provided commentators with a ready interpretation of the function of monarchy in Russia. Most British commentators could never hope to see Nicholas and Alexandra in person let alone meet them. Indeed, as is well established, the tsar and empress preferred family intimacy to grand court ceremonial, nonetheless, through the medium of film as well as the printed word Nicholas publicised aspects of his and his family’s life. A substantial amount of this material was available for British readers and cinema goers to enjoy and to perhaps reflect upon in the light of their understanding of their own royal family. By these means Nicholas sought to influence understanding of his personality, and to project his perception of the role of a Russian tsar to a wide audience. However, as we shall discuss, he could not control the more scurrilous aspects of the tabloid or anti-tsarist press in the United Kingdom.

A monarch, an autocrat or one constrained by a constitution, necessarily stood at the pinnacle of society but this did not mean they were entirely shielded from the realities of

¹³ William M. Kuhn, *Democratic Royalism: The Transformation of the British Monarchy, 1861-1914* (Basingstoke, 1996), p. 107.

¹⁴T.H.S. Escott, *King Edward and his Court* (London, 1903), p. 56.

life. Queen Victoria became a widow in early middle-age, Edward VII lost his son and heir, aged twenty-eight, to a fatal illness and one of George V's sons was born with epilepsy. As Richard Williams has explained, for the public, events such as these in the lives of royal personages created a well of sympathy and gave the impression that, although rich and powerful, members of a ruling family were human beings, victim to the same tribulations of even their poorest compatriots.¹⁵ Views such as these facilitated an understanding of the tsar and empress. For example, although Alexandra was said by one writer to be 'the mistress of 12 palaces in St Petersburg alone' wealth and status could not provide the empress with a male heir.¹⁶ As we shall see in Chapter 4 the empress's desperate need to give birth to a son and her repeated failure to do so attracted much sympathy in Britain. Similarly, when the tsar abdicated for himself and his son, the British press discussion of his role as a father on occasion overshadowed analysis of his political role.

In addition to their understanding of individual monarchs as human beings, the British were influenced in their perceptions of Nicholas and Alexandra by the varying state of Russo-British relations. These influences were mirrored in the attitude of successive British sovereigns' towards the tsar and empress as representatives of a rival imperial power. Nicholas II's reign coincided with that of three British monarchs: Queen Victoria (1837-1901) Edward VII (1901-1910) and George V (1910-1936). They were grandmother (Nicholas by marriage) uncle and cousin to the imperial couple. For the

¹⁵ Richard Williams, *The Contentious Crown: Public discussion of the British Monarchy in the reign of Queen Victoria* (Ashgate, 1997), p. 221.

¹⁶ Arthur H. Beavan, *Popular Royalty* (London, 1897), p. 158.

British public as well as for the Royal Family these ties of kinship played a part in constructing multifaceted perceptions of Nicholas and Alexandra. A central issue in Russo-British relations was the dispute over Central Asia and India where the two nations had long clashed.¹⁷ Therefore, when the future Nicholas II visited India as part of a tour of the region (1890-91), Queen Victoria counselled that ‘the Russian party will have to be carefully watched and not left alone’.¹⁸ As we shall see in Chapter 1 Victoria separated her distrust of Russia as a rival imperial power with her attitude to individual tsars and their heirs and on this occasion the queen was anxious that Nicholas enjoy British hospitality and be ‘treated with every civility’.¹⁹ Although, as we discuss in Chapter 2, she did all she could to prevent the match between Nicholas and Alexandra she was seemingly gracious in defeat and she enjoyed a warm relationship with the imperial couple.

In keeping with her ability to separate her perceptions of Russian political ambitions with her attitude towards individual monarchs and although she remained wary of Russian political ambitions she believed that Nicholas was devoted to England.²⁰ Thus, the queen remained mindful of her position as elder statesman and monarch of the British Empire and attempted to use her informal ties with Nicholas to influence Russian foreign policy in Britain’s favour. While she expected the tsar to adapt Russian foreign policy for

¹⁷ Eveny Sergeev, *The Great Game 1856-1907: Russo-British Relations in Central and East Asia* (Washington and Baltimore, 2013).

¹⁸ G.E. Buckle (ed.) *The Letters of Queen Victoria: A selection from Her Majesties Correspondence between the years 1886-1890* (London, 1930), vol. I., p. 651.

¹⁹ Buckle, *Letters of Queen Victoria 1886-1890*, p. 664.

²⁰ Victor Mallett, (ed.), *Life with Queen Victoria: Marie Mallett’s letters from Court 1887-1901* (London, 1968), p. 187.

Britain's convenience, she was not so accommodating in return. Britain's prestige and standing in the world were all important to her therefore, in 1898, when Nicholas called for a Peace Conference to discuss international arms reduction, she was adamant that this was a good idea as far as France, Germany and Russia were concerned but that Britain 'cannot reduce our armies due to our large overseas possessions'.²¹ However, Victoria died less than six years after Nicholas and Alexandra's wedding and she therefore had little time to effect long-term change in Russo-British relations.

The queen was succeeded by Edward VII whose reign, specifically in relation to the last tsar and empress, is remembered for the Anglo Russian Accord of 1907 and the exchange of visits between the ruling houses in 1908 and 1909. Although the extent of Edward VII's influence over Britain's foreign policy has been diminished by modern historians, a number of contemporary observers believed that Edward played a significant and positive role in Russo-British relations, not least on account of his relationship with the Romanov family.²² Although, as we have noted, the king's freedom to act in directing British foreign policy may have been less than some of his contemporaries claimed, he certainly took a 'hands on' approach to foreign affairs. Even given an element of exaggeration by his contemporaries, Edward was wholehearted in his role as diplomat. However, it is his successor, King George V, who is the British monarch most identified today with Nicholas and Alexandra. George V's role in European diplomacy was more discreet than his extrovert father but much has been written on the king's responsibility in

²¹ Agatha Ramm, (ed.), *Beloved and Darling Child: Last Letters between Queen Victoria and her eldest daughter 1886-1901* (Stroud, 1990), p. 220

²² Roderick R. Mclean, *Royalty and Diplomacy in Europe 1890-1914* (Cambridge, 2001), p. 183.

the summer of 1914 as he, the tsar and (another cousin) the German Kaiser corresponded in the fraught days before the outbreak of war.²³ In addition, the king's role in the possibility of exile in Britain for the imperial family continues to fascinate a wider public.²⁴

Edward VII was a playboy king with a string of mistresses and a long suffering wife. In contrast, George V was happily married and enjoyed the homely pursuit of stamp collecting in preference to lavish weekend house parties. For much of the British public he was a diligent monarch with a loyal wife and a loving family. While some aspects of George's family life may be open to modern criticism at the time it was widely regarded. It was through this prism of a hardworking monarch with a supportive wife at his side sharing in the burden of monarchy that many in Britain perceived Nicholas and Alexandra.

George was first cousin to both the tsar and empress.²⁵ The two men's physical likeness was often remarked upon, much to Nicholas's irritation.²⁶ The two monarchs were similar in other ways: they liked order and routine in their private lives and enjoyed the country pursuits typical of their class. In addition they shunned the ornate palaces at their disposal and established family homes in relatively small surroundings which they decorated in bourgeois style. More significantly, the two courts over which they presided shared another characteristic. Under George V and Queen Mary the monarchy 'ceased to

²³ Marina Soroka, *Britain, Russia and the Road to the First World War: The Fateful Embassy of Count Aleksandr Benckendorff (1903-1916)*, (Ashgate, 2011), pp. 252-4.

²⁴ Ann Morrow, *Cousins Divided: George V and Nicholas II* (Stroud, 2006), pp. 174-181.

²⁵ George's aunt Alice was Alexandra's mother. Nicholas's mother was George's aunt by marriage.

²⁶ Maylunas and Mironenko, *Lifelong Passion*, p. 220.

lead the smart-set and fashionable society' as had been the case with their predecessor.²⁷ Archbishop Lang was said to have found their royal residence at York Cottage on the Sandringham Estate more akin to the home of a curate and his wife than that of a king and queen.²⁸ Similarly, Nicholas and Alexandra shunned the social events so beloved of the Russian upper classes. As we shall see in the tsar and empress's case this attracted plaudits and criticism in equal measure.

Nicholas and Alexandra represented an autocratic, exotic and eastern form of government but their ties with the British royal family provided a means by which people in Britain could perceive them in terms with which they were familiar. In the midst of court ceremonials, in their family life and in their political role, including that as arbiters between nations, the British of all classes understood the tsar and empress by reference to their own Royal Family. In turn the British Royal Family's attitude towards Nicholas and Alexandra played a part in influencing British public opinion towards the imperial couple.

(ii) British Diplomatic Missions

British monarchs knew Alexandra very well as she had spent a lot of time in Britain after the death of her mother. Nicholas was perhaps less well known but Queen Victoria, Edward VII and George V had all spent time with him in informal surroundings in London, Windsor and Copenhagen before his accession. Following his coronation in

²⁷ J. Pearson, *The Selling of the Royal Family: The mystique of the British monarchy* (New York, 1986), p. 30.

²⁸ Harold Nicholson, *George the Fifth, His Life and Reign* (London, 1952), p. 143.

1896 he and Alexandra visited the British Royal Family in Balmoral. Subsequently there were long periods when it was not possible for either the imperial couple to travel abroad or for senior members of the British Royal Family to journey to Russia. The two families continued to correspond but both must have been conscious when Nicholas became tsar that such letters could take on a political hue. In place of face to face contact and uninhibited correspondence British monarchs as well as members of the government were assisted in their understanding of Nicholas and Alexandra by the diplomatic corps. Between 1894 and 1918 Britain sent six ambassadors to Russia. The amount of time each served in post varied from nineteen months to ten years: the dates given below refer to their tenure in office: Sir Frank Lascelles (1894-95), Sir Nicholas O’Conor (1895-98), Sir Charles Scott (1898-1904), Sir Charles Hardinge (1904-1906), Sir Arthur Nicolson (1905-1910) and Sir George Buchanan (1910-1918). Though each diplomat approached his role differently from his predecessor depending on his personality their task was never less than arduous. As Michael Hughes has noted, the ambassador was ‘central to the conduct of the embassy in a way which would be unthinkable to-day’.²⁹ The stress of the workload placed immense psychological strain on Buchanan who suffered from frequent bouts of exhaustion.

In 1916 R.H. Bruce Lockhart, who was several years younger than Buchanan and who shouldered a lesser overall burden as British Consul in Moscow (1911-1919), fell victim

²⁹ Hughes, *Diplomacy before the Revolution*, p. 65.

to a severe bout of depression brought on by the strains of work.³⁰

European diplomats constituted an exclusive caste, a self-assured elite, but as the representatives of the most powerful contemporary empire, British diplomats exuded a particular confidence. As Michael Hughes has noted, senior members of the diplomatic corps (although un-elected) believed it was their innate right to be the 'primary agent' in matters of foreign policy.³¹ In an era when monarchs (including constitutional ones) personally and publicly involved themselves in the diplomatic process, contacts with the royal court could prove crucial in obtaining prestigious postings.³² However, even without the influence of nepotism, the senior branches of the diplomatic corps were effectively closed to anyone without access to a private income since the entrance examination required years of preparation, many of them spent abroad for the purpose of learning French and German.³³ The professional and social world inhabited by the diplomatic corps was tight knit, sometimes gossipy, snobbish and, on occasion, over concerned with deference and perceived slights. Few in number, these men played an important role in forming the perceptions of Nicholas and Alexandra since, as Keith Neilson explains, it was they who decided 'what was important and how it should be presented to London'.³⁴ Their perceptions helped formulate British policy towards the tsar and empress and contributed to the wider governing elite's image of the imperial

³⁰ Hughes, *Inside the Enigma*, p. 72.

³¹ Hughes, *Diplomacy before the Revolution*, p. xi.

³² Thomas G. Otte, 'Outdoor Relief for the Aristocracy? European Nobility and Diplomacy 1850-1914', in (eds.) Markus Mosslang and Torsten Riotte, *The Diplomats World: A Cultural History of Diplomacy, 1815-1914* (Oxford, 2008), p. 46.

³³ Zara S. Steiner, *The Foreign Office and Foreign Policy 1898-1914* (Cambridge, 1969), p. 17.

³⁴ Neilson, *Britain and the Last Tsar*, p. 4.

couple. In addition, within this relatively small clique, diplomats spoke officially and “off the record” to friends, colleagues and family members

Historians who have studied the pre-revolutionary British diplomatic mission to Russia are divided as to the perceived status of a posting to St Petersburg. For example, it has been said by Michael Hughes that before 1914 St Petersburg ranked fourth in importance behind Berlin, Paris and Vienna.³⁵ In contrast Keith Neilson has asserted that, whilst ‘Paris was the plum’ the embassies in Berlin and St Petersburg vied for second place.³⁶ A letter written by Anthony St John Brodrick (the Secretary of State for India) in December 1904 implies that a posting to St Petersburg was an ordeal to be endured in the hope that it might lead to a more attractive post. In a letter to the third secretary, Broderick opined that: ‘I dare say you are feeling bored to death at present having to stay there under such unpleasant social conditions but I expect you are gaining an amount of experience which is not to be had at any other capital at present. Apparently one cannot get on in the army these days without running about to whatever small expedition is going on at the moment. In the same way, diplomatically I am sure you want to be in all the nasty places’.³⁷

Whether or not St Petersburg was merely a rung on a career ladder to be endured until a more glittering posting could be obtained, the Russian style of government, the extremes of weather, the high cost of living as well as potential language difficulties could make a posting to the Russian capital a daunting prospect for even the most ardent

³⁵ Hughes, *Diplomacy before the Revolution*, p. 62

³⁶ Neilson, *Britain and the Last Tsar*, p. 52.

³⁷ Surrey History Centre (hereafter, Surrey) Onslow Family Papers, G173/13/24. Letter from Anthony St. John Brodrick, Secretary of State for India to Richard William Alan Onslow, Viscount Cranley (5th Earl Onslow) 8 Sept. 1904.

Russophile. In addition, the British embassy was at times dilapidated and overcrowded. Housed in a mansion which the British government leased from the Saltykov family, situated on the bank of the River Neva, it was a short walk from the Winter Palace. As well as being a place of work, the building was also the ambassador's official residence. However, in spite of its impressive location, a 1901 British government report on the state of the building provides an image of the squalid conditions in which the ambassador lived and worked. In particular the report noted the building's unsanitary plumbing, which was said to have caused diphtheria and typhoid amongst the embassy staff, dangerously installed electrical wiring which was liable to fail, and unpleasant smells which wafted through the windows in warm weather from the stables located across the courtyard.³⁸

By December 1904, when Lord Onslow travelled to St Petersburg, the living conditions in the embassy seem to have improved, although this may in part have been due to the fact that at the height of the Russian winter the windows were kept tightly shut. The defective wiring at least had been remedied and the furnishings were more in keeping with Britain's standing in the world. In notes he made of his visit Onslow recorded that: 'Sir Charles Hardinge has given us the most gorgeous suite of rooms [...] all very warm and lighted with more powerful electric lights than we have in London'.³⁹ However, the variable living and working conditions were not the only difficulties with which a British ambassador and his colleagues had to contend.

³⁸Anthony Cross, 'A Corner of a Foreign Field: The British Embassy in St Petersburg, 1863-1918' in Simon Dixon, *Personality and Place in Russian Culture, Essays in Memory of Lindsey Hughes* (London, 2010), p. 344.

³⁹Surrey, Onslow Family Papers, G 173/13/24 Notes from a visit to St Petersburg and Berlin.

During the reign of the last tsar diplomatic life in St Petersburg was made difficult by the fact that, although Nicholas was the pinnacle of power, he preferred a quiet family life away from the capital and the traditional backdrop of courtly society. The tsar granted occasional audiences but, however amiable Nicholas might appear, he ‘disliked diplomats’, a fact not always reported to London or even recognised by the ambassador concerned.⁴⁰ The infrequency of audiences and the inability of some senior staff to speak Russian and the confines of their social circle led successive diplomats to rely for many of their despatches on what sometimes amounted to little more than rumour and gossip based on Romanov family intrigues or information about the tsar’s intent obtained from government ministers.⁴¹ In contrast, in Britain, the relationship between senior members of the diplomatic corps and the reigning monarch could be relatively informal. For example, the Russian ambassador, Count Aleksandr Benckendorff, proved to be a favourite of Edward VII and was often invited to spend the weekend with the ‘easily bored’ monarch.⁴²

Britain’s ambassador to St Petersburg at the time of Nicholas and Alexandra’s marriage in November 1894 was Sir Frank Cavendish Lascelles. His family background, his education and his friendships with other senior officials (notably Charles Hardinge) as well as with European royalty were, as Michael Hughes has identified, typical features of

⁴⁰House of Lords, (hereafter, Lords) Lloyd George Papers, F/59/1/5 Rear-Admiral Sir Richard F. Phillimore to Arthur Balfour, Foreign Secretary 28 Dec.1916.

⁴¹ Neilson, *Britain and the Last Tsar*, p. 57.

⁴² Soroka, *The Fateful Embassy*, p. 195.

the pre-1914 'old diplomacy'.⁴³ Before being appointed to Russia, Lascelles had served in Paris, Berlin, Sofia, Rome, Washington and Copenhagen. In August 1886, whilst stationed in Sofia, he came to the foreign secretary Lord Salisbury's favourable attention when Prince Alexander of Battenberg was kidnapped as part of a Russian plot to overthrow him.⁴⁴

Salisbury may have been impressed by Lascelles but his conduct in Bulgaria had not endeared him to Russia and to Russian Pan-Slavists in particular. He nonetheless came to St Petersburg 'determined to establish a close rapport with his hosts' but he was not long in post when Tsar Alexander III died.⁴⁵ One of Lascelles' immediate reactions was to caution Whitehall not to expect Nicholas to undertake policies which might be seen 'as a reproach' to his late father.⁴⁶ However, Lascelles period of service in St Petersburg was a relatively short one. Although Alexander III's reign had been characterised by political conservatism, and despite Lascelles impression, some British commentators remained optimistic that the regime might be successfully liberalised under Nicholas II.

In 1895 Lascelles was posted to Berlin and his vacated post was filled by Sir Nicholas O'Connor. Born in Ireland, where his family were large landowners, he was educated at Stonyhurst and at the Catholic University of Louvain. Nicknamed Feargus after the eponymous Chartist leader, he had married into the British establishment, his wife being a granddaughter of the fourteenth duke of Norfolk, one of the British aristocracy's leading

⁴³ Hughes, *Diplomacy before the Revolution*, pp. 1-19.

⁴⁴ Neilson, *Britain and the Last Tsar*, p. 38.

⁴⁵ Hughes, *Inside the Enigma*, p. 18.

⁴⁶ The National Archives, Kew (hereafter, TNA) Foreign Office, (hereafter FO) 800/16 Lascelles to Sir Thomas Sanderson, Under Secretary of State Parliamentary, 16 Jan. 1895.

Catholic peers.⁴⁷

O'Connor is interesting, not only on account of his background, which was different from many of his contemporaries in the diplomatic corps, but because he attended Nicholas II's coronation and went to Khodynka Field only hours after a number of people had been crushed to death. The true number of casualties at the site of the coronation festival has never been independently verified. However, rumours at the time spoke of the total number of victims as being as high as 4,000. Since the revolution, in works such as Helen Baker's analysis of the tragedy and its aftermath, it has been commonplace to look back on this event as a sign of the divorce between the lives of the tsar and his people.⁴⁸ However, as we shall discuss in Chapter Two, this impression was not necessarily a feature of O'Connor's or other contemporary reports on the disaster.

When O'Connor left St Petersburg in 1898 for a new posting in Constantinople he was succeeded by Sir Charles Scott who had served in St Petersburg as secretary and head of chancellery (1874 and 1877). In spite of his experience in Russia he appeared something of a surprise appointment having previously been passed over for promotion. However, as we have noted, professional and family connections played a significant role in facilitating diplomatic careers. When Lord Salisbury appointed Scott he did so in the knowledge that he enjoyed support from within the highest circles of the Russian court. By birth the dowager empress of Russia was a Danish princess and after her marriage she

⁴⁷T.G. Otte, *The Foreign Office mind: the making of Britain's foreign policy 1865-1914* (Cambridge, 2011), p. 191.

⁴⁸Helen Baker, 'Monarchy discredited? Reactions to the Khodynka coronation catastrophe of 1896', *Revolutionary Russia*, vol. 16, No. 1 (June 2003), pp.1-46.

continued to holiday with her family in her native Denmark. It was in Copenhagen that the dowager empress came to know Scott whilst he was stationed at the British Embassy (1862-1865).⁴⁹

Of all the ambassadors from whom we quote, Sir Charles Scott appears to have been amongst the most sociable, equally at ease lunching with junior members of his staff and at receptions held by the St Petersburg elite. However, the ambassador's character, although important in a milieu where sociability was highly prized, also had its drawbacks from a professional point of view. He was said to be rather 'garrulous to the point of indiscretion'.⁵⁰ His other failing, although he was not alone in this, was that he relied on conversations with the capital's high society to form his understanding of opposition to the regime. As a result, as Michael Hughes has noted, this led him to be less than perceptive and to blame any outbreak of social unrest on professional agitators 'rather than [arising from] genuine grievances'.⁵¹

After six years service in Russia, Scott was replaced by his erstwhile subordinate, Sir Charles Hardinge whose maternal grandfather, Earl Lucan, had fought in the Crimea and whose paternal grandfather had been governor general of India. His uncle, Sir Arthur Hardinge, had been part of the British entourage which accompanied Nicholas during his tour of India. Scott's departure was in no small part due to the persistent efforts of Hardinge and his cousin Lord Francis Bertie (Britain's ambassador to Paris 1905-1918).

⁴⁹ Neilson, *Britain and the Last Tsar*, p. 39.

⁵⁰ Hughes, *Inside the Enigma*, p. 16-7.

⁵¹ Hughes, *Inside the Enigma*, p. 37.

Together the pair undermined Scott in the eyes of senior foreign office officials and, more importantly, in the eyes of the king.⁵² In particular, while he was Scott's junior, Hardinge contradicted his ambassador's interpretations of Russian intentions in Manchuria.⁵³ Hardinge undoubtedly possessed a steely ambition and his career was an example *par excellence* of the role in which patronage and family connections played in Edwardian diplomacy. Hardinge was friends with the king's private secretary, Sir Francis Knollys, who later helped facilitate his appointment as permanent under-secretary to the Foreign Office (1906) and Viceroy of India (1910).⁵⁴ In addition, the fact that his wife, Winifred, was a lady-in-waiting to Queen Alexandra hardly hindered his career. As the British Embassy Secretary, Sir Cecil Spring Rice remarked: Hardinge's wife had 'the queen in one pocket and the king in another'.⁵⁵

In 1903, the year before he took up the ambassadorial post in St Petersburg, Hardinge accompanied Edward VII on a state visit to Portugal and an impromptu diplomatic mission to France. Furthermore, as Roderick Mclean tells us, when Hardinge was appointed to St Petersburg Edward VII met with the Russian Foreign Minister and, knowing the dowager empress was his patron, made it clear 'that Hardinge's appointment was to establish cordial relations between the two countries'.⁵⁶ These signs of the king's favour may have enabled the ambassador to cultivate a more intimate relationship with

⁵² Neilson. *Britain and the Last Tsar*, p. 40.

⁵³ Keith Neilson and Thomas G. Otte, *The Permanent Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs 1854-1946* (London, 2009), p. 126.

⁵⁴ Zara Steiner, 'Grey, Hardinge and the Foreign Office, 1907-1910', *The Historical Journal* vol. 10, No. 4 (1967), pp. 415-39, p. 415.

⁵⁵ Stephen Gwynn (ed), *The Letters and Friendships of Spring Rice: A Record* (London, 1929), p. 394.

⁵⁶ McLean, *Royalty and Diplomacy*, p. 158.

Nicholas than might have been possible for other diplomats. Hardinge himself believed this to have been the case.⁵⁷ The fact that Hardinge also spoke Russian would have also endeared him to the tsar who placed great emphasis on Russian language and culture.

Hardinge's time as ambassador in St Petersburg were difficult years both for Russia and for British-Russian relations but although he was evidently a popular and successful ambassador it was with Edward VII's approval that Hardinge left Russia for a senior role in the Foreign Office. However, Russia remained the focus of much of his career and he worked hard to achieve the Accord of 1907 which sought to resolve Russia and Britain's concerns over Persia, Afghanistan and Tibet. In 1908 he accompanied Edward VII to Reval for the king's official meeting with the tsar. Furthermore, in the spring of 1917, Hardinge was party to the confidential discussions concerning the possibility of allowing Nicholas and Alexandra exile in Britain.⁵⁸

Hardinge was succeeded in his post at St Petersburg by Sir Arthur Nicolson who had served in the diplomatic corps since 1874. In 1875 he first met Sir Donald Mackenzie Wallace, then making a name for himself as a Russian expert. Mackenzie Wallace later convinced Nicolson to 'put his faith in gradual reform' in the Russian empire.⁵⁹ Specifically in regards to Russo-British relations, fearful that Russia presented 'a powerful challenge to the British in India' Nicolson worked with Hardinge to achieve a

⁵⁷Royal Archives Windsor, W 44/103 (hereafter, RA), Sir Charles Hardinge to Francis, 1st Viscount Knollys, 25 May 1904.

⁵⁸ Kenneth Rose, *King George V* (London, 1983), p. 211.

⁵⁹ Neilson, *Britain and the Last Tsar*, p. 27.

political understanding with Russia.⁶⁰ It was during Nicolson's time in St Petersburg that Britain and Russia began to enjoy the fruits of this entente; an Anglo-Russian Accord was signed in 1907 and in 1908 Edward VII paid a state visit to Russia. The following year members of the Duma visited England and Scotland and Nicholas and Alexandra travelled to the Isle of Wight.⁶¹

Of all Britain's ambassadors to Russia between 1894 and 1918, the best known today is Sir George Buchanan. A descendant of the earls of Caithness, Buchanan had been employed in the diplomatic service for over thirty years when he was posted to St Petersburg. He served during the difficult years of the First World War and was a witness to the enthusiastic reception of the tsar and his consort in the Kremlin in August 1914 as well to the February and October 1917 revolutions.⁶² After the revolution Sir Bernard Pares remembered the ambassador as 'a man of singular and luminous simplicity'.⁶³ In retrospect this does not necessarily sound like a compliment and it has been said of Buchanan that whilst he was a competent administrator he 'lacked the instinctive understanding of the Russian mind' which had been the hallmark of some of his predecessors.⁶⁴ Buchanan spoke French, German and Italian but, despite his many years in Russia, he never felt it necessary to learn even basic Russian. His linguistic limitations, together with the vagaries of Russian internal politics, may have reduced the usefulness of some of his reports since he relied for information from friends drawn from a narrow

⁶⁰ Hughes, *Inside the Enigma*, p. 15

⁶¹ See Chapter 4.

⁶² Hew Strachan 'Britain and Russia 1914-1917', in *Russia: War, Peace and Diplomacy: Essays in Honour of John Erickson* (eds). Ljubica Erickson and Mark Erickson (London, 2004), pp. 56-69.

⁶³ Bernard Pares, 'Sir George Buchanan in Russia' *SEER*, 3, 9, (Mar., 1925), pp. 576-586, p. 576.

⁶⁴ Hughes, *Inside the Enigma*, p. 20.

social circle. The result was, as Michael Hughes has noted, that his reports were sometimes based on little more than ‘rumour and speculation’.⁶⁵

Buchanan’s celebrity is due in no small measure to his memoirs. Published in 1923 *My Mission to Russia and other Diplomatic Memories* recalled how, during his time as British *chargé d’affaires* in Hesse Darmstadt, he was invited to tennis parties attended by Nicholas and Alexandra.⁶⁶ Buchanan had a great deal of regard for his position as Britain’s senior representative in St Petersburg. As a result he expected the Russian court to show him considerable deference. On one occasion, early on in his posting, he was invited to lunch at Tsarskoe Selo. Assuming that he was to be a guest of the tsar and empress he was horrified to discover that he was to eat with the Household and made it quite clear to the Grand Marshal of the Court that this was not to happen again.⁶⁷ During the his period of service in St Petersburg his self-confidence, his fixation with his position as Britain’s ambassador and his mis-reading of Nicolas’s attitude towards diplomats, led Buchanan to see evidence of conspiracies by a pro-German clique where none existed.⁶⁸

In addition to the embassy in St Petersburg, as part of Britain’s diplomatic presence in Russia she had a network of consulates across the tsarist empire. The most important of these was based in Moscow, Russia’s second capital. Because of the tumultuous years in which he served at the Moscow consulate (1911-1919) and his role as Britain’s senior diplomatic representative after the revolution R.H. Bruce Lockhart continues to be well

⁶⁵ Hughes, *Inside the Enigma*, p. 31.

⁶⁶ Sir George Buchanan, *My Mission to Russia and other Diplomatic Memories*, p. 168.

⁶⁷ Buchanan, *My Mission*, p. 172.

⁶⁸ See Chapter six.

known even today.⁶⁹ Although the consulate service was not as highly regarded within the Foreign Office as other branches of the diplomatic corps Bruce Lockhart was fluent in Russian which gave him access to a wider spectrum of public opinion than his colleagues in St Petersburg.⁷⁰

In addition to the civilian diplomatic corps Britain's representatives in St Petersburg also included a number of military attachés who remained under a military chain of command and therefore tended to bypass the embassy when submitting reports to Whitehall.⁷¹ We have considered the perceptions of three of them. The dates given indicate their time of service in Russia. They are: Major-General Sir Alfred Knox (1912-1920), Major-General Sir John Hanbury Williams (1914-1917) and Rear-Admiral Sir Richard Phillimore R.N. (1915-1917). Their background, their sense of themselves as part wider European elite and their position as the 'public face' of the Russo-British alliance facilitated their ability to identify with the anxieties and values of the tsar and empress. In order to better understand the lens through which they perceived Nicholas and Alexandra we have provided brief biographical details below.

Alfred Knox was born in Ulster in 1870 and before 1914 he saw action on the North-West Frontier in British India. During the First World War he travelled widely along the eastern front speaking to soldiers and commanders alike. By this means Knox was able to gauge the rank and file opinion as to progression of the war, towards court politics and to

⁶⁹ *The Diaries of Sir Robert Bruce Lockhart 1915-1938*, (ed.) Keith Young (London, 1973).

⁷⁰ Hughes, *Diplomacy before the Revolution*, p. 119.

⁷¹ Matthew S. Seligmann, 'While I am in it I am not of it: A naval attachés recollections of British diplomacy and foreign policy 1906-1908' (eds.) Markus Mosslang and Torsten Rlotte, *The Diplomats World: A Cultural History of Diplomacy 1815-1914*, (Oxford, 2008), p. 435.

Nicholas's role as head of the army. In 1921 Knox published an account of his wartime service in imperial Russia entitled *With the Russian Army 1914-1917* which contained extracts from his diary detailing his experiences on the frontline.⁷² On occasion, in the course of Chapter Six, we make reference to Knox's observations which he published after the revolution but we also consider the reports he wrote from Russia during the First World War.

Of all the attachés whose views we consider Knox had the skills necessary to fulfil his role as an observer of the Russian forces, not least because he spoke Russian. It was a skill which many of his colleagues lacked although the extent of his fluency is open to doubt. Bernard Pares later claimed that as a result of his limited Russian Knox had barked out his speeches to the troops in 'short, soldierly sentences, using as many nominatives as possible'.⁷³ However, given his forceful personality it is perhaps doubtful if Pares would have acknowledged many of his compatriots as his linguistic equal. Whatever the truth of Knox's shortcomings in this regard, he was highly thought of in military matters by Lieutenant-General Sir Henry Wilson. The Lieutenant General formed part of Lord Milner's allied mission which met at Tsarskoe Selo in January 1917. In a report to the Cabinet on the eve of the revolution Wilson asserted: 'I attach more weight to [Alfred] Knox's opinion on any matter affecting the Russian army than I do to the opinion of any other man in Russia'.⁷⁴ However, Knox was not the head of the British military mission to Russia. Knox's lack of a title (he was not made a K.C.B until after the revolution)

⁷²General Sir Alfred Knox, *With the Russian Army 1914-1917* (London, 1921).

⁷³ Bernard Pares, *My Russian Memoirs* (London, 1931), p. 442.

⁷⁴TNA, CAB/24/3, Lieutenant General Sir Henry Hughes Wilson to the Cabinet, Mar. 1917.

would have added to impressions of his lack of social status. As Michael Hughes reminds us the decision not to appoint Knox as Head of the military mission was largely dictated by social considerations.⁷⁵ Sir John Hanbury Williams, who was appointed to this important post, spoke no Russian and at the time of his appointment, by his own admission, knew ‘practically nothing’ about Russia.⁷⁶ However, he had the sort of pedigree and social credentials which were admired, both in the Foreign Office, and at the Russian court.

Born in 1878, John Hanbury Williams was a descendant of Sir Charles Hanbury Williams who had been British ambassador to Russia at the court of Empress Elizabeth between 1755 -56. After obtaining a commission in the army he saw action in Egypt and South Africa. Between 1897 and 1904 he served as secretary to a number of influential men including William Broderick (Secretary of State for War) and Earl Grey (Governor General of Canada). The way in which he first learnt of his appointment to the Russian post seems representative of the well-meaning, but slightly amateurish, atmosphere at Russian imperial headquarters. At the outbreak of war with Germany, he was walking along South Audley Street in London’s Mayfair when he bumped into General “Jimmy” Grierson (an aide-de-camp to George V) whose first words were ‘Hanbury -- you’re for Russia’.⁷⁷ Not surprisingly, given the circumstances of his appointment, he and Knox

⁷⁵Hughes, *Inside the Enigma*, p. 54.

⁷⁶SSEES UCL Library Archive (hereafter, SSEES) Hanbury Williams Papers (hereafter, Hanbury Williams’ Diary) General Sir John Hanbury Williams’ Diary, September 1914.

⁷⁷SSEES, Hanbury Williams’ Diary, 3-14 August 1914.

enjoyed strained relations.⁷⁸ Lulled by the atmosphere at imperial headquarters Hanbury Williams believed Knox tended to be overly pessimistic in his assessment of the military situation and, more significantly, to lack a courtier's deference in his dealings with the tsar.⁷⁹ In 1922 Hanbury Williams published an account of his service in Russia and a sympathetic portrait of the tsar entitled *The Emperor Nicholas II as I knew Him*.⁸⁰ However, it is his wartime diary, in addition to his official reports, which form the basis of our analysis and his impressions of the tsar.⁸¹

In October 1915 Hanbury Williams was joined at imperial headquarters (*Stavka*) in the town of Mogilev by Rear-Admiral (later Admiral Sir) Richard Phillimore. Phillimore's career with the Royal Navy began in 1878 and he subsequently saw action in the Mediterranean, the West Indies, in the Far East, the Falklands and at Cape Helles as part of the Dardanelles campaign in April 1915.⁸² Like Hanbury Williams he spoke no Russian and spent much of his time in the company of the tsar and his sometimes self-absorbed entourage. However, with his extensive service record Phillimore seems to have impressed Nicholas. According to Hanbury Williams, he was 'an excellent choice for the job' because he was very much 'liked by the tsar'.⁸³ Although Phillimore's tenure in Russia was relatively brief, his perceptions of Alexandra are especially interesting because he met her in relatively informal surroundings at a critical time in her husband's

⁷⁸ Hughes, *Inside the Enigma*, p. 54.

⁷⁹ SSEES, Hanbury Williams' Diary, 20 November 1916.

⁸⁰ General Sir John Hanbury Williams, *The Emperor Nicholas II as I knew Him* (London, 1922).

⁸¹ TNA, PRO 30/57, General Sir John Hanbury Williams' personal correspondence with General Kitchener.

⁸² H.G. Thursfield, Phillimore, Sir Richard Fortescue (1864-1940), rev. Marc Brodie, Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (hereafter, ODNB), Jan. 2012, accessed 17 Jan. 2013.

⁸³ SSEES Archive, Hanbury Williams' Diary, 2 Nov. 1915.

reign.⁸⁴

Britain's official representatives had varying skills for their role: they were socialites and linguists, men driven by their desire to rise in their careers and men conscious of their family heritage and their position as representative of the British crown. As we have noted the quality of some of their reports have since been criticised for having been based on little more than gossip. Moreover, as Keith Neilson tells us, because many of their despatches were forwarded to the British monarch embassy staff felt inhibited and often maintained 'a discreet silence' with regard to Nicholas himself preferring to apportion blame for any crisis on factors outside of the tsar's control.⁸⁵ A number of journalists, writers and political activists contributed to debate about the imperial couple and, unlike the diplomatic reports, their accounts were intended for a much wider audience.

(iii) Journalists, Academics, Authors and political activists

For journalists, academics and political activists the tsar and empress meant different things: the benign religious and political leaders of their people, a loyal ally, the representatives of a brutal autocracy, and the loving parents of a close-knit family. British concepts of the tsar and empress in newspapers, magazines and other media fluctuated between being laudatory, sympathetic, defensive, critical, and scornful. Claims that the tsar was a despot and a bloodthirsty tyrant were juxtaposed with stories of the imperial

⁸⁴Imperial War Museum Archive, London (hereafter, IWM) 96/33/1-4 and PP/MCR/C34. Rear-Admiral Sir Richard Phillimore Papers.

⁸⁵Neilson, *Britain and the Last Tsar*, p. 26.

family's simple, bourgeois lifestyle and Nicholas's devotion to the welfare of his people.⁸⁶

In an era when the majority of people accessed daily information on the world around them from newspapers and magazines the press could be extremely influential. As Stephen Koss has noted 'the printed word was accepted [by the public] as an article of faith'.⁸⁷ However, although newspapers both formed and reflected public opinion, articles were not always based on fact. One contemporary journalist revealed, when reports of 'nihilists or assassinations of high personages' were scarce, a journalist might be asked to 'manufacture articles from "our own correspondent" in Vienna or Berlin or to concoct an report, which although written in Fleet Street, was published as coming out of St Petersburg'.⁸⁸ Furthermore, even before the advent of wartime censorship in 1914, the government controlled aspects of what was reported in regard to foreign affairs. As we shall discuss further below, the Foreign Office took a largely patrician attitude towards foreign affairs considering it perfectly normal that a relatively small clique might direct the foreign policy of the Empire without recourse to parliament, let alone the public. Therefore, editors and correspondents who wished to draw on official sources about events abroad were required to submit written requests at the Foreign Office. An hour later an official would 'send down any items of intelligence' thought suitable for presentation in the public domain.⁸⁹

At this time it was not common practice for editors or their journalists to ascribe their

⁸⁶Neilson, *Britain and the Last Tsar*, pp. 84-109.

⁸⁷Koss, *Rise and Fall*, p. 25.

⁸⁸William B. Steveni *Petrograd Past and Present* (London, 1915), p. 273.

⁸⁹Steiner, *Foreign Office and Foreign Policy*, p. 186.

name to an article. However, we do know that the journalists and academics E.J. Dillon and Bernard Pares wrote for the *Daily Telegraph* as well as monthly periodicals including the *Nineteenth Century and After*, the *Quarterly Review*, the *Fortnightly Review*, *Cornhill Magazine* and the *Contemporary Review*.⁹⁰ In the course of Chapter Three we consider articles and memoirs written by men who travelled to Manchuria specifically to cover Russia's war with Japan. They included Maurice Baring who was employed by the *Morning Post* and who is discussed further below, Lionel James, G.B. Bennett and Colonel Sir Charles À Court Repington who wrote for *The Times*, Lord Brooke who filed for Reuters, Daniel James the *Daily Telegraph*'s correspondent and Thomas Cowen who was war correspondent for the *Daily Chronicle*. Other journalists who reported from Manchuria included Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett who spent time with the Japanese Army and Sir Ian Hamilton who kept a diary of his experiences which was later published in volume form. In addition, Captain Douglas Story was one of a total of nine journalists (including the author Jack London) who were despatched to cover the Russo-Japanese war by the *Daily Express*.⁹¹

A number of newspapers during this period were edited by ambitious men whose opinions might influence politicians and the public. The most widely read Liberal newspaper of its day, the *Daily News*, was edited during the 1914-18 war by the ambitious radical A.G. Gardiner.⁹² The populist *Daily Mail* and London *Evening News* as

⁹⁰ A more complete list can be found in the bibliography.

⁹¹ A list of their accounts of the war in Manchuria can be found in the bibliography.

⁹² Stephen Koss, *Fleet Street Radical: A.G. Gardiner and the Daily News* (London, 1973).

well *The Times* were owned by the press baron, Lord Northcliffe.⁹³ Interestingly, Nicholas once observed that he had ‘taken *The Times* as long as he could remember’.⁹⁴ We also quote from the populist *Daily Mirror* which had begun life as a women’s newspaper and which, from 1914, was controlled by Lord Rothermere.⁹⁵ The broadsheet *Observer* was edited by the radical Tory J.L. Garvin and the self-confident John St Loe Strachey⁹⁶ was owner-editor of the *Spectator* for which the Independent Labour Party member, H.N. Brailsford, contributed many articles.⁹⁷ In addition we note that W.J. Fisher edited the Liberal supporting *Daily Chronicle* and (Charles Frederic) Moberley Bell was an influential editor of *The Times*.⁹⁸

Newspapers, whether broadsheet or tabloid, began life with a focus in mind intended to mark it out from potential rivals. In 1900 in its first editorial the *Daily Express* proclaimed its policy of ‘patriotism and independence from any political party or social clique’.⁹⁹ For its part the *Morning Post*, was characterised by its promotion of the economic and social causes dear to the hearts of the prosperous upper middle classes.¹⁰⁰ During Sir George Buchanan’s tenure as Britain’s ambassador in St Petersburg the pro-Russian *Morning Post* was owned by his sister-in-law Lady Bathurst.¹⁰¹ The *Illustrated*

⁹³ J.L. Thompson, *Northcliffe: Press baron in politics 1865-1922* (London, 2000).

⁹⁴ Trewin, *Tutor*, p. 86.

⁹⁵ S.J. Taylor, *The reluctant press Lord: Esmond Rothermere and the Daily Mail* (London, 1998).

⁹⁶ John St Loe Strachey, *The adventure of living: a subjective biography* (London, 1922).

⁹⁷ F.M. Levanthal, *The Last Dissenter: H.N. Brailsford and His Times* (Oxford, 1985).

⁹⁸ *The Times, The History of The Times: The Twentieth Century Test 1884-1912* (New York, 1947).

⁹⁹ James McMillan, *The Way We Were 1900-1914: Based on the files of the Daily Express* (London, 1978), pp. 315-6.

¹⁰⁰ Keith M. Wilson, *A Study in the history of the politics of the Morning Post 1905-1926* (Lampeter, 1990), p. 6.

¹⁰¹ Keith Neilson ‘Only a d...d marionette’?, p. 66.

London News eschewed an alliance with a political party and declared itself to be ‘earnestly domestic’.¹⁰² The *Daily Telegraph* has been described as the newspaper of ‘the clerk and the shopkeeper and *The Times* that of the City merchant’.¹⁰³ However, for all the intentions of their editors and proprietors, the readership of a given newspaper might be more varied than its founder intended. For example, the *Manchester Guardian* was read by business men who eschewed its radical editorial stance but valued its transatlantic commercial reports.¹⁰⁴

In addition to a variety of mainstream publications a number of specifically anti-tsarist periodicals were also published in Britain during this period. They were: *Darkest Russia* (1891-1893 and 1912-1914), *Anglo Russian Review*, *Free Russia* (1890-1914) and, founded in 1905, the *Russian Correspondence* which appears to have been short lived as few copies survive in the archives. Edited by Lucien Wolf, *Darkest Russia*¹⁰⁵ was supported by prominent members the Anglo-Jewish community and took an especial interest in Russian anti-Semitism.¹⁰⁶ The son of exiled central European Jews, Wolf was educated in Brussels and Paris. In the course of his working life he cultivated a network of acquaintances in the Chancelleries of Europe and for twenty-five years was employed as foreign affairs observer for the populist *Daily Graphic* and the widely read *Fortnightly Review* magazine. As Max Beloff tells us, Wolf was ‘one of the leading critics of Sir

¹⁰² Plunkett, *Media Monarch*, p. 99.

¹⁰³ Brown, *Victorian News* (Oxford, 1985), p. 246.

¹⁰⁴ Koss, *Rise and Fall*, vol. 1. p.22.

¹⁰⁵ The title may have been an allusion to William Booth’s: *In Darkest England and the way out* (London, 1890).

¹⁰⁶ SSEES Archive, WOL, Lucien Wolf Collection 1911-1928.

Edward Grey's foreign policy' and the pages of *Darkest Russia* provided a forum which allowed him to be 'more combative' than was possible in the more mainstream publications with which he had hitherto been associated.¹⁰⁷ However, at the start of the 1914-18 war Wolf was convinced that the need to show unity with Russia outweighed any political squeamishness and he ceased publication of *Darkest Russia*. Ironically, despite this act of patriotism and show of public support for an ally he had spent a career berating, he was accused of being a German spy and never recovered the respect he had once had.¹⁰⁸

A second anti-tsarist magazine, which also ceased publication in 1914, was the *Anglo Russian Review*. Edited by Russian Jewish émigré Jaakof Prelooker (who claimed a circulation of many thousands) the *Anglo Russian Review* was one of two publications (the other being *Free Russia*) which were supported by the British 'Society of Friends of Russian Freedom'.¹⁰⁹ The society had been founded in 1890 by the radical journalist George Herbert Perris (foreign editor of the *Tribune* 1906-08)¹¹⁰ and Robert Spence (a Newcastle solicitor and president of the National Liberal Federation 1890-1902). It succeeded in attracting membership from many of the leading British intellectuals and politicians of the day including William Morris, Sidney Webb and Keir Hardie. Together they funded an 'exile escape fund' and sought to challenge those it viewed as apologists

¹⁰⁷Max Beloff, 'Lucien Wolf and the Anglo Russian Entente 1907-1914' *Jewish Historical Society of England* (University College, 1957), p. 32.

¹⁰⁸M. Levene, *War, Jews and the new Europe: the diplomacy of Lucien Wolf, 1914-1919* (1992)

¹⁰⁹John Slatter, 'Jaakof Prelooker and the Anglo Russian Review' (ed.), John Slatter, *From the other shore: Russian Political Emigrants in Britain 1880-1917* (London, 1984), pp 49-66. p.53.

¹¹⁰Barry Holingsworth, 'Benckendorff's Bête Noire: The Tribune and Russian Internal Affairs 1906-1908' in (eds.) William Harrison and Avril Pyman, *Aspects of Russia: Poetry, Prose and Public Opinion, Essays presented in memory of Dr NE. Andreyev* (Avebury, 1984), pp. 106-132.

for the tsarist regime such as Maurice Baring and Sir Bernard Pares.¹¹¹ The subscribers to *Free Russia* included the social reformer Joshua Rowntree and the writer Sarah Smith whose books (published under the pseudonym of Hesba Stretton) dealt with social issues such as child poverty. Other supporters of the *Anglo Russian Review* included the Liberal politician the Right Honourable Arthur Herbert Dyke Ackland, thirteenth Baronet, the Countess of Carlisle, the suffragist Isabella O. Ford and the Reverend Augustus Stopford Brooke one time chaplain to both Queen Victoria and her daughter, the Empress Frederick of Germany.¹¹²

The subject of the struggle for Russian freedom against the despotism of the tsar's also found a ready market amongst readers of popular novels. In the late nineteenth century in particular there was 'a veritable flood' of so-called "nihilistic novels" which purported to relate the daring exploits of Russians who were working for the revolution. Their titles alone: *A Nihilist Princess* and *In the Hands of the Tsar* reinforced popular images of a tyrannical monarch.¹¹³ However, the British were not only interested in the more brutal side of the imperial regime but were avid readers of "cosy" descriptions of life behind the palace walls. A particularly popular example of this genre was written by Margaret Eager: a former governess to the imperial children who published an account of her time in the imperial household. The book which was illustrated with photographs of the imperial children proved extremely popular. It ran to at least two editions and extracts

¹¹¹Barry Hollingsworth 'The Society of Friends of Russian Freedom: English Liberals and Russian Socialists 1890-1917', *Oxford Slavonic Papers*, 3, N.S. 1970.

¹¹² Carol Peaker, 'We are not Barbarians: Literature and the Russian Émigré Press in England, 1890–1905' *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 3 (2006).

¹¹³ Neilson, *Britain and the last Tsar*, p. 50.

were also published in *Leisure Hour*, a mass circulation family magazine.¹¹⁴

Eager claimed to have been encouraged to write her memoirs by the empress as a counter to the untruthful accounts of life at the imperial court then in circulation. She described in some detail the tsar and empress's private quarters, the empress's bedroom with her collection of 'holy images' and Nicholas's study which, Eager said, was 'the most used room in the palace [where] the tsar spends hours each day working hard for the advancement of the great empire committed to his charge'.¹¹⁵ In 1905, a year before Eager published her account of life at Tsarskoe Selo the *Daily Express* had reported that a major in the Russian army tasted the imperial family's food before they dined in a sealed, bomb proof room made entirely of cast iron.¹¹⁶ There was no such room in the palace at Tsarskoe Selo but the article revived memories of the attempted assassination of Tsar Alexander II with a bomb hidden beneath the dining room of the Winter Palace. In her introduction Eager appeared to reject stereotypical images such as those presented in the *Daily Express* of a tsar dogged by revolutionaries. Thus, Eager asserted 'it would be easy for me to pile on the agony [and] to speak of plots and counterplots; to speak of hidden bombs and life made horrible by fear; but no such things have occurred in my six years at the Russian court'.¹¹⁷ However, in spite of her protestations to the contrary, she devoted an entire chapter to what she called 'attacks on the tsar' including an attempt to poison the

¹¹⁴ Margaret Eager, *Six Years at the Russian Court* (London, 1906).

¹¹⁵ Eager, *Six Years*, p. 9.

¹¹⁶ McMillan, *The Way we were*, p. 170.

¹¹⁷ Eager, *Six Years*, p. viii.

water supply at Livadia by a revolutionary disguised as a priest.¹¹⁸ Even more dramatic was her story of a parcel ‘posted in Suez’, addressed to Nicholas that was found to contain a piece of cloth contaminated with plague germs.¹¹⁹

Nicholas was an extremely private person and he may not have approved of Eager’s book-nonetheless, he did promote aspects of his life in photographs and in film as well as in newspapers, periodicals and books. In 1905, reflecting on the events of Bloody Sunday when the workers had marched to the Winter Palace despite the tsar’s absence, the empress’s brother suggested Nicholas institute a court circular in order that in future the people would know his location on any given day. Perhaps realising that the tsar would be doubtful as the benefits of such a scheme the grand duke advised that the people only ‘hear only about your official work but they want to know how *their* emperor lives, his family life and his dear wife’.¹²⁰ In the wake of the 1905 revolution security reasons probably precluded publication of as detailed a schedule as was commonplace in other monarchies but, in 1914, the tsar permitted publication of an English translation of a book first published in Russia to mark the Romanov tercentenary. Readers of *The Tsar and his People* were informed that the tsar ‘never sits down to rest during the day time [...] the ruler of the Russian Empire devotes never less than ten and frequently as many as twelve hours to work’.¹²¹ The book was well received by the *Daily Express* which asserted that the book proved ‘once and for all that monarchs work harder than most of their subjects

¹¹⁸ Eager, *Six Years*, p. 214.

¹¹⁹ Eager, *Six Years*, p.216.

¹²⁰ Petra H. Kleinpenning, (ed.), *The Correspondence of the Empress Alexandra of Russia with Ernst Ludwig and Eleonore Grand Duke and Grand Duchess of Hesse 1878-1916* (Norderstedt, 2010), p. 272.

¹²¹ Major A.G. Elchaninov, *The Tsar and His People* (London, 1914), p. 14.

[since] all the tables and sofas ‘of the tsar’s working room are ‘perpetually covered with papers yet the work is never behind’.¹²² Furthermore, adding a note of frugality which contrasted with popular images of Romanov wealth, the newspaper observed that the tsar is ‘sparing in his use of writing materials and hands over the stumps to the tsarevich’.¹²³

The coronation procession in 1896 was the first historic occasion of its kind to be filmed for distribution to the public but after 1912, with imperial sanction, Gaumont produced over 100 films showing the tsar and his family.¹²⁴ British cinema goers were able to see moving images of Nicholas entitled, for example, *The Czar at the Front* (1915) and *The Czar of Russia and his Armies* (1916). British *Pathé* news also showed a number of films of the tsar including, in 1912, the *Czar Attends the Centenary of the Battle of Borodino* and *The Czar and Grand Duke Nicholas Inspect the Army in the Field*, made at the height of the war in 1915. One of the last films showing Nicholas, entitled *A Royal Prisoner* (1917), was made on the eve the tsar’s return to Tsarskoe Selo following his abdication at Pskov. These films enabled a wide British audience outside of the elites the opportunity to ‘see’ Nicholas and, sometimes, Alexandra for themselves.¹²⁵ Such vignettes, served to emphasise the human qualities of the imperial couple beneath the more traditional images of Russian rulers, their unlimited wealth and their uncaring hauteur.

Nicholas’s political and personal views were also promoted to the British public by

¹²² *Daily Express*, 5 Jan. 1914, p. 1.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ Wortman, *Scenarios of Power*, vol. 2, pp. 485-486.

¹²⁵ British Film Institute Online Archive, <http://www.ftvdb.bfi.org.uk> accessed 30 November 2011.

means of interviews with sympathetic British journalists including Sir Donald Mackenzie Wallace and W.T. Stead. These two men in particular were very different characters but they both had a genuine and long standing interest in Russia, Russian affairs and the Russian monarchy. According to his obituary in *The Times* Sir Donald Mackenzie Wallace devoted his life to his ‘passionate love of study’ which included spending time at universities in Scotland, Germany and France.¹²⁶ He spoke several languages, including Russian, and in 1870 he made his first visit to Russia where he spent the following six years criss-crossing the Russian empire. His manuscript entitled *Russia* was at first turned down by London publishers on the grounds that no one in Britain would be interested in the subject.¹²⁷ It was not until the Bosnian Risings (1875) and the Bulgarian Atrocities (1876) that the so-called Eastern Question became the focus of British attention and it became evident that a book on Russia might fill a gap in public knowledge.¹²⁸ Eventually running to five editions, it remained for many years, the definitive work for anyone seeking a considered insight into Russia.¹²⁹

Mackenzie Wallace first met Nicholas in 1890 having been proposed by Sir Robert Morier, the then British ambassador to St Petersburg, to accompany the future tsar on tour of India.¹³⁰ Wallace subsequently submitted a report on the visit to Morier, it provides an interesting insight into Nicholas’s character a few short years before his accession. The portrait of the future autocrat is not very flattering, he is depicted as an immature,

¹²⁶ *The Times* 11 Jan. 1919, p. 6.

¹²⁷ Donald Mackenzie Wallace, *Russia* (London, 1877).

¹²⁸ Richard T. Shannon, *Gladstone and the Bulgarian Agitation 1876*, 2nd edn, (London, 1975).

¹²⁹ *The Times*, 11 Jan. 1919, p. 6.

¹³⁰ Lord Lansdowne to Sir Robert Burnet David Morier, RBD Morier Papers 1826-1893 vol. 15 (hereafter, Morier Papers), Balliol College Archives University of Oxford.

lethargic young man whose education in regards to the responsibilities of royalty appears to be somewhat lacking. In particular Wallace found he had the ‘abrupt manner of the Romanovs’ and, as a result, often gave offence ‘having no idea of the great importance ordinary mortals attribute to the insignificant words and acts of personage in his position’.¹³¹ By his own admission Wallace hesitated to predict what sort of ruler Nicholas might make but he noted that although he was ‘well-intentioned [he lacked] enthusiasm of any kind’.¹³² As a result he believed history would regard him as Nicholas ‘the good and worthy’ rather than ‘Nicholas the Great’.¹³³ Clearly Wallace was far from impressed by the tsarevich but his time with Nicholas may have stood him in good stead since he later obtained regular audiences with the tsar ‘who spoke to him surprisingly openly’ about the problems facing Russia.¹³⁴ At the urging of Edward VII Mackenzie Wallace travelled to Russia in the wake of Bloody Sunday. As is discussed in Chapter 4 Mackenzie Wallace’s relatively phlegmatic response to Bloody Sunday contrasted with some other firsthand accounts.¹³⁵ Mackenzie Wallace was evidently respected by the tsar, he was twice sent to St Petersburg by the British government to sound Nicholas out about the possibility of an Anglo-Russian Accord.¹³⁶

Amongst the British commentators whom we consider who were granted audiences with Nicholas and whose perceptions we consider, W.T. Stead was the most unusual.

¹³¹ Donald Mackenzie Wallace Confidential Memorandum to Sir Robert Morier, Morier Papers vol. 15.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Hughes, *Inside the Enigma*, p. 25.

¹³⁵ Special Collections of the London Library, Donald Mackenzie Wallace: An outline sketch on the revolutionary movement written for Edward VII 27 Dec 1905.

¹³⁶ McLean, *Royalty and Diplomacy*, p. 164.

Stead began his journalistic career in 1871 on a provincial newspaper, the *Northern Echo* based in Darlington. He continued to work for the *Northern Echo* until 1880 but a wider public knew him during his tenure as a journalist and editor of the London based *Pall Mall Gazette* which, under his stewardship, crusaded on a number of radical topics. His articles tackled some of the most controversial subjects of the day including Irish Home Rule, white slavery and juvenile prostitution.¹³⁷ Stead was also the author of a number of books which focused on his range of eclectic interests including spiritualism and Russian politics.¹³⁸ Following his exposé in the *Pall Mall Gazette* of British child prostitution he was charged with peddling pornography and in 1885 he was sentenced to three months imprisonment. One critic has since unflatteringly described Stead as ‘lacking balance, judgement and self-discipline [...] a journalistic Toad of Toad Hall forever puffed up with some new conceit, a quack cure for cancer, a miraculous fertiliser, Esperanto and spirit photography or a process for distilling gold out of sea water’.¹³⁹ However, his mercurial character and his notoriety did not harm his writing career and in 1888 he achieved something of a journalistic coup when he secured interviews with both Lev Tolstoy and Tsar Alexander III.

Stead’s interview with Alexander III was the beginning of a long association with the imperial family and his public defence of “their causes”. For example, in towns and cities across Europe, Stead enthusiastically publicised Nicholas’ call for a Peace Conference at

¹³⁷Victor Pierce Jones, *Saint or Sensationalist? The story of W.T. Stead, 1849-1912* (London, 1988).

¹³⁸ See, for example, W.T. Stead *After Death: a personal narrative* (London, 1905) and *The Truth about Russia* (London, 1888).

¹³⁹ Piers Brendon, *The Life and Death of the Press Barons* (London, 1982), p. 81.

The Hague.¹⁴⁰ In November 1898 Stead interviewed the tsar at Livadia, a meeting which seems to have left him in a state of elation. In a subsequent letter to Queen Victoria, Stead declared that he felt ‘grateful to God that such a man sits upon the Russian throne’.¹⁴¹ In the coming years Stead’s enthusiasm for Nicholas remained undimmed and, following the establishment of the Duma, he was granted another interview with the tsar. Unable to gain access to Nicholas at this time of change the tsar’s invitation to Stead rankled with the British diplomatic corps.¹⁴² Stead is an especially interesting character since he believed in both liberal reform and his ability to assist the tsar. He did so with a deferential, yet at times extremely familiar, attitude towards Nicholas and Alexandra.¹⁴³ However, Stead did not live to witness the final crisis of imperial Russia having been a passenger onboard the *Titanic* in 1912.

Of all those who wrote about Russia during this period, perhaps the best known today is Sir Bernard Pares, mainly because of the accounts he wrote of his experiences in Russia and his analysis of the demise of the imperial regime. In particular, his readable account *The Fall of the Russian Monarchy* in which he recalled ‘a time when it was still thought possible to regard a sixth of the world’s surface as a personal estate and govern a hundred and seventy millions of humanity from a lady’s drawing room’.¹⁴⁴ However, we have given priority to Pares’ perceptions of Nicholas and Alexandra contained in his

¹⁴⁰ W.T. Stead, ‘Nicholas II Czar of Russia and Emperor of Peace’ *Review of Reviews*, 19, Jan. 1899, pp. 34-48.

¹⁴¹ Papers of Queen Victoria on Foreign Affairs, vol. 1., W.T Stead to Queen Victoria’, 1 Nov. 1898.

¹⁴² Neilson, *Britain and the last Tsar*, p. 47.

¹⁴³ Joseph Baylen, *The Tsar's Lecturer General, W.T. Stead and the Russian Revolution of 1905*, (Atlanta Georgia Jul. 1969).

¹⁴⁴ Bernard Pares, *The Fall of the Russian Monarchy* (Oxford, 1939), p. 502.

confidential government reports, newspaper columns and letters to the press.

Pares' interest in Russia can be dated from 1898 when he toured Napoleon's battlefields. Although he enjoyed independent means, he began an academic career as a lecturer at Cambridge. In 1907 he established the first school of Russian studies at the University of Liverpool where he invited several Russianists of the day, including the theologian William Birkbeck and the Tolstoyan Aylmer Maude, to lecture.¹⁴⁵ Pares later became director of the School of Slavonic and East European Studies which was founded in 1915.

After the 1905 revolution and the introduction of constitutional reforms Pares became an enthusiastic supporter of evolutionary liberalisation in Russia. In 1907 he published a study of the subject entitled *Russia and Reform* and became a keen secretary of the Anglo-Russian Friendship Society.¹⁴⁶ In later years he was remembered by his secretary Dorothy Galton as 'a benevolent autocrat' who could get on with anyone 'so long as they deferred to him'.¹⁴⁷ Although Pares may have been overbearing it was largely as a result of his stamina and enthusiasm for the reform movement that the Duma was able to undertake a successful visit to Britain in 1909.¹⁴⁸

His interpretations of Russian affairs were valued by Whitehall and as early as 1906 he

¹⁴⁵ Michael Hughes 'Bernard Pares, Russian studies and the promotion of Anglo-Russian friendship 1907-1914', *SEER*, vol. 78, No. 3 (Jul. 2000), p. 591.

¹⁴⁶ Bernard Pares, *Russia and Reform* (London, 1907).

¹⁴⁷ Dorothy Galton 'Sir Bernard Pares and Slavonic Studies in London University 1919-1939', *SEER*, vol. 46, No. 107 9Jul. 1968), pp. 481-3.

¹⁴⁸ SSEES Archive, PAR/3 and PAR/4, Sir Bernard Pares correspondence concerning the visit of the Russian Duma to Britain, 1909.

provided the Cabinet with an analysis of debates in the Duma.¹⁴⁹ In August 1914 the Foreign Office sent him to Russia and he spent the next nine months touring the eastern front by bicycle. His mission was to counter the German propaganda stories of Cossack outrages and he duly published a sympathetic account of the Russian Army. Amongst the images he described was of an army corps which marched resolutely to the Front singing as they went. One line of the song included the refrain: '*Be not moody Russian tsar, Russian tsar! Russia will never yield*'.¹⁵⁰ This book, which highlighted the patriotism of the Russian Army, was well received in Russia. However, as Keith Neilson has noted, Pares was not popular with everyone at the British Embassy. Perhaps because of his domineering character Sir Charles Hardinge for example, found him 'a bit of a bore'.¹⁵¹ During the war Buchanan had little time for Pares' official reports and as a result he was effectively sacked from Foreign Office work although he continued to write for the press.¹⁵²

Pares met the tsar on two occasions, the first in 1912, when he led a parliamentary delegation to Russia and the second in 1916 when he was awarded the Cross of St George (Fourth Class) to mark the publication of his book on the Russian Army. However, because of Pares' very public association with the Duma, he seems not to have been invited to interview the tsar.

Dr Emile Joseph Dillon was born in Dublin and first visited Russia in 1877. His first

¹⁴⁹ Hughes, 'Pares and the Promotion of Anglo-Russian Friendship', pp. 513-514.

¹⁵⁰ Bernard Pares, *Day By Day with the Russian Army* (London, 1915), frontispiece.

¹⁵¹ Neilson, *The Last Tsar*, p. 45.

¹⁵² Keith Neilson, 'Joyrides? British Intelligence and Propaganda in Russia 1914-1917' in *The Historical Journal*, 24, 4 (Dec.1981), p. 891.

wife, whom he married in 1881, was a Russian and he enjoyed a long association with the country.¹⁵³ A talented linguist, in addition to Arabic and Sanskrit, Dillon was also fluent in Latin, Greek, French, German and Russian. He studied at St Petersburg University and was subsequently appointed professor of comparative philology, Sanskrit and ancient Armenian at Khar'kov University. Uniquely amongst his British contemporaries from whom we quote, Dillon was also employed as foreign correspondent for *Odesskie Vestnik* and later as editor of *Odesskie Novosti*. In 1887 he was recruited as the Russia correspondent for the London *Daily Telegraph* and in the coming years he also wrote for the *Fortnightly Review*.¹⁵⁴

Dillon was friends with a number of the political and diplomatic elite of St Petersburg. His talks with Russia's first Prime Minister Sergei Witte influenced his reports to the British embassy, particularly during the revolutionary crisis of 1905.¹⁵⁵ He advised the British embassy secretary Sir Cecil Spring Rice about the Russian revolutionary movement and the Russian secret police.¹⁵⁶ However, amongst his compatriots, opinion about Dillon was divided. W.T. Stead described him as 'far and away the ablest, most cultured and most adventurous newspaperman' he had ever met.¹⁵⁷ Lord Onslow was also impressed and thought Dillon 'knew more about Russia than anyone he had met'.¹⁵⁸ In contrast to his many admirers, Charles Hardinge came to believe that Dillon was 'a most

¹⁵³ <http://www.oxforddnb.com.ezproxy.londonlibrary.co.uk/view/article/32828> accessed 2 March 2011.

¹⁵⁴ E.J. Dillon, *Russian Characteristics* (London, 1892). Originally published under the pseudonym of E.B. Lanin, Dillon's articles were subsequently revised, updated and published in volume form.

¹⁵⁵ Hughes, *Diplomacy before the Revolution*, p. 77.

¹⁵⁶ Sir Henry Beaumont Papers' IWM, PP/MCR/11, p. 203.

¹⁵⁷ David Linton and Kay Boston (eds.), *The Newspaper Press in Britain: An Annotated Bibliography* (London, 1987), p. 70.

¹⁵⁸ Surrey, G173/13/24, Notes of a Visit to St Petersburg and Berlin December 1904,

unreliable scoundrel'.¹⁵⁹

Like the diplomatic corps, the journalists whose perceptions we consider had a variety of skills. A number were linguists, few were immune from self-promotion and several wrote for publications with a specific political or social outlook which they themselves sometimes shared. They are a useful foil for this thesis providing as they do a rich variety of texts with sometimes uninhibited views about the tsar and empress which generally contrast to the more restrained language of British diplomatic reports.

As we have noted, the readership of a particular newspaper or magazine might include readers who did not share the publications political outlook. However, human nature suggests that people tend to buy newspapers and to read articles which reflect their own views. As a result what these journalists wrote may give us some sense of what their 'ordinary' British readers might have thought of Nicholas and Alexandra.

(iv) Travellers and Residents

In addition to those in Britain who constructed their perceptions of the tsar and empress based on articles whose authors we have considered above there were a number who were able to travel to Russia and who therefore felt able to comment on the imperial couple. Since Richard Chancellor had first come to Muscovy in the sixteenth century there had been no lack of British citizens with a sense of adventure willing to endure hardships in order to trade with Russia and to explore the vast land. The advent of the railways in the

¹⁵⁹ TNA FO 800/71/342, Report from Sir Charles Hardinge to Sir Arthur Nicolson. 10 Nov. 1909.

nineteenth century facilitated travel to Russia and the century saw a plethora of guidebooks to meet the needs of travellers.¹⁶⁰ These temporary visitors could be divided into tourists who spent a relatively brief time in Russia rarely venturing beyond the two capitals and others, often fluent Russian speakers, who were more intrepid and might spend many months in Russia and her easternmost provinces.

Of those who fall into the latter category, Maurice Baring and Stephen Graham were amongst the most prolific. Maurice Baring was born in 1874, a scion of the banking dynasty which had extensive business dealings in Russia. It was Baring's Bank which underwrote the British loan to Persia which formed part of the Anglo-Russian Accord of 1907.¹⁶¹ In 1898 Baring passed the diplomatic examinations with 'outstanding French' and the following year he was posted to Copenhagen.¹⁶² While in Denmark he met Count Aleksander Benckendorff. The two men became firm friends and spent time together in Russia and in London where the count was posted as Russia's Ambassador. Although he came to be perceived as something of an expert on Russian affairs, Baring admitted that before going to Russia he had been influenced by popular British descriptions of the country. As a result, he said, he had imagined it as a sort of 'Rhineland covered with snow [where] princesses carried about dynamite in their cigarette cases and wore bombs

¹⁶⁰See for example: *Murray's Handbook of Russia, Poland and Finland: including the Crimea, Caucasus, Siberia and Central Asia* (London, 1893), Jeremiah Curtin *A Journey in Southern Siberia: the Mongols, their Religion and their Myths* (London, 1909), Rothay Reynolds, *My Year in Russia* (London, 1913). Others are listed in the bibliography.

¹⁶¹ K. M. Wilson, 'Creative Accounting: the place of loans to Persia in the commencement of the negotiation of the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907 in *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 38, No. 2 (Apr., 2002) pp. 35-82.

¹⁶² (eds.) Jocelyn Hilgarth and Julian Jeffs, *Maurice Baring Letters*, (Norwich, 2007), pp. 12-13.

in their tiaras'.¹⁶³

In 1904, with Count Benckendorff's assistance, Baring travelled to the Manchurian Front.¹⁶⁴ He subsequently published accounts of his experiences with the Russian Army¹⁶⁵ and in Moscow during the 1905 revolution.¹⁶⁶ In 1912, with rather more mature perceptions of the country, Baring was part of an official British delegation to the Russian Duma. His ties to the extended Benckendorff family continued after the fall of the regime. Aleksander's brother Paul was with the imperial family during the period they spent under house arrest at Tsarskoe Selo. Baring later translated into English his account of the months he spent with the tsar and empress before they were sent to Siberia.¹⁶⁷

Baring's family background, his education, his ambition to serve in the diplomatic corps as well as his close friendship with members of the Russian aristocracy placed him firmly within the mindset of a member of the European elite. He was friends with Prince P.D. Sviatopolk-Mirsky, the liberal minister of the interior (1904-05), and the Russian socialite Countess "Betsy" Shuvaloff.¹⁶⁸ Perhaps he never shrugged off his initial romantic views about Russia and this may have led him to reject "western" political solutions to the crises of the last reign. For example, in *Russian People* published in 1911, Baring railed against the intelligentsia and what he scathingly called their 'second

¹⁶³ Maurice Baring, *What I saw in Russia* (London, 1913), pp. 243.244.

¹⁶⁴ Emma Letley, *Maurice Baring: A Citizen of Europe* (London, 1991), , p. 91.

¹⁶⁵ Maurice Baring, *With the Russians in Manchuria* (London, 1905).

¹⁶⁶ Maurice Baring, *A Year in Russia* (London, 1907).

¹⁶⁷ Count Paul Benckendorff, *Last Days at Tsarskoe Selo* (London, 1927).

¹⁶⁸ Letley, *Maurice Baring*, p.74.

hand socialism'.¹⁶⁹ In 1914, in his book *The Mainspring of Russia*, Baring reflected on the creation of the Duma, preferring to see it in terms of a renewal of the medieval Council of Boyars rather than a break with Russia's past.¹⁷⁰

Stephen Graham was born in Edinburgh in 1884 whilst a snow storm raged outside. He later joked that the weather that day may have subliminally influenced his interest in Russia.¹⁷¹ Having given up his job in a government office he forged a successful writing career authoring articles in the *English Review*, *The Times* and the *Daily Mail* as well as the London evening newspapers.¹⁷² He became well connected amongst "Russianists" and counted amongst his friends Sir Bernard Pares and members of the Anglican and Eastern Churches Association including the Reverend Fynes Clinton, Canon Douglas and Archbishop Lang.¹⁷³ Another member of the Eastern Churches Association, G.B.H. Bishop, Vicar of Cardington in Shropshire, praised what he said was Graham's insight into the Russian peasant. In particular the vicar bemoaned the many light weight and 'supercilious' accounts of Russian life which were avidly read by the British public and he contrasted them unfavourably with Graham's writings.¹⁷⁴ As Michael Hughes explains, Graham sought in particular to promote the idea of "Holy Russia". Everyday life in Russia, Graham told the British public was 'saturated by a sense of the presence of

¹⁶⁹ Letley, *Maurice Baring*, p. 305.

¹⁷⁰ Maurice Baring, *The Mainsprings of Russia* (London, 1914).

¹⁷¹ Stephen Graham, *Part of a Wonderful Scene: an autobiography* (London, 1964), p. 9.

¹⁷² Michael Hughes, 'Stephen Graham' (1884-1975) 2010, ODNB, accessed 13 Feb 2012.

¹⁷³ Rev.A.T.J. Salter, *An Outline of the History of the Anglican and Eastern Churches Association*, www.aeca.org.uk, accessed 24 March 2011.

¹⁷⁴ G.B.H. Bishop, *The Religion of Russia, from the point of view of the Church in England* (London, 1915), p. 45.

God'.¹⁷⁵ This theme of innate piety in the Russian peasant was taken up by Graham in his book entitled *With the Russian Pilgrims to Jerusalem* which he published during the Romanov Tercentenary year and which relates his experiences with the Russians who made the Easter pilgrimage to Jerusalem.¹⁷⁶ At the height of the First World War he published *The Way of Martha and the Way of Mary* which more fully discussed religious life in Russia.¹⁷⁷ During the 1914-18 war his views were sought by Lloyd George and the British cabinet but, in retrospect, his views appear tinged with a little romanticism. In spite of his years of study of Russia and because of his belief in the natural spirituality of the mass of the Russian people, Graham later admitted that he had not expected the revolution.¹⁷⁸

The Coronation year of 1896 provided a particular focus for a variety of travellers. In order to meet this demand the well-known package tour operators Thomas Cook and Henry Lunn offered excursions to coincide with the festivities. In the course of this thesis we consider the impressions of Arthur Sykes, a journalist and translator of works by Gogol and Chekhov,¹⁷⁹ and the Reverend Augustus Thursby-Pelham, vicar of the Shropshire parish of Cound. The two men travelled to Russia as part of a Co-operative Educational tour organised by (later Sir) Henry Lunn¹⁸⁰ and John Thomas Woolrych

¹⁷⁵ Michael Hughes, 'Searching for the Soul of Russia: British Perceptions of Russia During the First World War' in *Twentieth Century British History*, 20, 2, 2009, p. 214.

¹⁷⁶ Stephen Graham, *With the Russian Pilgrims to Jerusalem* (London, 1913).

¹⁷⁷ Stephen Graham, *The Way of Martha and the Way of Mary* (London, 1916).

¹⁷⁸ Graham, *Wonderful Scene*, p. 148.

¹⁷⁹ <http://www.ukwhoswho.com/view/article/oupww/whowaswho/U217884>, accessed 17 March 2011.

¹⁸⁰ Stella Wood, 'Lunn, Sir Henry Simpson 1859-1939' article/34633, accessed 30 Nov. 2012.

Perowne.¹⁸¹ Perowne expressed the hope that the tours would ‘improve the minds of the clergy’.¹⁸² On this occasion at least, the clerical contingent was a strong one since, according to Thursby-Pelham, there were two vicars and a canon in addition to himself aboard the vessel which sailed for Russia.¹⁸³ Sykes was in the Kremlin’s cathedral square as the tsar processed to the Red Staircase and Thursby-Pelham witnessed Nicholas and Alexandra’s official entry into Moscow. Another British tourist who was in Moscow at this time and whose perceptions we consider was one Mary Hickley. Her sister’s position as companion to princess Galitzin gave Hickley entrée to the coronation cathedral.¹⁸⁴ The narratives left by these visitors provide us with entertaining, frequently positive, if contrasting perceptions of the imperial couple during the coronation year of 1896.

Amongst the many British visitors and residents in Moscow during the late spring of 1896 a number were British delegates, representing the Crown and the Anglican Church. They included the Duke of Connaught who wrote to Queen Victoria about the disaster at Khodynka Field, his aide-de-camp, Field Marshall Lord Francis Grenfell, who published an account of the festivities in the Kremlin, and the bishop of Peterborough Mandell Creighton who attended the coronation as representative of the Church of England. Creighton is of particular interest because he was one of a number of Anglicans at this time, including William Birkbeck and Athelstan Riley, who aspired to unity between the

¹⁸¹ He later published *Russian Hosts and English Guests in Central Asia* (London, 1898).

¹⁸² Shropshire County Archives, Shrewsbury, (hereafter, Shropshire Archives) Papers of the Reverend A. Thursby-Pelham AT 64THU, *The Northern Capitals and Europe and the Tsar’s Coronation*.

¹⁸³ Shropshire Archives AT 64THU, Thursby Pelham, *The Northern Capitals and Europe and the Tsar’s Coronation*,

¹⁸⁴ Mary Hickley Gold, *Glitter and Gloom: Recollections of the Coronation of the Tsar Nicholas II and later travels in Russia written in 1903* (Devon, 1997)

Church of England and the Russian Orthodox Church.¹⁸⁵ Taken aback by the sights and sounds of Moscow, Creighton was influenced in his understanding of the relationship between tsar and the Russian people by the displays of religious devotion which he witnessed. However, although Creighton professed an interest in Russian Church matters, he seems to have lacked an awareness of the tsar himself. Perhaps influenced by typically more negative British images of despotic Russian rulers, Creighton noted with an element of surprise that, having met Nicholas, he had found the young tsar to be ‘a charming man of great culture’.¹⁸⁶

Broadly, the impressions of the tsar and empress by those who travelled to Russia for the coronation as tourists or as official visitors were positive but their stay was a relatively short one. This did not necessarily allow them to develop mature impressions of either Russia or Nicholas and Alexandra.

In addition to the many temporary visitors to Russia, there was a thriving British community whose ties to the country went back many centuries.¹⁸⁷ In St Petersburg and Moscow families such as the Johnstones, the Maxwells, the Wylies, the Andersons, the Merryweathers and the Cazalets were engaged in shipping, commerce, engineering and

¹⁸⁵ Athelstan Riley (ed.), *William J. Birkbeck and the Russian Church* (London, 1917). See also, Jeffrey R. Bibbee, ‘The Church of England and Russian Orthodoxy: politics and the ecumenical dialogue, 1888-1917’ PhD thesis, King’s College London, 2007.

¹⁸⁶ Church of England Record Centre Lambeth Palace, Benson Papers 148/186, Archbishop Mandell Creighton to Archbishop of Canterbury, 15 June 1896.

¹⁸⁷ Anthony G. Cross, *St Petersburg and the British: the city through British visitors and residents* (London, 2008), pp. 227-34. For readers of German, see also Julia Mahnke-Devlin, *Britische Migration nach Russland im 19. Jahrhundert: Integration, Kultur, Alltagsleben* (Wiesbaden, 2005).

the manufacture of glass.¹⁸⁸ The Russo-Scottish department store of Muir and Mirrielees was a centre of British life in Russia.¹⁸⁹ Between 1883 and 1890 Aylmer Maude, who had studied at the Moscow Lyceum, was employed as the manager of the store's carpet department: he was also a vocal critic of the imperial regime.

In 1895 Maude met the Russian philosopher and writer Lev Tolstoi and the two men became firm friends. Tolstoi's philosophy deeply influenced Maude's thinking and Maude later wrote his authorised biography.¹⁹⁰ Influenced by Tolstoi and his own Quaker beliefs Maude published an account of the coronation festivities under the nom de plume 'De Monte Alto' claiming that to do otherwise would risk the wrath of the tsarist secret police.¹⁹¹ In contrast to the many positive views we consider, Maude berated the cost of the ceremony and countered images of Nicholas as an extraordinary human being, worthy of especial reverence. Many of the British visitors in Moscow and much of the British press focused their sympathy for the disaster at Khodynka Field on Nicholas and Alexandra rather than the many victims of the tragedy. In keeping with his lack of subservience and antipathy to the tsarist regime Maude was a great deal harsher towards the imperial couple and dismissed as illogical the sympathy shown towards the tsar and empress.¹⁹² Maude was not the only British resident who commented on the tsarist regime. As we shall discuss the views of Walter Philip, a senior employee of Muir and Mirrielees, were rather more those of the 'Establishment' than those of Maude.

¹⁸⁸ William Barnes Stevani, *Petrograd Past and Present* (London, 1915), p. 286.

¹⁸⁹ Harvey J. Pitcher, *Muir and Mirrielees: The Scottish Partnership that became a household name in Russia* (Cromer, 1994) p. 124.

¹⁹⁰ Aylmer Maude, *Leo Tolstoy: A Short Biography* (London, 1902).

¹⁹¹ Aylmer Maude, *The Tsar's Coronation as seen by 'De Monto Alto' Resident in Moscow* (London, 1896)

¹⁹² Maude, *Coronation*, p.104.

Members of the British Royal Family, diplomats, journalists, travellers to Russia and longer term residents all contributed to the variety of British perceptions of Nicholas and Alexandra. They provided a particularly British focus to their analysis of the tsar and empress. Commentators perceived the imperial couple through the lens of their understanding of the British monarchy as a focus for nationhood and as a ‘celebrity’. In addition, factors such as class, and a commentators political outlook contributed to the development of attitudes towards the tsar and empress. These notably ‘British influences’ were mirrored by a commentator’s understanding of Russian history, the relationship between Russia’s rulers and their subjects as well as a view of opposition to the regime. In the following chapter we consider these ‘Russian influences’ which were established over centuries of Russo-British interaction and suggest ways in which, sometimes centuries old ideas, may have contributed to British perceptions of Nicholas and Alexandra.

Chapter 1: British interaction with Russia and images of Russia, tsars, empresses and consorts between 1553-1894

The relationship between the tsar and his people is unique and beyond all parallel, totally different from that existing in the previous history of nations. Not even the Pope in the most amazing of epochs of power, not even the Tartars in their devastating deluge of torturing executioners, not even the most savage of barbaric hordes of Vandalism ever presented to the world a spectacle of a people so adoring so submissive and so warlike at the nod of a supreme ruler. ¹⁹³

As the quote at the start of this epigraph indicates, British commentators were fascinated by Russia's tsars and empresses; their power, their wealth and the nature of their relationship with the mass of the Russian people.¹⁹⁴ The British public believed that Russia was 'different' she aspired to be a European power but was 'of the east'. Russia's social and political structures, her religious practices, her language, her geography and scale, even her climate were strikingly different from that which existed in Britain. British understanding of Nicholas and Alexandra was influenced by a number of sometimes conflicting factors. One of the most significant of these was British images of past tsars and empresses, the despotic as well as the more liberal. In addition, British understanding of Nicholas and Alexandra was formed as a result of either admiration or distaste for

¹⁹³ George W. Royston-Piggott, *Savage and Civilised Russia* (London, 1878), p. 130.

¹⁹⁴ Richard Hakluyt, *Voyages and Discoveries* (London, 1972).

Russian religious as well as both fear of an imperial rival and the necessity of Russo-British alliances against a common enemy. Influenced by an accumulation of centuries of British perceptions of Russia and her rulers, during the final years of the regime British responses to the question what was 'true' face of Russia and her tsar reflected that of earlier generations. Was Nicholas II committed to reform or was he a reactionary? Were the mass of its inhabitants inherently uncivilised and discontent or were they happy to live their lives under the paternalistic authority of the autocracy? What was the role of an empress? Was she foremost a mother, a loving guide to the heir, a helpmate for her husband or could she be a political force in her own right? As for Russian culture, was it characteristic of eastern barbarism or high art? Was Russian society deeply and sincerely spiritual or was its apparent receptiveness to superstition a key factor which enabled Rasputin to flourish? Intertwined with references from specifically Russian motifs, British attitudes towards Nicholas and Alexandra were also influenced by specifically British factors. In particular, notions of the superiority of British culture, the British political system as well as the class, education and political leanings of those who commented upon the imperial couple all formed a framework against which Nicholas and Alexandra were judged.

(i) The Nature of a Russian Tsar

The pinnacle of power in Russia resided in the absolute monarch whose personality set the tone for his or her reign. In addition, they considered the personal characteristics

deemed necessary for a successful tsar or empress. By the time of Nicholas II's accession there were any number of "Russian studies" by travellers, diplomats, clerics, academics and merchants. A Russian tsar was typically said to have a striking build, a dominating personality and a willingness to use violence, against both his own subjects and foreign enemies, in order to defend the autocracy and the empire. A Russian ruler's relationship with their subjects was perceived to be at once authoritarian and benevolent.

The extent to which it was appropriate for an autocrat to act with violence in defence of the status quo fascinated a number of British commentators. Tsar Ivan IV (1553-84) was viewed as the most notoriously autocratic ruler. In his 1854 survey of Russian history, the translator and folklorist Walter K. Kelly¹⁹⁵ declared that Ivan had enforced his tyrannical rule by 'everyday inventing new punishments'.¹⁹⁶ The Anglo-American writer, Edmund Noble offered an equally blood curdling characterisation in 1900. According to this account Ivan had ruled his subjects 'with a rod of terror-his animal spirits transported him beyond all bounds of moderation while his anger degraded him into a furious beast'.¹⁹⁷ As a member of the 'Society Friends of Russian Freedom' Noble was unlikely to play down the despotism of the tsars but other commentators offered understanding of a tsar's violent actions in the place of Noble's condemnation. Paul I (1796-1801) had a reputation during his lifetime for arbitrariness and a love of rigid military drill. Yet, in retrospect, his actions were not necessarily seen as the capricious acts of a tyrant. In 1838

¹⁹⁵ Richard M. Dorson (ed.), *Peasant Customs and Savage Myths* (London, 1968), p. 120.

¹⁹⁶ Walter K. Kelly, *The History of Russia from the earliest period to the present time*, vol. 1 (London, 1854), p. 143.

¹⁹⁷ E. Noble, *Russia and the Russians* (London, 1900), p. 177.

Thomas Raikes defended Paul against his critics. Employed in the City of London, Raikes was a regency dandy, a friend of (George) Beau Brummell and a profligate gambler.¹⁹⁸ However, his dissolute lifestyle does not appear to have precluded a love of social order and he insisted that Paul's 'acts of severity were justified by necessity and [were] the wholesome exercise of authority rather than the act of a despot'.¹⁹⁹

The contrasting features of restraint and combativeness identified in Nicholas II's character were sometimes seen as evidence of duplicity. However, earlier commentators had not always perceived such characteristics as mutually exclusive traits in a Russian ruler. The writer, traveller and mercenary, Charles Henningsen²⁰⁰ described Alexander I (1801-1825) in contradictory terms, seemingly without a hint of irony. According to Henningsen, Alexander was 'mild and liberal minded' yet, he also claimed, 'the methods he used to suppress dissent were more 'cruel than those used by Ivan the Terrible'.²⁰¹

To his contemporaries, of all his forebears, Nicholas II, with his love of family and the outdoor life, appeared most like Mary Pelleur Smith's 1859 description of Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich (r.1645-76). According to Pelleur Smith, Aleksei had liked to 'admire the beauties of nature' and to watch his 'son at play'.²⁰² It was an image which Nicholas II much admired. However, in reality, Aleksei could be rather less passive than this description of him suggests. As Lindsey Hughes has noted, Aleksei was said by the

¹⁹⁸ W.P. Courtney, 'Raikes, Thomas (1774-1848) ODNB, accessed 21 Nov. 2012.

¹⁹⁹ Thomas Raikes, *A Visit to St Petersburg in the Winter of 1829-30* (London, 1838), p. 56.

²⁰⁰ Samuel Austin Allibone, *A Critical Dictionary of English Literature and British and American Authors* (Philadelphia, 1891).

²⁰¹ Charles F. Henningsen, *Revelations of Russia in 1846 by an English Resident*, vol. 1, 3rd edn. (London, 1846), p. 37.

²⁰² Mary Ann Pelleur, Smith *Six Years Travel in Russia by an English lady*, vol. 2 (London, 1859), p. 72.

Austrian ambassador to have dragged his father-in-law around the room by his beard. In addition, during his reign, rebels were burned at the stake, buried alive and starved to death.²⁰³

Although Nicholas II suppressed social and political unrest, he was perceived to lack the ability to inculcate fear as his ancestors had done. Perhaps this was because he did not resort to the extreme methods of suppression employed by earlier tsars but it was also on account of his slight build which he had inherited from his petite mother. For example, Bernard Pares thought that the tsar was charming but had ‘an almost feminine delicacy’.²⁰⁴ He recalled that the sight of him produced a feeling ‘of pity [...] one felt his weakness’.²⁰⁵ Several of Nicholas’s ancestors’ commanding presence had been accentuated by their height. Peter the Great (r.1682-1725) for example, had stood well over 6 feet tall. It was a striking image which, even a century after his death, reinforced established British perceptions of ‘a colossal [tsar with a] vigour of body and mind’.²⁰⁶ Peter was extraordinarily tall by the standards of his day but more recent tsars were also noted for their height. A Church of England clergyman, the Rev. Robert Bateman Paul spent some time in Russia when he found himself ‘between appointments’.²⁰⁷ In a later account of his travels he noted that the future Nicholas I (1825-1855) stood ‘at least 6 feet two inches’ tall.²⁰⁸ According to Charles Henningsen when Nicholas I gave ‘the word of

²⁰³ Lindsey Hughes, *The Romanovs: Ruling Russia 1613-1917* (London, 2008), p. 29-30.

²⁰⁴ Pares, *Memoirs*, pp. 236-7.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁶ Kelly, *History of Russia*, p. 234.

²⁰⁷ W. P. Courtney, ‘Paul, Robert Bateman (1798–1877)’, rev. Ellie Clewlow, ODNB, 2004 accessed 21 Jun. 2012.

²⁰⁸ Rev. R.B. Paul, *Journal of a Tour to Moscow in the Summer of 1836* (London, 1836), p. 64.

command' he did so 'in a deep and sonorous voice' which could be heard over the vast plain of Krasnoe Selo.²⁰⁹

Although Nicholas II lacked the striking physical presence of some earlier tsars, his personality had more in common with later Russian rulers than with semi-fictitious images of the Muscovite tsars. For example, his avoidance of foreign diplomats and court life, which was much commented on by his contemporaries, sometimes gave the impression that previous tsars had been scrupulous in engaging with Russian and foreign elites. However, much of what was said about Nicholas was also observed by a British contemporary of Alexander I who, he noted, liked to 'escape to Tsarskoe Selo', had granted only 'three or four audiences a year to foreign ambassadors, [avoided court life and was] almost invisible to everyone but his own family'.²¹⁰ Nicholas's social isolation and his willingness to take advice from a narrow clique and his tendency to be swayed by a more authoritative personality was frequently criticised by British commentators. However, these too were allegations which were frequently levelled at his ancestors. In 1856, for example, Lord Granville, Britain's representative at the coronation of Alexander II, offered a critical assessment of the new tsar which differed little from some later diplomatic perceptions of Nicholas II. Granville asserted that Alexander II was 'guided by the person who speaks to him last [and, furthermore,] he does not surround himself with able men'.²¹¹

²⁰⁹ Henningsen, *Revelations*, p. 33.

²¹⁰ Raikes, *A visit*, p. 299.

²¹¹ A.C. Benson and Viscount Esher *The letters of Queen Victoria*, Series 2, vol. 3 (London, 1908), p. 203.

Nicholas II's father, Tsar Alexander III (r.1881-1894), provided Nicholas's contemporaries with the most recent image of a Russian ruler. However, contemporary descriptions of Alexander III were more varied than is sometimes acknowledged. For example, following his accession in 1881, the British ambassador reported that the new tsar was 'shy'.²¹² The radical writer G.H. Perris's later description of him as 'obstinate and prey to mystical exhortations' could equally have applied to his son.²¹³ When Alexander III died, an obituary in the *Penny Illustrated Paper and Illustrated Times* claimed that Alexander had revelled in his family life and had frequently joined in his children's games. Although regarded as behaviour untypical of a Russian tsar, it was a trait which he shared with his eldest son who loved to spend time in the company of his children, albeit that Alexander played the part of a fierce 'growling bear' in his romps in the nursery, a part which best mirrored his role as an autocrat.²¹⁴

For all these similarities between father and son, it was descriptions of Alexander as 'strong, well built [...] over six feet in height with a broad chest and a look of great strength', which predominated, and cast a shadow over perceptions of Nicholas.²¹⁵ The last tsar adopted Alexander III's Russophile costume and sported a beard as his father had done but he could not replicate images in the public mind of his father's height, his build or his extraordinary strength with which he was popularly reputed to break 'horseshoes,

²¹² TNA FO 30/29/185, Lord Dufferin to Foreign Office, 7 Apr. 1881.

²¹³ G.H. Perris, *Russia in Revolution* (London, 1905), p. 15.

²¹⁴ *Penny Illustrated Paper and Illustrated Times*, 3 Nov. 1894, p. 280.

²¹⁵ Edward Dicey, *A month in Russia during the Marriage of the Czarevitch* (London, 1867), p. 47.

roubles, iron pokers and pewter tankards'.²¹⁶

(ii) The role of a Russian Empress

In the centuries preceding Nicholas II's accession, only a handful of empresses had ruled in their own right. As a result the notion of an 'ideal' empress was not as well-defined amongst British commentators as that of an 'ideal' tsar. On account of her achievements, and through popular literature, Catherine the Great (r.1762-1796) was the empress best known to the British public. During her reign James Harris, Britain's Envoy Extraordinary to Russia, recorded his impression of the two sides to Catherine's nature, hospitable and yet determined. Thus, according to Harris, the empress had 'a talent of putting people at ease', but would brook no opposition and was always 'rigidly obeyed'.²¹⁷ These images of Catherine's force of personality passed down the centuries and provided a theme for Fred Wishaw's 1893 novel *Out of Doors in Tsarland*. Wishaw's description of Catherine's despotism provides a colourful illustration of popular understanding of the eighteenth century empress and her autocratic power. According to Wishaw, such was her freedom to act that Catherine had been able to treat 'her empire like a pack of cards which would be the better for a good shuffling'.²¹⁸

Authors such as Harris and Wishaw commented on aspects of Catherine's rulership, others chose to describe her feminine attributes. For example, the scholar and author

²¹⁶ *Morning Post*, 1 Oct. 1894, p. 3.

²¹⁷ The Diary and Correspondence by James Harris M.P. in Peter Putnam (ed.) *Seven Britons in Imperial Russia 1698-1812* (Princeton, 1952), p. 198.

²¹⁸ Fred J. Wishaw, *Out of Doors in Tsarland: A Record of the Seeing and Doings of a Wanderer in Russia* (London, 1893), p. 40.

William Richardson described her as: ‘very comely and gracefully formed [but] inclined to grow corpulent’.²¹⁹ Her role as a mother also attracted comment. Thomas Raikes accused her of having brought up her heir (Paul I) ‘with unnatural harshness and never having deigned to treat him like a son’.²²⁰ The importance of maternal tenderness, even in a ruling empress, was underlined by Raikes who blamed its absence for having ‘alienated [Paul’s] reason’ causing him to act in an unpredictable and violent fashion.²²¹

As had been the case with earlier empresses, the last empress’s physical looks, the state of her health and her family life attracted much British comment. In this regard Alexandra’s namesake, the first Empress Alexandra Fedorovna (1798-1860), also attracted some attention. Married to Nicholas I, Alexandra had given birth to ten children, two of them still born, all of which had naturally taken its toll on her physical and mental well being. During 1840-41 Sir Roderick Impey Murchison travelled across the Russian Empire from the White Sea to the Sea of Azov. A renowned geologist of his day he was received at court and subsequently given the orders of St Anne and St Stanislaus by the tsar in recognition of his work classifying Russian geology.²²² From his observation at an imperial reception, Murchison recorded that, although Alexandra was ‘every inch imperial, she was worn and thin and seemed in [a state of] perpetual nervousness’.²²³ In another description of the same empress the Reverend R.B. Paul admitted that Alexandra

²¹⁹William Richardson, *Anecdotes of the Russian Empire in a series of letters written a few years ago from St Petersburg* (London, 1784), p. 148.

²²⁰Raikes, *A Visit*, p. 57.

²²¹*Ibid.*

²²²T.G. Bonney, ‘Murchison, Sir Roderick Impey, baronet (1792-1871)’, rev. Robert A. Stafford, 2009 article 19555 ODNB accessed, 21 Nov. 2012.

²²³Michael Collie and John Diemer (eds.), *Murchison’s Wanderings in Russia, his geological exploration of Russia in Europe and the Ural mountains 1840-41* (London, 2004), p. 152.

had, in earlier years, ‘probably been handsome’ but that ‘ill-health had now deprived her of all pretensions to beauty’.²²⁴ Somewhat more kindly, but unexpectedly given his own rather hedonistic lifestyle, Thomas Raikes did not dwell on the empress’s fading beauty but rather emphasised that she lived life away from what he called the ‘Eastern magnificence’ of the court.²²⁵ Such a description conjured up negative images in British minds of Asiatic barbarity, despotism and unfettered wealth which, according to Raikes, the empress shunned. It was Raikes’ contention that in contrast to the fripperies, gaudiness and extravagance of the Russian court, the empress’s life was as ‘pure and domestic as an exemplary private family in England’.²²⁶ Clearly Raikes considered domesticity an admirable, indeed essential, attribute in both ruling empresses and in female consorts. As we shall discuss, attitudes towards the last empress were less clear cut. A number of commentators praised for her potential political interest, others bemoaned her interference in matters of state while yet others were exasperated in her focus on her family life.

(iii) Customs and Society

During Nicholas II’s reign mainstream British understanding of the relationship between the tsars and their subjects influenced British attitudes towards Russian demands for a reduction in the tsar’s autocratic powers and informed perceptions of his reception at national celebrations. Fear of the uneducated masses ‘let loose’ was a concern which

²²⁴ Paul, *Journal of a Tour*, p. 67.

²²⁵ Raikes, *A Visit*, p. 241.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*

preoccupied elites in Britain as much as it did in Russia. It was as much a feature of discussion during the reigns of Nicholas's predecessors as it was in the years immediately before the 1917 revolution. For example, although William Richardson's biographer has stated that he recognised the inequities of serfdom, he did not call for its immediate end.²²⁷ In 1784 he argued that change should be implemented slowly 'over several generations' arguing that to do otherwise would risk 'giving liberty to 20 million robbers and spoilers'.²²⁸ In 1836 the Reverend R.B. Paul took a similarly cautious view when he compared the Russian peasantry to those of their French counterparts before the overthrow of the monarchy and the ensuing Terror. Describing the Russian people as 'a lion', Paul warned that if it were to be 'unchained' a similar 'tragedy [to that which had occurred in France] might befall Russia'.²²⁹

Some observers who supported the status quo believed that the peasants understood the advantages of the authoritarian rule, and contrasted their lives with those of their counterparts in Britain. As he had on other aspects of Russian society, Thomas Raikes had much to say about serfdom. He insisted that rather than chaffing for their freedom 'the Russian hugs his slavery and rejects the air boon of liberty [since] he lives without care for the present or anxiety for the future, the whole responsibility of his existence rests with his Lord'.²³⁰ Furthermore, Raikes argued, while an Englishman 'may boast of his liberty he suffered unemployment and poverty', neither of which, he insisted, were

²²⁷ Michael S. Moss, 'Richardson, William (1743-1814)' ODNB 2009 article 23590 accessed 21 June 2012.

²²⁸ Richardson, *Anecdotes*, p. 175.

²²⁹ Paul, *Journal of a Tour*, p. 25.

²³⁰ Raikes, *A Visit*, p. 117.

features of a Russian peasants life on account of the benevolence of his master.²³¹ In 1846, Charles Henningsen developed this theme of paternalistic despotism and explained that the ‘Muscovite peasant looks upon [the tsar] as their God upon earth’.²³² In 1859, Mary Ann Pelleur Smith (erroneously attributing the creation of serfdom to Tsar Boris Godunov) hailed it as a ‘wise and kind provision’.²³³ Although she admitted that the system was open to abuse, she insisted that: ‘the Russian serf is neither cowed nor abject in appearance’.²³⁴ Some writers went even further in their descriptions of this supposed peasant idyll, rejecting notions that Russian society was victim of an arbitrary and autocratic government. For example, in 1874 *The Times* celebrated Alexander II’s visit to London with an article extolling the virtues of Russian local government. The newspaper declared that, contrary to popular opinion, ‘Russia has very much more of a constitution than the English give her credit for’ and that the local administration in Russia had greater power than English counties.²³⁵

In developing these themes of popular democracy in Russia some Briton’s promoted the notion that ordinary Russians could appeal to the tsar over the heads of his bureaucrats and nobles. According to British observers the possibility of petitioning the tsars stretched back at least as far as the reign of Michael, the first Romanov tsar (r.1613-45). For example, Robert Nisbet Bain²³⁶ wrote that during Michael’s reign: ‘the downtrodden and overburdened Russian people looked to the throne alone for relief and

²³¹ Raikes, *A Visit*, p. 116.

²³² Henningsen, *Revelations*, p. 40.

²³³ Pelleur Smith, *Six Years*, p. 180.

²³⁴ Pelleur Smith, *Six Years*, p. 174.

²³⁵ *The Times*, 13 May 1874, p. 9.

²³⁶ On Bain see L. Czigány, ‘Bain, Robert Nisbet’, 2004, ODNB.

justice and did not look in vain'.²³⁷ Bain's 1905 description provided an image of a benevolent, if paternalistic, tsar central to the life and well-being of the nation. However, to all but the most optimistic observer, the mass of Russians lived very hard lives. In view of this fact, accepting that the tsar had the good of his people at heart, British commentators asked: how was it that so many Russians found it difficult to make a living. By way of an answer to this conundrum a number of commentators suggested that unscrupulous nobles and even members of the imperial family conspired to prevent the tsar from implementing "good laws" which might have relieved the peasants' burden. A 1716 account by a naval engineer, John Perry, is an early example of this perception. According to Perry, before Peter the Great had come to throne, 'common persons' were prevented from approaching the tsar by the 'old boyars' who wished to 'keep the government [...] entirely in their own hands'.²³⁸ It was Perry's inference that Peter the Great had been the first tsar who, having overcome the power of the nobles was free to rule for the good of his people.

Perry had had been invited to work in Russia by Peter so his continued good fortune may well have depended on his vindication of his employer. However, Perry was not alone in his positive depiction of Peter's relationship with his subjects and the myth perpetuated down the centuries. In 1859 Mary Ann Pelleur Smith recalled having been shown an iron box which, it was said, had belonged to Peter the Great. The person who showed her the relic explained that during Peter's reign his subjects had left their petitions

²³⁷ R. Nisbet Bain, *The First Romanovs, 1613-1725: A history of Moscovite Civilisation* (London, 1905), p. 68.

²³⁸ John Perry, *The State of Russia under the Present Tsar* (London, 1716), p. 142.

in the box and each morning the tsar had diligently ‘replied to its contents in his own hand’.²³⁹ The nature of Peter’s relationship with the mass of his subjects was romanticised by accounts such as these since, for example, in reality, peasants were subject to punitive poll tax and army service. Laws prohibiting the selling of serfs outside of their family group were never implemented. Nor was another that threatened to confiscate the estates of cruel landlords.²⁴⁰

By Nicholas I’s reign at least one British observer believed that the nobles had regained their former authority. Roderick Murchison argued that since the death of Peter the Great the elites had conspired to defend their privilege’s’ and now routinely put obstacles in the way of imperial plans for reform.²⁴¹ Matters seemed to have little changed by the start of Alexander III’s reign since the Prince of Wales (later Edward VII) believed Alexander was unable to find advisors who shared his political vision. Thus, Edward told the Prime Minister Gladstone, that although the tsar ‘intends to be a liberal Sovereign in every sense of the word he is unable to find counsellors whom he can trust’.²⁴² These perceptions of a tsar who wanted to do the best for his people but was prevented from doing so by nefarious officials enjoyed considerable longevity. During Nicholas II’s reign commentators frequently asserted that he was prevented from acting as would have liked in spite of the fact that he was an autocrat. Such claims were used during the last reign to defend the tsar’s actions occasions including when Russia went to war with Japan and on Bloody Sunday.

²³⁹ Pelleur Smith, *Six Years*, p. 72.

²⁴⁰ Paul Dukes, *The Making of Russian Absolutism 1613-1801* (2nd edn.), (London, 1997), p. 92.

²⁴¹ Murchison’s *Wanderings*, p. 413.

²⁴² Sir Samuel Lee, *King Edward VII* (London, 1927), p. 507.

During Nicholas's reign the prominence given to church ceremonies combined with tales of the 'the monk' Rasputin emphasised the central role of religion in the life of the tsar and his consort. It was a feature which sometimes seemed at odds with the modern world and the lives of the Petersburg elite. However, as with so many perceptions of Nicholas and Alexandra, British understanding of the tsar and empress's spiritual lives was informed by centuries of accumulated comment on the Russian church and observations of religious practices in Russia and Russian culture in general.

As we have noted, Stephen Graham and Mandell Creighton were deeply impressed by what they perceived to be the centrality of religious faith at all levels of society. Many more in Britain assumed that Russian religious observances indicated that, beneath a veneer of European culture, Russia remained deeply uncivilised and superstitious. For example, in 1839, Robert Brenner described his exasperation with the widely held belief 'in the lucky and unlucky days for setting out on a journey or for commencing any undertaking, the evil consequences of meeting certain kinds of people, of having thirteen at dinner or of upsetting the salt'.²⁴³ British frustration with what was perceived to be Russian irrationality extended to Russian religious practices which many regarded with, at best, ridicule and at worst bewilderment. From descriptions of historic cathedrals to accounts of pilgrimages and public devotions, often in terms of 'idolatry and superstition', British commentators noted the role of the Russian Orthodox Church in the life of the tsars.²⁴⁴

²⁴³ Pricilla Roosevelt, *Life on the Russian Country Estate* (New Haven, 1995) p. 199.

²⁴⁴ J. McDermid 'Travellers' Tales: British Reflections on Russian Peasant Women before 1900', *Scottish Slavonic Review* (Spring, 1988), p. 115.

In 1826, Charlotte Disbrowe, the daughter of Edward Cromwell Disbrowe, the British Minister Plenipotentiary to the Russian Court, observed the traditional Easter Greetings in the Winter Palace. Either from ignorance or disdain for its religious significance she described having seen Tsar ‘Nicholas I slobber some hundreds of old and young, tall and short, thin and thick, ugly and handsome dutiful subjects’.²⁴⁵ In 1830 Captain Colville Frankland, described a visit to the Moscow Kremlin in similarly dismissive terms. In horror he reported that the Cathedral of the Annunciation contained: ‘a number of musty and disgusting relics, which the deluded and absurd people were kissing with great veneration’.²⁴⁶

(iv) Entrepreneurs, Artisans, Soldiers and Sailors

These images which we have discussed above, painted a picture of a society unseen in Britain for hundreds of years. Yet, for all these examples of criticism, and in spite of political, religious and cultural differences, since the earliest days of their contact with the tsars, people from Britain had sought to establish communities in Russia. By Nicholas II’s reign British enclaves flourished across Russia from the northern port of Archangel to the Ural city of Yekaterinburg and beyond into Siberia. Anthony Cross has made a number of studies of the British in Russia which reveal the extraordinary variety and influence of

²⁴⁵Charlotte Disbrowe, ‘Original letters from Russia 1825-28’ L. Kelly, (ed.) *St Petersburg A Traveller’s Companion* (London, 1981). p. 73

²⁴⁶Charles Colville Frankland, ‘Narrative of a Visit to the Courts of Russia and Sweden in the Years 1830’ in L. Kelly, (ed.) *Moscow a Travellers Companion* (London, 1983). P. 121

this expatriate community.²⁴⁷ From his researches we learn that architects, physicians, engineers, mill owners and merchants were employed by Russian rulers. In the eighteenth century, such were the numbers of skilled artisans leaving to work in Russia, that one British Ambassador in St Petersburg warned of the ‘ill consequences’ to the British economy should this continue.²⁴⁸ His advice failed to stem the tide and people from Britain continued to flock to Russia in search of fame and fortune. Although he did not travel to Russia Josiah Wedgwood was one of the most famous British craftsmen employed by Catherine the Great. In 1773 the empress commissioned Wedgwood to create a dinner service. The finished product was magnificent consisting of nearly 1,000 pieces decorated with views of British parks, landscapes, ruins and country estates. Unfortunately although Wedgwood hoped that the commission would ‘enable [him] to penetrate the Russian market on a large scale’ he failed to do so.²⁴⁹ Others amongst his compatriots were more successful in forging careers in Russia.²⁵⁰

One notably successful emigrant to Russia was the architect Charles Cameron, who first arrived in the country in 1779. Cameron created the designs for the Arabesque, Lyons, and Chinese Halls the Green Dining Room and the Imperial Bedchamber in the Catherine Palace at Tsarskoe Selo. In 1781 he began work on a palace at Pavlovsk for

²⁴⁷ See in particular, Anthony Cross, *By the Banks of the Neva: Chapters from the Lives and Careers of the British in eighteenth century Russia* (Cambridge, 1997) and Anthony Cross, *St Petersburg and the British: The City through the Eyes of British Visitors and Residents* (London, 2008).

²⁴⁸ Johnson, *Wedgwood and Bentley*, p.124

²⁴⁹ C.A. Johnson ‘Wedgwood & Bentley’s Frog Service for Catherine the Great’ in (ed) A.G. Cross, *Great Britain and Russia in the eighteenth-century: Contacts & Comparisons* (Mass, 1979), p. 124.

²⁵⁰ In 1912 the service was the star attraction at the exhibition of Wedgwood products held at the Academy of Arts in St Petersburg under the patronage of Grand Duchess Maria Pavlovna.

Catherine the Great's heir, Paul.²⁵¹ This imperial relationship with British (more specifically Scottish) architects was continued by Catherine's grandson. Alexander I approved a design by William Hastie for the reconstruction of Moscow following the 1812 fire which had destroyed much of the city.²⁵² Hastie's design was never implemented, partly due to the cost involved, but this was not the end of British involvement in Russian town planning. In 1826 Adam Menelaws was asked by Nicholas I to design townscapes for the Ukrainian city of Yekatarinoslav and the Siberian city of Tomsk. Menelaws was also responsible for the gothic Chapelle and Arsenal Pavilion at Tsarskoe Selo and the Cottage Palace at Peterhof.²⁵³ In 1879 Alexander II commissioned John Elder and Co., a ship building firm on the Clyde, to construct an imperial yacht. The ship was christened *Livadia*, and decorations for its interior were executed by the arts and craft designer William de Morgan.²⁵⁴ Unfortunately, after it was launched, the ship, whose design was based on a turbot, was found to be unstable and was consequently never used by the imperial family.

In addition to the many peaceable activities in which British expatriates were engaged, a number also fought in the Russian army and navy. In this respect the links between Russia's armed forces and Scotland were especially strong such that between '1650 and 1709 no less than fifteen men of Scottish birth or origins held a general's rank in the

²⁵¹ Dimitri Shvidkovsky, *The Empress and the Architect: British Architecture and Gardens at the Court of Catherine the Great* (London and New York, 1996).

²⁵² Cross, *Banks of the Neva*, p. 416.

²⁵³ William Craft Brumfield, *A History of Russian Architecture* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 394.

²⁵⁴ Mark Hamilton, *Rare Spirit: a life of William de Morgan 1839-1911* (London, 1911).

Muscovite forces'.²⁵⁵ A particularly notable example of a Scotsman, who made an illustrious career in the Russian army, was Patrick Gordon. In 1661 he entered the service of Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich and later served under Peter the Great whom he helped to overthrow the regent Sophia in 1689 and to suppress the revolt of the *streltsy* in 1698.²⁵⁶ In 1770, during the reign of Catherine the Great, another Scotsman, Admiral Samuel Greig and his compatriot Captain John Elphinstone fought for Russia at the Battle of Chesme.²⁵⁷

The many opportunities for Russo-British co-operation did not prevent occasions of conflict and at such times negative, stereotypical images of Russia and her supposed primitiveness were likely to come to the fore. For example, during the Crimean War (1853-56) the British Foreign Secretary, the Earl of Clarendon, described the allied cause as no less than 'the battle of civilisation against barbarism'.²⁵⁸ However, even at times of crisis, the British public's response to individual tsars could be rather more positive. During the Crimean War *The Times* carried a report which indicated a separation in the public mind between a Russian monarch and the Russian state, a not infrequent occurrence during the last years of imperial Russia. On this occasion on 24 June 1854, in an article which was starkly in contrast with Clarendon's vitriol, *The Times* reported the arrival home from Russia of several British Naval engineers. According to the article the engineers seemed sorry to have had to leave: their employment a testimony to the

²⁵⁵ Dmitri Fedosov, 'Peter the Great: the Scottish Dimension' in L. Hughes, (ed.), *Peter the Great: New Perspectives* p. 90.

²⁵⁶ *Diary of Patrick Gordon of Auchleuchries 1635-1699* (Aberdeen, 2009).

²⁵⁷ Anthony Cross, *By the Banks of the Neva: Chapters from the Lives and Careers of the British in Eighteenth Century Russia* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 184-189.

²⁵⁸ Earl of Clarendon, *Hansard*, 31 Mar. 1854 p. 145.

longstanding and valued relationship between British technical experts and Russian rulers.²⁵⁹ Equally, according to this same account, the tsar seems to have shown no ill-will to his erstwhile employees in spite of the circumstances which had forced their departure. Thus, the newspaper reported that one of the men by the name of John Young, an engineer on the tsar's yacht, had been given a number of gold and diamond encrusted farewell gifts from his grateful employer.²⁶⁰

(v) Imperial Visits and Family Ties

Nicholas and Alexandra visited the United Kingdom only twice after their marriage. The first of these was in the nature of a family visit to the royal at retreat Balmoral, although the queen and the Foreign Secretary, Lord Salisbury, took the opportunity to discuss with Nicholas his attitude towards India.²⁶¹ The second in 1909 was more overtly political, coming as it did in the wake of Bloody Sunday and the 1905 Revolution. Both visits differed in that earlier tsars had travelled around Britain and had been seen by a greater number of ordinary people. In 1896 and especially in 1909 the imperial itinerary was constrained by security concerns. However, in other ways, Nicholas and Alexandra's visits had much in common with those of their predecessors. Many people in Britain received their imperial guests from Peter the Great to Nicholas II with a mixture of curiosity and enthusiasm. The warm feelings of some sections of the British public were counterbalanced by others who preferred to highlight the despotic aspects of the imperial

²⁵⁹ *The Times*, 24 June 1854, p. 12.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁶¹ Margaret M. Jefferson and Lord Salisbury, 'Lord Salisbury's Conversations with the Tsar at Balmoral 27 and 29 September 1896', *SEER*, vol. 39, No. 92 (1960), pp. 216-22.

regime and the danger Russian ambition posed to Britain's Indian Empire. The most famous visit to Britain by a Russian tsar was that undertaken by Peter the Great in 1698 during the reign of William and Mary. In subsequent centuries official Russo-British relations would be marked by years of imperial rivalry. On this occasion however, the British author of a 'Congratulatory Poem' seemed unconcerned by Russian expansionism. On the contrary he hoped that Peter would out do 'Roman conquests'.²⁶² Peter's visit was the first by a Russian ruler and as a result it attracted considerable attention. Indeed, such was the eagerness of some courtiers to see him that a number of them disguised themselves as servants arraigned to wait on the tsar.²⁶³ Interest in Peter was not limited to the elites and in London and Oxford he was irritated by members of the public who gathered to gawp at him.²⁶⁴ In the aftermath of his visit public interest in the tsar gathered apace and a number of English histories of his life and reign of were written albeit, as Anthony Cross explains, by 'people who had no knowledge of Russia or its language'.²⁶⁵

During the nineteenth century the tsars and their heirs paid several visits to Britain. In 1815 Tsar Alexander I was welcomed in Britain as Europe's Liberator and awarded a doctorate of law at the University of Oxford and the Freedom of the City of Oxford. Recalling the part which the tsar had played in defeating Napoleon, the Poet Laureate,

²⁶² *A Congratulatory Poem to the High and Mighty Czar of Muscovy on his arrival in England* (London, 1698).

²⁶³ Anthony Cross, *Peter the Great Through British eyes: Perceptions and Representations of the tsar since 1698* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 39.

²⁶⁴ Cross, *Through British eyes*, p. 20.

²⁶⁵ Anthony Cross, 'British Awareness of Russian Culture (1698-1891)' *Anglo-Russica: Aspects of Cultural Relations between Great Britain and Russia in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, 1993), pp. 1-28.

Robert Southey (1774-1843), wrote a congratulatory ode, one line of which welcomed Alexander as the ‘friend of human kind’.²⁶⁶ In 1816, the future Nicholas I was feted by Edinburgh Town Council during which the Lord Provost praised the then tsar, Alexander I and including Russia in the community of enlightened nations from which British imagery more typically excluded her. The Lord Provost recalled: ‘the noble conduct of [Nicholas’s] august brother [who together with] the patriotism and selfless devotion of the people of Russia, gave resistance to an unprincipled aggressor [Napoleon] that threatened to subvert the liberties of the civilised world’.²⁶⁷

Imperial visits generally followed a similar pattern to those we have noted above: a series of banquets, speeches and awards hosted by the elites. For example, in 1839, Grand Duke Alexander Nikolayevich (Nicholas I’s son and heir) was given an honorary degree by the University of Oxford where he was met with ‘shouts and applause which continued for several minutes’.²⁶⁸ It was not only the elites who enthusiastically received the tsars and their heirs. In 1844 during Nicholas I’s visit to Britain the public was evidently as keen to catch a glimpse of him as their forebears had been of Peter the Great. After reviewing a number of British army regiments in Windsor Home Park, the tsar returned to the Castle via the Long Walk where he was greeted by thousands of well-wishers.²⁶⁹

When Nicholas and Alexandra’s engagement was announced much was made of their

²⁶⁶A. Cross, ‘Oh thou, great monarch of a pow’rful reign!’: English Bards and Russian tsars’, pp. 163-179, in *Anglo-Russica* p. 177. Janet Hartley, ‘England “Enjoys the Spectacle of a Northern Barbarian”: The Reception of Peter I and Alexander I’, in Maria Di Salvo and Lindsey Hughes, (eds.) *A Window on Russia*, (Rome, 1996) pp. 11-18.

²⁶⁷ *Caledonian Mercury*, 21 Dec. 1816.

²⁶⁸ *The Times*, 23 May 1839, p. 5.

²⁶⁹ *A Diary of Royal Movements and personal events and incidents in the life of Her Most Gracious Majesty Queen Victoria, compiled from official documents and public records* (London, 1883), p. 278.

ties to the British royal family. In particular, the fact that Alexandra was a granddaughter of Queen Victoria proved a focus for hope of a Russo-British entente. However, this was not the first marriage between Queen Victoria's family and a member of the Russian ruling house. In 1874, the queen's second son, Prince Alfred, married Grand Duchess Mariia Aleksandrovna. The grand duchess first met Alfred in 1868 in the duchy of Hesse-Darmstadt. By co-incidence it was here that the last empress of Russia later spent much of her childhood. Interestingly the queen, who did not favour the match between her son and a Russian grand duchess, blamed her daughter, Princess Alice (the mother of the last empress) for encouraging the romance.²⁷⁰

The prospect of a marriage between her son and a member of the Russian imperial family brought all of Victoria's royal hauteur and Russophobia to the fore. In a bid to prevent the matrimonial union, Victoria launched a campaign of writing to Princess Alice, to the Empress Augusta of Germany and to Britain's ambassador in Russia. In particular, asserting that she was the 'Doyenne' of Sovereigns, Victoria complained that the Romanov family had 'Asiatic ideas of the Rank [and frequently] disregarded the feelings of everyone but their own'.²⁷¹ However, for all her opposition to the match, when negotiations were put "on hold", Queen Victoria's pride was injured. In a letter to her eldest daughter she bemoaned the fact that her son had been put in the position of 'a humble suitor [...] to be left dangling while [Mariia] condescends to have him or not'.²⁷² In spite of the queen's opposition, Mariia and Alfred married in St Petersburg in January

²⁷⁰Merritt Abrash, 'A Curious Romance: The Queen's Son and the Tsar's Daughter' *SEER*, Vol. 47, No. 109 (Jul., 1969), p.398.

²⁷¹ Merritt Abrash, 'A Curious Romance', pp. 397-400.

²⁷² Fulford, *Crown Princess*, p. 68.

1874. Nonetheless, as a sign of her continued disquiet over the marriage, the Queen continued to refuse to permit the bride's precedence (as the daughter of an emperor) over the Princess of Wales.²⁷³ However, although Victoria had reservations, public reaction to the marriage was mostly positive. When Alfred and Maria arrived in Gravesend they were met by hundreds of well wishers and *The Times* enthusiastically interpreted the warmth of the greeting as a sign 'of national satisfaction at a domestic alliance between England and Russia'.²⁷⁴ In keeping with this spirit of good will when the newlyweds arrived in Windsor the streets were decorated with declarations of welcome.²⁷⁵

Amidst these scenes of rejoicing there was at least one dissenting voice. As John Plunkett tells us, *Reynolds Weekly Newspaper* frequently criticised the frivolous and inconsequential weight of attention which royalty received from much of the press.²⁷⁶ It was with this focus in mind that the newspaper provided a conduit for opposition to the marriage. One correspondent wrote to *Reynolds* complaining about the obsequiousness of the public response to the nuptials. Painting the groom as a gold-digger the writer insisted that the marriage was not a love match but a cynical ploy by the Russians who hoped that 'the English people will be dazzled and delighted with the marriage so proud of having an imperial princess with an enormous fortune that no thought or heed will be taken of the insidious advances of Russia on our Eastern possessions'.²⁷⁷ British concern about

²⁷³ Magnus, *Edward VII*, p. 126.

²⁷⁴ *The Times*, 9 Mar. 1874, p. 9.

²⁷⁵ G.E. Buckle, (ed.), *The Letters of Queen Victoria: A Selection from Her Majesty's Correspondence between the years 1862-1878*, vol. 2, (London, 1926),

²⁷⁶ Plunkett, *Media Monarch* (Oxford, 2003), p. 127.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

Russian intentions in Central Asia were no less a feature of Russo-British relations during the last reign, particularly during the Dogger Bank crisis when the spectre of a Russian invasion of India was felt to be a real possibility in some quarters.

In May 1874, Alexander II visited Britain, true to form *Reynolds Weekly Newspaper* bemoaned the money Britain had ‘lavished on [the visiting] despots’²⁷⁸ However, the popular mood seems to have still been one of welcome and interest in the imperial visitor. For example, the *Daily News* noted that, in order to mark the occasion, the Polytechnic Institution in London offered a series of lectures on themes of Russia and the tsar.²⁷⁹ They proved so popular that the programme was extended and the lectures were repeated every day throughout May and June 1874.²⁸⁰ This public warmth towards Russia was reflected in official circles and was in contrast to the views espoused by Lord Clarendon over twenty years earlier when he had cast Russia and her rulers in the role of barbarian. Following a reception in Alexander’s honour W.E. Gladstone (then recently out of office) recorded in his diary that the tsar had been extremely cordial.²⁸¹ Recalling the tsar’s decision to end serfdom in 1861, Gladstone responded with genuine warmth to Alexander. He told the tsar that he had watched his reign with ‘profound interest [and had noted especially] the great benefits which he had conferred on his people’.²⁸²

When Gladstone responded positively to Alexander II three hundred years had passed

²⁷⁸ *Reynolds Weekly Newspaper*, 17 May 1874.

²⁷⁹ *Daily News*, 15 May 1874.

²⁸⁰ University of Westminster Archives, 550A, Jan.-June 1874.

²⁸¹ H.C.G., Matthew (ed.), *The Gladstone Diaries-with Ministers and Prime Ministerial Correspondence*, vol. 3 (Oxford, 1982), p. 492.

²⁸² *Ibid.*

since Britain had first ‘discovered’ Russia. In the intervening years, British attitudes towards Russia and her rulers had undergone a variety of changes. British commentators had only twenty-four years in which to discuss Nicholas and Alexandra but their perceptions were no less varied. Reports of tyrannical Russian rulers, anecdotes about the relationship between tsar and subjects, descriptions of the ‘Asiatic’ aspects of the tsarist regime and reactions to the Russian Church all influenced British perceptions of the last tsar and empress. In the following chapter, we consider British responses to Nicholas and Alexandra’s engagement, marriage and coronation partly based on their interpretations of Russia’s past.

Chapter 2: Engagement, Marriage and Coronation 1894-1896

*An impression has gone through all the western peoples in favour of the Princess Alix. Her influence will be great and will be good.*²⁸³

*The Catastrophe at Moscow [...] seems to me to mark the entrance of Russia into the common lot of vast nations, a taking up of the burden of all great peoples, with all its dangers and suffering. Her strength is her peasant hordes; her weakness is her inability to control them.*²⁸⁴

The years between 1894 and 1896 marked Britain's introduction to Nicholas and Alexandra as husband and wife, as tsar and empress. The British perceived them romantically as an attractive, young married couple committed to the ideal of domesticity which they associated with their own monarchy. As result of their youth and their connections with the German and British royal houses some believed that Nicholas and Alexandra were receptive to 'liberal' ideas of government. At times the impressions formed during those years were unfeasibly optimistic, they were joyful and sad and they were tinged with realism and exasperation. They were influenced by a perception of Russian customs and of Russian history as well as an understanding of the imperial couple as part of a network of European royal families. This latter factor was especially evident on 20 April 1894, in the small German town of Coburg when their engagement

²⁸³ *Spectator*, 27 Oct. 1894, p. 548.

²⁸⁴ *Penny Illustrated Paper*, 6 June 1896, p. 35.

was announced. Nicholas and Alexandra had been in Coburg to celebrate the wedding of Alexandra's brother, Ernst to Princess Victoria Melita the daughter of Grand Duchess Mariia Aleksandrovna and Prince Alfred (Duke of Edinburgh and installed as Duke of Saxe Coburg in 1893). The wedding guests included Queen Victoria, Kaiser Wilhelm II, the dowager empress of Germany and the Prince of Wales.

Nicholas and Alexandra's first recorded meeting took place in 1884 at the wedding of Alexandra's sister Elizabeth to Nicholas's uncle, Grand Duke Sergei Aleksandrovich. During the winter of 1889 Alexandra came again to St Petersburg where she enjoyed skating parties with Nicholas and his family. The future tsar was smitten but he faced opposition to the match from his parents and Queen Victoria (who had already "lost" one Hessian granddaughter to a Russian grand duke, Sergei Aleksandrovich) and who insisted she would allow no Russian match for Alexandra.²⁸⁵ Victoria's relationship with Russia's rulers and her attitude towards Russia itself complex, she was wary to say the least of Russia and the Russian court despite her own "Russian" connection which extended over many years. Tsar Alexander I was one of her godfathers and she was baptised Alexandrine in his honour.

The queen's sometimes-contradictory perception of Russia and Russian tsars reflected that of many of her subjects. She chaffed at their political ambitions and was horrified by the loose morals of their court but in regards to individual tsars, like much of the British public, she sometimes fell under their spell. She admired their good looks, exemplary manners and apparent modesty. Indeed, in 1839, she confided in her diary that

²⁸⁵ Hough, *Advice to a granddaughter*, p. 108.

she had been a little in love with Alexander II, then heir to the Russian throne.²⁸⁶ In 1844, during Nicholas I's stay at Windsor, the queen was similarly struck by his physical good looks.²⁸⁷ In a letter to her uncle (the King of the Belgians) the young queen wrote gushingly that the tsar, whose subjects were said to regard him as a demi-god, had very human attributes. Thus, she wrote of Nicholas I: 'he is certainly a *very striking man*; and still very handsome; his profile is *beautiful*, and his manners *most dignified and graceful*; extremely civil quite alarmingly so, full of attentions and *politesse*. [...] He is easy to get along with really it seems like a dream that we breakfast and walk with this greatest of all earthly potentates'.²⁸⁸ However, Victoria's warm feelings towards Nicholas I did not override political considerations. Indeed, throughout her reign she staunchly defended British interests and remained convinced that 'the Russians are totally antagonistic to England'.²⁸⁹ On one occasion when her children Alfred and Alice appeared to look at the world from a Romanov perspective she peevishly complained that they had become completely 'Russified'.²⁹⁰

In 1854, tensions over the future of the Ottoman Empire caused Britain and Russia to go to war. However, Victoria's kindly feelings toward Nicholas I as person rather than as the rule of a rival empire came to the fore when he died as the conflict raged. Although,

²⁸⁶ Viscount Esher (ed.), *The Girlhood of Queen Victoria: A Selection from Her Majesty's Diaries between the years 1832-1840*, vol. 2 (London, 1912), p. 191.

²⁸⁷ A.C. Benson and Viscount Esher (eds.) *The Letters of Queen Victoria 1837-1861*, vol. 2. (London, 1908), p. 12.

²⁸⁸ Benson and Esher, *Letters 1837-1861* vol. 3, p. 12.

²⁸⁹ Hough, *Advice to a granddaughter* p. 52.

²⁹⁰ R. Fulford, *Dearest Child: Letters between Queen Victoria and the Princess Royal 1858-1861* (London, 1964), p. 27 and R. Fulford, *Darling Child: Letters between Queen Victoria and the Crown Princess of Prussia 1871-1878* (London, 1976), p. 229.

for obvious reasons, she was unable to correspond directly with the imperial family the favourable memories of 1844 had remained with her and she asked Princess Augusta of Prussia to pass on her condolences declaring that: ‘although the poor emperor died our enemy I have not forgotten happier times’.²⁹¹

In March 1881 Tsar Alexander II was assassinated as he drove through the streets of St Petersburg. Victoria recorded her reaction, confiding in her journal that the death of ‘the poor dear emperor’ had left her feeling ‘quite shaken and stunned’.²⁹² The violent death of a fellow monarch was, not unexpectedly, a cause for concern; the queen herself had been the subject of a number of assassination attempts but Alexander II’s murder struck a deeper chord. Albeit within the privacy of her journal, Victoria revealed her concerns and, a common British perception, that Russia’s rulers, although despotic, invariably had good intentions. Thus, the queen recorded that the tsar had been ‘a kind and amiable man [who had] been a good ruler, wishing to do the best for his country’.²⁹³

The queen was distressed at Nicholas I and Alexander II’s early passing but, although her responses to them in death, as in life, could appear soft and feminine, as a wife and mother she was horrified at the lax morals prevalent at the Russian court. She was particularly critical of Alexander II’s relationship with Princess Ekaterina Dolgorukaia with whom he had several children.²⁹⁴ When Alexander III was tsarevich, the queen had found him extremely ‘good natured and kind’ and she found his family life and his

²⁹¹ Benson and Esher, *Letters 1837-1861*, vol. 3, pp. 112-3.

²⁹² G.E. Buckle, *The Letters of Queen Victoria: A Selection of Her Majesty’s correspondence between the years 1879-1881*, vol. 3, (London, 1928), p. 202.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁴ Fulford, *Crown Princess*, p.66.

fidelity to his wife in marked contrast to that of his father. However, after Alexander III acceded to the Russian throne Victoria's attitude towards him was somewhat frosty.²⁹⁵ Perhaps Alexander had taken his sister Mariia's side in a quarrel with her mother-in-law, perhaps the queen had been irked at the Russian authorities' implied accusation that those responsible for Alexander II's assassination had taken refuge in Britain or perhaps she now regarded Alexander III more critically because he was the monarch of a rival imperial power.²⁹⁶ Whatever the reason, in 1885, she imperiously refused to send greetings to the tsar claiming that: 'she cannot have any personal communication with a sovereign whom she does not look upon as a gentleman'.²⁹⁷

The queen's dislike of the immorality of the Russian court influenced her attitude towards Russian marriages for her Hessian granddaughters' Elizabeth and Alexandra. She was extremely relieved in August 1883 when Elizabeth refused Grand Duke Sergei Aleksandrovich's proposal of marriage. However, she was imperiously scathing of the response to the news of her daughter-in-law, Grand Duchess Mariia Aleksandrovna. Arguments over precedence had clouded her relationship with the grand duchess, the fact that the Romanov dynasty stretched back nearly three hundred years influenced Queen Victoria not one jot. As we have noted in Chapter I she regarded as absurd the suggestion that a daughter of the imperial family might take precedence over a member of her own family. The queen's irritation is clear from a letter she wrote to Victoria (Elizabeth's

²⁹⁵ Fulford, *Crown Princess*, p. 96.

²⁹⁶ Agatha Ramm (ed.), *The Political Correspondence of Mr Gladstone and Lord Granville 1876-1886*, (Oxford, 1962), pp. 254-255.

²⁹⁷ A. Ponsonby (ed.) *Henry Ponsonby: Queen Victoria's private secretary, his life from his letters*, (London, 1943), p. 172.

sister) in which she declared the ‘Russian family thinks it such an honour to marry anyone of them that a refusal appears to them so impossible’.²⁹⁸ In response to Sergei’s persistence in pursuing Elizabeth the queen wrote a further letter in a furious torrent outlining her many objections to the match. In particular she noted ‘the very bad state of society and its *total want of principle* from the grand dukes down’.²⁹⁹ However, in spite of the queen’s objections, Elizabeth and Sergei married in 1884 and together the couple schemed to bring about a match between Nicholas and Alexandra.³⁰⁰

The queen had hoped that Alexandra would marry Albert Victor, the eldest son of the Prince of Wales. Evidently aware of Nicholas and Alexandra’s blossoming romance, and knowing of Alexandra’s reluctance to marry Albert Victor, the queen admonished Alexandra’s eldest sister to make her ‘her reflect seriously on the folly of throwing away the chance of a very good husband, kind, affectionate and steady [and] a very good position which is second to none’.³⁰¹ Victoria perceived the position of a future British queen to be far superior to that of a Russian empress. Yet, in spite of her reluctance to marry Albert Victor, Alexandra was no less implacable that she could not marry Nicholas. A devout Lutheran, Alexandra believed it would be a sin to renounce her faith and convert to Orthodoxy (as she would be required to do in order to marry the Russian heir.)

The reasons why, in spite of her sincerely held religious beliefs and the opposition of her formidable grandmother, Alexandra finally gave in have never been made known.

²⁹⁸ Hough, *Advice to a granddaughter*, p. 52.

²⁹⁹ Hough, *Advice to a granddaughter*, p. 55.

³⁰⁰ Maylunas & Mironenko, *Life Long Passion*, p. 17.

³⁰¹ Hough, *Advice to a granddaughter*, p. 100.

Over the years it has been suggested that Alexandra dreaded the thought of life as a spinster in her sister-in-law's household. If her sister Victoria is to be believed it was the German Kaiser who finally convinced Alexandra that it was her duty to marry Nicholas in order to ensure the peace of Europe.³⁰² Whatever the reason, Queen Victoria having fought so hard against the match, was despondent, not least because as future empress her granddaughter had to convert to Russian Orthodoxy. The extent of her angst in this regard can be gleaned from a letter in which the queen wrote: 'to think that she is learning Russian and in all probability will have to talk to a Priest my whole nature shudders against it'.³⁰³

While the queen's immediate reaction to the engagement centred on her negative attitude towards the Russian Orthodox Church, the British public discussion of her Alexandra's future focused on two main themes: the German born Alexandra's ties of kinship with British royal family and what were said to be her liberal inclinations. In the latter years of Nicholas's reign and, after the fall of imperial Russia, Alexandra was portrayed as a reactionary whose political interference cost her husband his throne. In 1917 her German heritage was seen as a liability, as indeed were the British royal family's own links with Hohenzollerns. However, at the time of her engagement British perceptions about Germany were quite different. In the late nineteenth century large German communities could be found across Britain. Employed as bankers, shopkeepers,

³⁰²So far as I have been able to ascertain there is no scholarly biography of the empress in English. This anecdote is quoted in Greg King, *Empress Alexandra* (New York, 1990), p. 56.

³⁰³Hough, *Advice to a granddaughter*, p. 124.

musicians and waiters, they founded German churches, newspapers, clubs and societies.³⁰⁴ After the Irish they made up the largest immigrant community in Britain. However, whereas the Irish were often despised, the German community was widely respected. In part this stemmed from the fact that many people, including most notably Thomas Carlyle, Cecil Rhodes, and Winston Churchill believed that the British and Germans shared a common racial heritage.³⁰⁵ The belief that the two peoples were descended from the same “racially superior stock”, imbued with a love of freedom and a civilisation based on the supremacy of laws, was given scholarly support as early as 1849.³⁰⁶ Germany itself was sometimes seen as a regimented and a less liberal country than Britain but, nonetheless, the British found much to admire in contemporary German life.³⁰⁷

Noting in particular the controversy over a parliamentary allowance for Prince Albert, Karina Urbach has argued that the German roots of the British Royal Family ‘had long been a point of criticism’.³⁰⁸ However, Queen Victoria’s ties with Germany could be noted with approval. For example, in 1876, the British Foreign Secretary observed that ‘the royal family, being half English and half German, think of the two countries as being inseparably connected’.³⁰⁹ It was against this background of British empathy with

³⁰⁴ See for example, Panikos Panayi, *The Enemy in the Midst: Germans in Britain During the First World War* (Oxford, 1991), and Rosemary Ashton, *Little Germany: Exile and Asylum in Victorian England* (Oxford, 1986).

³⁰⁵ Steven W. Siak, ‘The Blood that is in our veins comes from our German ancestors: British historians and the Coming of the First World War’, *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies*, vol. 30, No. 2 (Summer, 1998), pp. 221-252.

³⁰⁶ John M. Kemble, *The Saxons in England: A History of the English Commonwealth Till the Period of the Norman Conquest*, 2 vols. (London, 1849).

³⁰⁷ Ernest Peter Hennock, *British Social Reform and German Precedents: the case of social insurance 1880-1914* (Oxford, 1987).

³⁰⁸ Karina Urbach, *Royal Kinship Anglo-German Family Networks 1815-1918* (London, 2008), p. 15.

³⁰⁹ John Ramsden, *Don’t Mention the War: The British and the Germans since 1890* (London, 2006), p. 48.

Germany and an understanding of the links with Britain's royal family that Alexandra's engagement and her entry into Russian life was narrated. For example, the *Daily News* reported that the Head of the British Legation in Coburg had heard the news of the forthcoming nuptials from the Kaiser who, in typically ebullient fashion, 'slapped him [on the back] and cordially shook his hands'.³¹⁰ The town of Coburg, where Nicholas and Alexandra's engagement had been announced, held special significance for the British Royal Family since it had been the Prince Consort's place of birth and childhood home. This fact was recalled by *The Times* which enthusiastically informed its readers that the rooms of the palace were crammed 'full of memorials of the Royal House of Great Britain [...] pictures and busts of members of Her Majesty's family'.³¹¹

As we have seen, it was said that the Kaiser had asserted that the marriage was imperative for the peace of Europe. Whether or not this was the case some commentators believed that Alexandra's position within an Anglo-German family might play an important part in enabling the future peaceful course of Russian, German and British foreign policy. An article in *The Times*, respectfully entitled 'Royal Personages at Coburg', asserted that: 'the fact that the Russian Heir Apparent proposes to marry a German Princess closely related to the Queen of England and to the Emperor of Germany is not an incident which should [only] be chronicled in the Court Circular. The peace of the World depends in no small degree on the relations between England, Russia and Germany and anything which tends to increase the cordiality of these relations cannot fail

³¹⁰ *Daily News*, 21 Apr.1894, p. 1.

³¹¹ *The Times*, 17 Apr.1894 p. 5.

to have [a] beneficent influence on European politics. For that reason the proposed matrimonial alliance announced from Coburg must be hailed with lively satisfaction in this country'.³¹²

The *Spectator* also examined the political implications of the match, contending that the political equilibrium in Europe, which was thought to have been disturbed by the recently established Franco-Russian alliance, had been restored. In particular the *Spectator* argued that since the 'wives [of Russian emperors] are seldom a nonentity and are sometimes very powerful [and] as the bride is a German princess she is very unlikely to urge an invasion of her Fatherland and as she is also English she is unlikely to regard Great Britain as a bitter enemy'.³¹³ It was not only the newspapers and journals of the educated elites which concluded that Alexandra's position within the German, British and now Russian royal houses would enable her to influence European affairs for the better. The middlebrow *Illustrated Daily Graphic* believed that Alexandra would succeed where professional diplomats and politicians had failed. Thus, the newspaper asserted, the future empress would be sure to bring 'her national and family affinities to bear in order to solve the misunderstandings with which relations of Britain, Germany and Russia [have been] frequently troubled'.³¹⁴

(i) **Death and marriage of a Tsar**

In spite of all the discussion with regard to Alexandra's political influence, at the time

³¹² *The Times*, 21 Apr. 1894, p. 11.

³¹³ *Spectator*, 28 Apr. 1894, p. 574.

³¹⁴ *Daily Graphic*, 21 Apr. 1894, p. 7.

of her engagement the day when she would be crowned empress seemed a long way off. However, Alexander III was suffering from kidney disease and on 1 November 1894 he died-aged only forty-nine. Although it had been known for some time within the family at least that the tsar was seriously ill, the most recent medical bulletins from the Russian Court had given hope that he might recover. The news of his death was therefore all the more unexpected. This shock was reflected in the British press whose reporters described their impression of Russian reaction to the news. One of the most dramatic articles appeared in *The Times* on the eve of the departure of the funeral train carrying Alexander's body from Sevastopol to St Petersburg, via Moscow. The newspaper predicted that as a result of the shock which was felt across the nation 'along the entire route [...] the bereaved land of Russia will show its poignant grief'.³¹⁵ The tsar's death was of such significance that even provincial newspapers covered the story. The *Birmingham Daily Post*, for example, told its readers that news of the tsar's death had caused women in St Petersburg to 'sob in the streets'.³¹⁶ Although there may well have been evidence of grief in Russia at the death of the ruler tinged with concern about the future under his young son these images also played to British stereotypes of the relationship between ordinary Russians and their tsars. Even taking into account some sentimentalising of Russian reaction to Alexander III's death, the responsibilities which Nicholas and Alexandra were called upon to assume were immense.

Even before the tsar was dead there were rumours that Nicholas planned to renounce

³¹⁵ *The Times*, 9 Nov. 1894, p. 5.

³¹⁶ *Birmingham Daily Post*, 2 Nov. 1894, p. 4.

his rights to the throne as his ancestor, Grand Duke Constantine Pavlovich, had done.³¹⁷ On 20 October, Queen Victoria, knowing that Alexander's life was drawing to an end, telegraphed Alexandra's brother insisting that 'no decision should be taken as to [Alexandra's] future without my first being told'.³¹⁸ On 23 October, rumours reached the queen that because the 'tsarevich wishes to renounce the throne his marriage [was] being hastened'.³¹⁹ On 27 October the *Spectator* repeated claims that Nicholas was 'disinclined to accept the throne'.³²⁰ In reality, whatever his personal inclinations, Nicholas accepted his accession as a God-given burden.

Nicholas's lack of preparedness for his new role has been well documented by memoirists and historians.³²¹ As Dominic Lieven has noted, Nicholas enjoyed a relatively solitary education and lack of contact with other boys his age outside of the palace milieu.³²² Even his army service was a family affair as his uncle, Grand Duke Sergei Aleksandrovich, was commander of the regiment in which Nicholas served.³²³ At the point he inherited the throne Nicholas had grown into a polite, if slightly immature, young man who still enjoyed childish practical jokes. The *Daily Graphic* intended its report that Nicholas had all the 'high spirits of the Romanovs' as a compliment but it provides an intimation of his character which did not necessarily accord with the more

³¹⁷ For more on the Grand Duke's life see for example, Angela T. Pienkos, *The Imperfect Autocrat: Grand Duke Constantine Pavlovich and the Polish Congress Kingdom* (New York., 1987).

³¹⁸ RA, VIC/2/499/26, Letter from Queen Victoria to Ernst, Grand Duke of Hesse, 20 Oct. 1894.

³¹⁹ RA, VIC Z/499/17, A cutting from the *Daily Telegraph*, 23 Oct. 1894.

³²⁰ *Spectator*, 27 Oct. 1894, p. 575.

³²¹ Nicholas's cousin Grand Duke Alexander Mikhailovich recalled Nicholas's despair on becoming tsar: *Once a Grand Duke* (New York, 1931).

³²² Lieven, *Nicholas II*, p. 30.

³²³ Wortman, *Scenarios of Power*, vol. 2, p. 310.

serious prerequisites of high office.³²⁴

During the ceremonies surrounding Alexander III's funeral, the Prince of Wales equerry, Major General Arthur Ellis, noted that 'every attention [was] now microscopically centred on the smallest act of the young emperor'.³²⁵ This intense public analysis resulted in one particular act on Nicholas's part, which involved his 'English' family, taking on significance far beyond its intended meaning. The Prince and Princess of Wales, who had travelled to Russia to comfort Alexander's widow, were amongst the funeral party which travelled to St Petersburg. En route in Moscow, Nicholas invited the Prince of Wales (the future Edward VII) to walk alongside him as the coffin entered the Kremlin. In the published programme Nicholas was to have walked alone. As a result of this alteration *The Times* believed that, knowing the eyes of the world were upon him, the tsar had chosen to very publicly signal his wish for friendlier relations with Britain.³²⁶ The perception that the tsar's relationship with the future king as a conduit for amicable Russo-British relations was to prove a popular, if not an always accurate, motif until the king's death in 1910.

Nicholas had hoped to marry Alexandra privately in Livadia almost immediately after his father's death but accepted advice from his Romanov uncles to marry in a more public ceremony in St Petersburg. The date selected was 26 November, the widowed empress Maria Fedorovna's birthday. In Britain Victorian mourning etiquette typically ensured

³²⁴ *Daily Graphic*, 21 Apr. 1894, p. 7.

³²⁵ RA, VIC/2499/145, Letter from Major General Sir Arthur Edward Augustus Ellis (equerry to the Prince of Wales) to Queen Victoria, 23 Nov. 1894.

³²⁶ *The Times*, 6 Nov. 1894, p. 5.

that weddings were often postponed especially if a close relative of the groom had died.³²⁷ If weddings went ahead they were quite, private affairs with only immediate family members in attendance.³²⁸ In the light of these social strictures, when it was announced that Nicholas and Alexandra's wedding would take place within days of Alexander III's funeral, eyebrows were raised in some quarters.

Such was the unexpected nature of the timing of the tsar and empress's wedding that the *Belfast News Letter* felt moved to offer its own admonishment. Founded in 1737, the newspaper was politically and socially conservative with a readership amongst the Protestant landowning and commercial classes throughout Ireland. Reflecting the strait-laced image of its readership, the newspaper was horrified by what it perceived as the impropriety of holding a wedding at this time. Its correspondent was certain that his readers would share in the 'shock [of] the countries of Europe who had so sympathetically mourned with Russia [and who now found] the court of the bereaved family all absorbed in preparations for a grand wedding ceremony'.³²⁹ In addition to its bewilderment at the choice of date for the nuptials, the newspaper also took issue with Alexandra's wedding dress. The dress, made of white silk, covered in silver brocade and artificial pearls followed regulations for court dress that had been set down in the reign of Tsar Alexander I (1801-1825).³³⁰ To those unaware of its origins the style appeared distinctly old fashioned. Perhaps wishing to assert its metropolitan credentials the *Belfast*

³²⁷ Pat Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 305-6.

³²⁸ *Ibid.*

³²⁹ *Belfast News Letter*, 26 Nov. 1894, p. 3.

³³⁰ Robert Timms (ed.) (trans. Frank Althaus and Darya Lakha) *Nicholas and Alexandra: the last imperial family of Russia*, (London, 1998), pp. 200-205.

News Letter opined that ‘whilst [even] European peasantry were casting off their traditional dress in favour of modern British and American fashions, the bride of the richest sovereign in the world [was to wear a] dress designed a hundred years ago’.³³¹

Alexandra’s marriage and her husband’s sudden accession to the Russian throne had all the attributes necessary to enthrall the general public: the sudden death of a Russian autocrat and the marriage of a shy, Anglo-German princess to his handsome but politically untried successor. However, not everyone was impressed by Alexandra’s rise in social status. In a letter to her sister Charlotte Knollys (lady-in-waiting to the Princess of Wales) made rather mean-spirited and snobbish references to Alexandra’s formerly relatively (at least in royal terms) lowly status. Thus she wrote in some astonishment that Alexandra: ‘wore *two* crowns on her head, her neck [was] covered with the most enormous diamonds and a long mantle of gold stuff borne by four officers of state. What a change! A little scrubby Hessian princess-not even a Royal Highness and now the empress of the largest empire in Europe!’³³²

In public commentators responded rather more graciously, if in sentimental terms. For example, the *Penny Illustrated Paper* gushingly congratulated the tsar on his ‘union with one of the most charming and intelligent of Princesses, our queen’s own granddaughter, the handsome Princess Alix of Hesse, sweet daughter of England’s Princess Alice’.³³³

Other newspapers focused on the relationship between the Russian rulers and their

³³¹ *Belfast News Letter*, 26 Nov. 1894, p. 3.

³³² Hampshire Archives and Local Studies, 21M69/25/2, Letter from Hon. Charlotte Knollys to her sister Constance, 25 Nov. 1894.

³³³ *Penny Illustrated Paper* 10 Nov. 1894, p. 290.

subjects. For *The Times*, such scenes illustrated the loyal ‘hold that the imperial family has upon the affection of the Russian masses’.³³⁴ Similarly, the *Daily Telegraph* described how crowds filled the streets desperate to obtain sight of the tsar and empress while ‘many hundreds more stood on the roofs of houses, on the walls of the quay, on lampposts, on chairs and on stools [and] cheered the newlyweds as they drove by’.³³⁵

A good deal of the positive coverage of Nicholas and Alexandra’s wedding was undoubtedly genuine. Some articles may have been a symptom of the flattery to which even foreign royalty is perhaps susceptible in the British press on account of perceptions of its glamour or simply the youth of some royals whose lives may seem constrained by protocol and tradition and in Nicholas’s case-fate. Journalists may have been influenced by images of a young man come suddenly and unwillingly to the throne. They may have really hoped that a reluctant monarch might be more likely to be a liberal one, or it may be their reports fitted better with the soft-focus image of Nicholas, which the press had created. The following examples suggest it as a possibility. The first, in *The Times*, without offering any firm evidence beyond the level of hopeful speculation, declared that new reign would be ‘softer and less autocratic’ than that of Alexander III.³³⁶ Two weeks later the *Daily Telegraph* informed its readers that the new tsar was definitely ‘more European than his late father’ and went even further, solemnly intoning that under his rule ‘universal peace [will] prevail on land and sea’.³³⁷ The *Penny Illustrated Paper* was taken

³³⁴ *The Times*, 27 Nov. 1894, p. 9.

³³⁵ *Daily Telegraph*, 27 Nov. 1894, p. 6.

³³⁶ *The Times*, 5 Nov. 1894, p. 5.

³³⁷ *Daily Telegraph*, 27 Nov. 1894, p. 6.

up with this idea and waxed lyrical that the new tsar's very name 'spells peace'.³³⁸ In a similar vein in a biography of Nicholas's father, published in the year of the coronation, Charles Lowe looked forward with confidence to the day when the young tsar would 'implement reforms on a scale not seen since the Emancipation of the Serfs in 1861'.³³⁹

Nicholas's first major foray into the political arena appeared to quash these hopes when he responded to a petition from the Tver zemstvo. The zemstvos, which Alexander II had instituted in 1864, provided a basic system of local government. Historians have been almost unanimous in asserting that Nicholas 'infuriated public opinion' when he rebuffed the Tver delegation.³⁴⁰ The men from Tver had asked that the zemstvos be given a greater role in the life of the nation and in particular that they be permitted 'to tell the government of the people's needs and thoughts'.³⁴¹ The British ambassador blamed the negative tone of the tsar's response on the advice of the Grand Duke Sergei Aleksandrovich who, he asserted, had the reputation of 'being extremely retrograde and devoid of all political sense'.³⁴² The negative reaction to the imperial rebuff by *Free Russia* was only to be expected as the magazine declared: 'Before being fairly settled on the throne, without waiting for the development of events, without casting a look around him, Nicholas II utters the fatal words which dispel like smoke that kind and trusting feeling inspired by his youth'.³⁴³ However, other contemporary responses were rather more varied. *The Times*, for example, appeared to lay the blame for the dispute on the

³³⁸ *Penny Illustrated Post*, 10 Nov. 1894, p. 290.

³³⁹ Charles Lowe, *Alexander III* (London, 1895), p. 370.

³⁴⁰ Orlando Figes, *A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution 1917-1924* (London, 1996), p. 165.

³⁴¹ Hans Rogger, *Russia in the Age of Modernisation and Revolution 1881-1917* (London, 1986), p. 18.

³⁴² Churchill Archives, Churchill College Cambridge, (hereafter, Churchill Archives) OCON 4/1/16, Sir Nicholas O'Connor to Sir Thomas Sanderson, 13 Jan. 1896.

³⁴³ *Free Russia*, 1 Mar. 1895, p. 19.

men from Tver. The newspaper acknowledged that Nicholas's 'declaration [had] annihilated all hope of parliamentary development'.³⁴⁴ However, the article appeared to side with the tsar when it asserted that 'unfortunately vague and inappropriate aspirations have found expression in the [local] assemblies with an impulsive haste and want of tact'.³⁴⁵ Furthermore, as we have noted, in earlier centuries, some British commentators were convinced that the autocracy was the best form of government for Russia and so it was on this occasion. As *The Times* explained, 'the absolute rule of the tsar seems to suit Russia very well [and] it is not for foreigners to affirm that something else would suit her better'.³⁴⁶

A note of specifically Russo-British politics was injected into the wedding discourse by the *Daily Graphic* and *The Times*. As a personal token of her esteem, Queen Victoria awarded Nicholas an honorary Colonelcy in the British Army. The *Daily Graphic* gave its front page over to the news including an imagined drawing of Nicholas in the dress uniform of 'his' regiment, the Scots Greys. The paper's accompanying headline 'The New Colonel of the Greys' gave the news an air of intimacy, as if the newspaper were announcing the promotion of a British army officer.³⁴⁷ At first sight the choice of the Scots Greys appeared less than tactful since the regiment had not only fought in the Crimean War, but had obtained battle honours at Balaclava. Nevertheless, *The Times* argued that far from reminding Nicholas of past quarrels, his appointment was Queen

³⁴⁴ *The Times*, 30 Jan. 1895, p. 9

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁷ *Daily Graphic*, 28 Nov. 1894, p. 1.

Victoria's and Britain's way of signalling to Russia and to the young ruler their wish to 'let bygones be bygones'.³⁴⁸

Alexandra's potential role in Russian foreign affairs had been much discussed at her engagement and marriage. Her husband's coronation provided an opportunity for a renewed focus on the empress and the liberal attributes she had supposedly inherited from her mother, Princess Alice, as Grand Duchess of Hesse-Darmstadt, had taken a keen interest in the education, employment and the health of women. She died in 1878 but her nephew, Lord Mountbatten of Burma, was of the opinion that Alice would have made a great impact on 'liberal history' had she lived longer.³⁴⁹ Mountbatten was born in 1900, many years after his aunt's death and almost certainly overstated her qualities.³⁵⁰ However, some contemporary British observers, such as the *Penny Illustrated Press*, asserted that Alexandra had indeed inherited princess Alice's 'liberal leanings' and, as a result, she would bring to the Russian court 'an atmosphere of freedom' which it was currently lacking.³⁵¹

In the midst of sometimes unfounded and even pompous claims about the empress there was one unintentionally light-hearted article in the *Manchester Times*. In an article headlined 'Gossip about Interesting People' the paper declared itself startled to learn that Alexandra had once worked in a coal pit. Of course a reading of the article did not reveal that the future empress had earned her living hewing coal. Rather, the story centred on

³⁴⁸ *The Times*, 27 Nov. 1894, p. 9.

³⁴⁹ Gerard Noel, *Princess Alice: Queen Victoria's Forgotten Daughter* (London, 1974).

³⁵⁰ Philip Ziegler, *Mountbatten: the official biography* (London, 1985).

³⁵¹ *Penny Illustrated Paper*, 10 Nov. 1894, p. 290.

the fact that in 1889 she had accompanied Queen Victoria on a brief visit to the Ruabon Colliery. Having descended into the mine she was said to have brought down whole blocks of coal with a specially crafted hammer. Having handed back the hammer to a waiting druid (according to the *Manchester Times*) she had had then ‘made off’ with a piece of the coal she had herself had hewn as a memento of the occasion.³⁵² The anecdote appeared to show that, not only was she skilled in the art of international and domestic politics as had been highlighted by other newspapers, but that she was also capable of manual labour.

(ii) The Coronation in May 1896

The accession of a new tsar was an opportunity to look to the future and consider what the new reign might achieve. A number of commentators responded optimistically, albeit that their supposition was sometimes based on the flimsiest of evidence. As we shall discuss below Aylmer Maude was a notable exception to this general enthusiasm for the imperial couple. In describing the coronation ceremonies Maude was exasperated with religious and other formal aspects surrounding the occasion. Maude lived and worked in Moscow but many hundreds of people came from Britain to Moscow during coronation months of May and June 1896 specifically to witness the festivities. The *Times* carried advertisements for luxurious ‘Coronation Cruises’ costing as much as £100 whilst those on a more limited budget were offered the ‘economical’ ‘Twenty Guinea’ Whitsuntide Cruise to Russia. Even at this ‘budget’ price one would need some disposable income,

³⁵² *Manchester Times*, 2 Nov. 1894, p. 5.

not to mention the spare time necessary to travel by ship to Russia and thence, overland to Moscow. For the independent traveller hotel rooms were at a premium and private accommodation could cost between £400 and £800 for the period of the festivities.³⁵³ An indication of the number of people from Britain who travelled to Russia for the coronation can be seen from an article in the *Daily Telegraph*. On the eve of the coronation the newspaper, rather shamefacedly, noted that the city had been ‘literally invaded by [people from Britain] who overrun the restaurants, fill the churches and crowd the Kremlin and empty the shops of their silver and gold ware’.³⁵⁴ So numerous were the British visitors who later wrote accounts of their time in Moscow during the festivities that at least one of them felt the need to apologise for adding to the ‘amount of stuff’ written on the subject.³⁵⁵

The coronation provided an opportunity not only for British commentators to marvel at the sumptuousness of the celebrations but to consider Nicholas and Alexandra as individuals and to discuss their roles in an absolutist state. Rather unexpectedly, given its avowed opposition to the tsarist regime, *Free Russia* appeared to hold out hope that the regime might be successfully reformed rather than overthrown. In this regard *Free Russia* believed that the empress might exert beneficial influence over her husband, particularly in the field of education. The magazine asserted that, in order to mark his coronation, Nicholas would be sure to announce a series of educational reforms on the basis of advice from his wife who, according to the article, was a ‘very well educated lady who took a

³⁵³ *Daily Telegraph* 26 May 1896 p. 3.

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁵ Sykes, *Moscow Raid*, p. 114.

hearty interest in popular education'.³⁵⁶

Richard Wortman tells us that the foreigners who saw the multinational representatives of the empire who accompanied the tsar and empress during their official entry into Moscow believed that they had witnessed firm evidence the subject people's 'devotion to the Russian throne'.³⁵⁷ At the time of Nicholas's coronation the *Penny Illustrated Paper* rejected the Russian style of Empire which it described as 'the assimilation of native elements' and trumpeted instead the British way of ruling its subject peoples standing 'apart, just, strong and wise'.³⁵⁸ Another contemporary commentator noted the similarities between the two empires and lauded Russia's 'civilising influence' amongst people, many of whom had now converted to Christianity but who had previously 'lived a life very little removed from brute beasts'.³⁵⁹ Identified only by the initials E.H.P., the writer congratulated Russia for having pacified 'the wretched Khanates of Bokhara and Khiva' and crushing the 'hotbeds of Mahometan fanaticism'.³⁶⁰ Russian civilisation, he concluded, was 'doing as much for Asia as [was] English civilisation'.³⁶¹

In 1890-91 Nicholas had seen for himself Britain's Asian possessions when he toured India and Ceylon. His tour was described by the *Penny Illustrated Paper* as 'the best education in the world'.³⁶² This was a common feeling in Britain and, as a result, a number of commentators anticipated Nicholas might implement reforms, based on the

³⁵⁶ *Free Russia*, 7, 5 May 1896, p. 42.

³⁵⁷ Wortman, *Scenarios of Power*, vol. 2, p. 352.

³⁵⁸ *Penny Illustrated Paper*, 30 May 1896, p. 338.

³⁵⁹ E.H.P. 'A Plea for Russia' *Contemporary Review*, 79, Jan-Jun. 1896, pp. 670-679, p. 672.

³⁶⁰ E.H.P. 'A Plea for Russia', p. 679

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*

³⁶² *Penny Illustrated Paper*, 10 Nov. 1894, p. 300.

excellent “British models” he had witnessed during his time in the Indian sub-continent. An authorised account of this journey entitled: *Travels in the east with Nicholas II, Emperor of Russia when Cesarevitch 1890-1891* was published in English in the coronation year.³⁶³ A review in *The Times* declared, with evident pride, that Nicholas had been able to observe ‘British brains and discipline’ in India.³⁶⁴ In reality, much of the visit had been plagued by squabbles over etiquette such as when the imperial party, in an argument over the style of reception proposed for them, threatened to cancel part of their visit or travel to Calcutta incognito.³⁶⁵ Fearing a diplomatic incident, the British sought to accommodate the Russians and they continued with the planned programme.³⁶⁶ During his Indian visit Nicholas also showed an early disinclination to be interested in political affairs. Although he frequently suggested to Sir Donald Mackenzie Wallace that they set aside time to discuss ‘the past history’ of India, according to Wallace the twenty-two year old tsarevich was more interested in playing practical jokes with his cousin Prince George of Greece than discussing the workings of the British Empire.³⁶⁷

While there was a good deal of self-congratulation about much of the press coverage, this sense of the superiority of British institutions over those of other nations was not universal. Charles Lowe, for example, worried that, far from impressing the tsar, his experiences of British democracy might well have alienated him from the idea of devolved government. Lowe explained that in 1893 Nicholas, then tsarevich, had visited

³⁶³ Prince E. Ukhtomskii, *Travels in the east with Nicholas II, Emperor of Russia when Cesarevitch 1890-1891* (London, 1896).

³⁶⁴ *The Times*, 22 Sept. 1896, p. 12.

³⁶⁵ Sir Arthur Hardinge to Sir Robert Morier 13 Jan. 1891, Morier Papers, vol. 15.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁷ Donald Mackenzie Wallace to Sir Robert Morier, Morier Papers, vol. 15.

London for the Duke of York's (the future George V's) wedding. During his stay Nicholas took the opportunity to visit the House of Commons where he had listened to a debate from the public gallery. The House of Commons, then as now, could be a noisy, boisterous place where the honourable members sometimes seem more bent on party-political point scoring than reasoned debate. Charles Lowe fretted that if the future tsar had witnessed such rowdy scenes he might well have been left with 'a justifiable hatred and distrust of parliamentary institutions'.³⁶⁸

In the days before the coronation the tsar and empress spent much of their time fasting and in prayer at the Petrovsky Palace on the outskirts of Moscow. The ceremonies, beliefs and rites of the Russian Orthodox church were an important part of Nicholas and Alexandra's lives and coloured their understanding of their relationship with their subjects which they perceived in terms of an 'invisible spiritual bond'.³⁶⁹ These manifestations of religiosity also informed British perceptions of the imperial couple. As we have noted, British attitudes towards the Russian Orthodox Church were divided between those who viewed it with disgust and those who admired its role in the life of the nation. Most recently *Free Russia* had bemoaned Alexandra's conversion to Russian Orthodoxy as 'distinctly repulsive'.³⁷⁰ On a more positive note William Birkbeck, a leading member of the Anglican and Eastern Association, was rumoured to have been responsible for easing Alexandra's conversion to Russian Orthodoxy after she read an

³⁶⁸ Lowe, *Alexander III*, p. 370.

³⁶⁹ Wortman, *Scenarios of Power*, vol. 2, p. 366.

³⁷⁰ *Free Russia*, 5, 9, 1 Sept. 1896, p. 74.

article by him entitled: 'Reunion with the Russian Church'.³⁷¹

It was against a background of his personal interest in unity between the Russian and Anglican Churches that the Bishop of Peterborough, Mandell Creighton attended the coronation in 1896. Although eminently qualified on account of his enthusiasm for Orthodoxy, he travelled to Russia only because the Bishop of Winchester was too ill to make the trip.³⁷² As Creighton himself admitted, his first response on hearing that he was to be sent to Moscow was that it was a great 'inconvenience'.³⁷³ Even in Moscow his immediate reaction was no more positive than it had been when he first learnt that he was to be the official Anglican representative at the coronation. In particular he was frustrated by his lack of Russian and the fact that the British ambassador, who he had assumed would be available to help him, was not only a Catholic (and therefore thought to be unsympathetic to Anglican-Orthodox rapprochement) but was also far too busy with embassy matters to ease his stay. In a letter to his wife he expressed his frustration declaring that 'the whole thing seems more and more ridiculous and I keep asking myself what am I doing' here.³⁷⁴ However, after these initial problems, Creighton fell under Moscow's spell and took the presence of numerous churches, monasteries, shrines and the reverence of the Orthodox congregations as evidence of deep Christian faith. He preached a sermon in St Andrew's Anglican Church in the centre of Moscow during which, in light of what he had witnessed across the capital, he noted with admiration that Russia was 'a

³⁷¹ Athelstan Riley, *Birkbeck and the Russian Church* (London, 1917), p. 358.

³⁷² The Church of England Record Centre, Lambeth Palace, Archbishop E.W. Benson Papers 148/114, F. Fleetwood to Lord Salisbury, 6 April 1896.

³⁷³ Louise Creighton, *Life and Letters of Mandell Creighton: sometime bishop of London* (London, 1904), p. 147.

³⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

nation which so evidently puts the worship of God, whether in the streets, or in their houses, or in their churches before everything else'.³⁷⁵

Before coming to Russia Creighton had sought advice from Athelstan Riley, a layman who also advocated closer links between the Church of England and the Russian Orthodox Church. Riley warned Creighton not to dance at any coronation balls since the sight of a bishop on the dance floor would be sure to shock his hosts! It would be more appropriate, Riley suggested, if Creighton accompanied the imperial party on the traditional coronation pilgrimage to the Trinity St Sergius Monastery.³⁷⁶ Riley explained that the monastery, founded in the fourteenth century, held great historical significance as the focus of national resistance to what he called 'the Romano-Polish attempt to subjugate the Russian state and church'.³⁷⁷ Creighton's visit was judged a success by the *Church Times* which devoted many column inches to the fact that an Anglican bishop had been present at the Russian coronation. The newspaper, which had been founded in 1863 to foster Anglo-Catholic theology, delightedly echoed Creighton's joy at discovering a common link between Britain and Russia. According to the newspaper during what it called 'their ancient ceremonial of crowning their sovereigns [Russians] have retained the use of chrism to anoint the ruler'.³⁷⁸

Not everyone in Britain shared either Creighton's receptiveness or that of the *Church Times* to the virtues of Russia's national church. William Birkbeck, who also travelled to

³⁷⁵Riley, *Birkbeck*, p. 103.

³⁷⁶Church of England Record Centre Lambeth Palace, Benson Papers 148/134, Letter from Athelstan Riley to Mandell Creighton Bishop of Peterborough, 17 Apr. 1896.

³⁷⁷*Ibid.*

³⁷⁸*Church Times*, 29 May 1896, p. 615.

Moscow for the coronation, noted that it was the fashion in Britain to speak of the Russian Orthodox Church as a ‘corrupt body, ignorant, and fossilised, without life, without engorge, in fact a church which has long been perfectly useless’.³⁷⁹ This was evidently the opinion of Aylmer Maude whose years in Russia had done little to soften his view of the national Church. On the eve of their crowning Nicholas and Alexandra prayed at the tombs of the medieval rulers and Russian patriarchs. Maude scathingly described the ceremony, which was a genuine act of piety on the part of the imperial couple, as the veneration of ‘some dried up bits of corpses’.³⁸⁰ Similarly, when Nicholas and Alexandra were welcomed by metropolitan Sergei at the door of the Assumption Cathedral in a flowery and effusive manner, Maude spluttered his contempt. In particular he poured scorn on the metropolitan and his ilk who, he said, thought this a suitable way to speak to ‘a young man of twenty-eight, who differed from his peasant subjects, only in that he had been cut off from the actual business of life the task of ringing from nature food, clothes and shelter’.³⁸¹

(iii) Witnesses to a Coronation

The Coronation took place in the Moscow Kremlin’s fifteenth-century cathedral of the Dormition. In addition to the many guests of exalted rank, twenty journalists, half of whom were from abroad, were allowed into the cathedral to witness the ritual. The remainder were accommodated in specially built stands in the square outside and

³⁷⁹ Riley, *Birkbeck*, p. 72.

³⁸⁰ Maude, *Coronation*, p. 41.

³⁸¹ Maude, *Coronation*, p 33

provided with telegraph lines to file stories home and a press pass giving them access to Moscow and the Kremlin. According to one British newspaper the mere sight of these passes caused even the fiercest of Russian policemen to ‘recoil in smiles’.³⁸²

The journalists’ accounts and those of other spectators are a mixture of the richly descriptive, the reverently over awed, the realistic and the fiercely critical. For example, Charles Listed noted what he perceived to be the incongruity of a combination of ‘the almost awfully solemn and impressive picture and the small, slight young man in the centre of such dazzling glory’.³⁸³ Similarly, as Alexandra processed to the Kremlin, Mary Hickley observed that she appeared much more confident than her husband.³⁸⁴ In contrast from her vantage point she noted that although he was ‘power personified [the tsar] was as white as a sheet’.³⁸⁵ *The Queen: The Lady’s Magazine* also identified Alexandra as the rather more assured of the imperial pair. In photographs taken to mark her engagement and others taken during her teenage years Alexandra frequently appears quite timid and shy.³⁸⁶ Now, however, it was the magazine’s perception, that she had ‘left the shyness of her childhood behind her in Darmstadt’ and with her ‘every glance and gesture proclaimed that she was in fact as in name the helpmate of the most magnificent representative of the European powers’.³⁸⁷

In the *Daily Telegraph*, Edwin Arnold alluded to British perceptions of Russia’s

³⁸² *Daily Graphic* 21 May 1896 p 10.

³⁸³ Charles T. Listed, ‘The Apotheosis of Russia’, *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, vol. 969, No. 160, 1896, p. 135.

³⁸⁴ Hickley, *Gold, Glitter and Gloom*, p.13.

³⁸⁵ *Ibid.* p.19.

³⁸⁶ Charlotte Zeepvat, *Queen Victoria’s Family: A century of photographs 1840-1940* (Sutton, 2001).

³⁸⁷ *Queen, the Lady’s Magazine*, 30 May 1896, p. 948.

eastern heritage in his description of the guests processing into the Kremlin. Thus, he reported seeing a number of ‘glittering Oriental magnates [in] gorgeous garb such as Tamerlane in his utmost grandeur never musted’.³⁸⁸ Another eyewitness account, published in *The Times*, included descriptions of great richness such as was popularly associated with the Orient. The tsar, the newspaper noted, processed from the Cathedral beneath a ‘gorgeous golden canopy with its rich draperies of ermine [surrounded by] heralds resplendent in golden uniforms’.³⁸⁹ A third eye-witness described almost mouth-watering scenes of fantastical ‘golden domes, fairy lights [of] ruby, sapphire, emerald and amethyst’ [and an] imperial canopy of orange, white and black-the Russian colours, emblematic of gold, glitter and gloom’.³⁹⁰

The nearest which Britain had most recently come to such pomp and pageantry had been the celebrations of mark Queen Victoria’s Golden Jubilee in 1887. However, the queen had refused to wear the crown or robes of state, preferring to wear a mourning dress with a simple bonnet. Therefore, although she was escorted by her Indian Cavalry as she drove the short distance from Buckingham Palace to Westminster Abbey, it was somewhat lacklustre in comparison Nicholas and Alexandra’s magnificent official entry into Moscow. During the coronation ceremony, which lasted four hours, one Briton observed the imperial thrones, which also contrasted with the ancient and rather workaday throne of British monarchs. One was made of ‘ivory and gold and studded with

³⁸⁸ *The Times*, May 22 1896 p. 7.

³⁸⁹ *Daily Graphic*, 29 May 1896 p. 9.

³⁹⁰ Hickely, *Gold, Glitter and Gloom*, p. 18 and 26.

sapphires, rubies, emeralds and turquoises’.³⁹¹ The ambassador, Sir Nicholas O’Conor, reported his impressions of the ceremony to Queen Victoria. In particular, he recalled how the tsar had ‘long and deliberately’ kissed the empress as he placed the crown on her head. It was, declared O’Conor, ‘apparent to the most casual observer that their majesties felt at that moment the heavy responsibility upon them as Sovereigns’.³⁹²

David Cannadine tells us that British royal ceremonial during much of the nineteenth century was noted for its unintended informality and tendency to disarray.³⁹³ In this respect the grand ceremonial in Moscow shared at least one common feature. As Arthur Sykes reported that, as the imperial family entered the Kremlin, ‘a hundred bands played God Save the tsar at the same time although ‘not simultaneously [while] a dog of uncertain breed sat down in front of the tsar with sublime unconcern during a pause in the procession’.³⁹⁴ Although from such accounts the ceremony did indeed appear ill rehearsed, perhaps on account of its recent creation, Creighton asserted that the coronation was neither a modern invention nor a random series of events. On the contrary, he wrote, it was ‘a ceremony of great antiquity [which] expresses the sentiments of the Russian people’.³⁹⁵ The upper middle-class *Lady* magazine took a similar view describing the ceremony in reverent tones as a ‘most unspeakably magnificent and

³⁹¹ *The Times*, 27 May 1896, p. 5.

³⁹² Papers of Queen Victoria on Foreign Affairs, vol. 1. Sir Nicholas O’Conor to Queen Victoria, 2 Jun. 1896.

³⁹³ David Cannadine, *The Context, Performance and Meaning of Ritual: The British Monarchy and the ‘Invention of Tradition’, c. 1820-1977* in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 2009), p. 117.

³⁹⁴ Sykes, *Coronation Cruise*, p. 58.

³⁹⁵ Mandell Creighton, ‘The Imperial Coronation at Moscow’, *Cornhill Magazine* N.S.1. (Jul.–Dec., 1896), p. 305.

thrilling ceremonial a sacred sacrament of allegiance between Their Imperial Majesties and the vast peoples over whom they have been called to reign'.³⁹⁶

A number of popular magazines provided their readers with very rudimentary sketches of the crowning ceremony and attendant festivities. One of the largest appeared in the *Penny Illustrated Paper*. In a sequence of four sketches the newspaper showed Nicholas and Alexandra's reception in the Kremlin before the ceremony the tsar crowning himself before the kneeling clergy and lastly a depiction of Nicholas crowning Alexandra. The newspaper also drew attention to what it identified as the important difference between the coronation of a Russian tsar and a British monarch. In Britain the king or queen was crowned by the archbishop of Canterbury. In Russia the tsar placed the crown on his own head. In Britain (with the notable exceptions of William III and Mary II who ruled jointly) the spouse of a monarch was confined to the position of Consort. In Russia however, when Nicholas briefly held the imperial crown against Alexandra's forehead and then placed a small diadem on her head, according to the *Penny Illustrated Paper*, in doing so 'he signified her central role' as empress.³⁹⁷

The *Daily Graphic* was the first illustrated newspaper in England. Its founder, William Luson Thomas, believed that 'illustrations had the power to influence public opinion on public issues'.³⁹⁸ Interestingly it was one to which the imperial family itself subscribed.³⁹⁹ The newspaper sent an artist to Moscow to record the new tsar's ceremonial entry into the

³⁹⁶ *Lady*, 4 Jun., 1896, p. 793.

³⁹⁷ *Penny Illustrated Paper*, 30 May 1896, p. 1.

³⁹⁸ Forrest Reid, *Illustrators of the sixties* (London, 1928).

³⁹⁹ J.C. Trewin, *Tutor to the Tsarevich: An Intimate Portrait of the Last Days of the Russian Imperial Family* (London, 1975), p. 86.

capital and his coronation. A drawing in the *Graphic* showed Nicholas saluting the crowds and looking confidently ahead as he passed the British Embassy. As he made his official entry into the Kremlin Nicholas rode some way ahead of his entourage.⁴⁰⁰ In an unfortunate, if prescient analogy, the Reverend Thursby-Pelham compared this scene with Christ's triumphal entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday in the week before his crucifixion.⁴⁰¹

Although, there was undoubtedly much popular acclamation of the tsar along the processional route and later in the Kremlin, his assassination was a real possibility. In the years since 1881, when a bomb in St Petersburg had killed Alexander II, the authorities had implemented strict security measures around the imperial family. For the Coronation the streets around the Kremlin were lined with a double row of soldiers, police and detectives. Mary Hickley was in no doubt that the numbers were more than justified. Her argument seems almost gleaned from the pages of a popular novel since she declared that Russia was 'a hot bed of anarchists and nihilists who, because they cannot be kings, are determined that no one else shall be'.⁴⁰² In 1888 the train in which Alexander III and his family were travelling was derailed near Borki in southern Russia. It was said that the cause of the accident had been a terrorist bomb and on this basis Mary Hickley claimed that the railway line between St Petersburg and Moscow had been guarded by hundreds of soldiers because Russians were 'addicted to blowing up imperial trains'.⁴⁰³ However,

⁴⁰⁰ *Daily Graphic*, 28 May 1896, p. 1.

⁴⁰¹ Shropshire Archives, AT 64THU.

⁴⁰² Hickley, *Gold, Glitter and Gloom*, p.11.

⁴⁰³ *Ibid.* p.5.

within the walls of the Kremlin, the situation appears to have been more lax, at least if Arthur Sykes is to be believed. According to Sykes, Russian officials were so impressed by a fellow tourist 'Mrs Gass's mere visiting card that they obtained good positions near the door of the [Assumption] Cathedral'.⁴⁰⁴

Russia had been a favoured destination of British travellers for generations but visits to the country were often undertaken with some degree of trepidation. An anecdote, related by Field Marshal Lord Francis Grenfell, an aide-de-camp to Queen Victoria, indicated what might happen to anyone who fell foul of the Russian authorities. Grenfell claimed to have witnessed an 'English tourist' lunge at the imperial couple during the coronation ceremony. As he recalled in his memoirs: 'a curious incident took place at the moment of the coronation when a man, dressed like an English tourist, almost got to the foot of the throne before the police seized him'.⁴⁰⁵ His fate, Grenfell was sure, would be immediate imprisonment in Siberia.⁴⁰⁶ Grenfell's story does not appear in the *London Times* account of the day and that despite the fact that their correspondent had a prime view of the ceremony. Nor, so far as we have been able to ascertain, does such an event appear in any other account of the events that day. It may therefore be that he invented it, embellishing for his readers a frisson of danger thus reinforcing a popular vein of belief in Britain that Russia was full of would be regicides who, if they were apprehended, were incarcerated without a judicial hearing.

⁴⁰⁴ Sykes, *Coronation Cruise*, p 70.

⁴⁰⁵ Francis Grenfell, *Three Weeks in Moscow* (London, 1896), p. 47.

⁴⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

Grenfell's tale would have found a ready British audience, for whom Russia was a land of despotism and arbitrary rules which banned activities which were freely undertaken in more liberal countries. As Arthur Sykes explained before travelling to Moscow his more nervous, stay-at-home, compatriots had cautioned him that sketching, let alone photography, was strictly forbidden in Russia. According to these nervy individuals, any transgression of police rules would mean instant transportation to Siberia. Happily, said Sykes, such fears proved groundless, as he noted in one verse of a poem he wrote to celebrate his visit. Entitled 'A Little Moscow Raid' he ridiculed his compatriots whose knowledge of Russia smacked more of adventure novels than reality. Thus, he wrote:

If we photo'd or sketched 'twas said we'd be fetched by gendarmes and removed to Siberia while scribbling was banned by the law of the land-all these warnings were simply hysteria. We Kodak'd the tsar and suite so bizarre and felt not a qualm or a Trembling. Quite free of all charge we wandered o'er the place I must spell as the Krembling.⁴⁰⁷

In Britain the cost of the monarchy to the public purse and the extent of the Crown's private fortune were frequently the subject of controversy. During Victoria's reign the allowances paid to her husband, her children and her grandchildren were much scrutinised by the public and by the Treasury. As William M. Kuhn tells us, even as Queen Victoria recovered much of her popularity following her long widowhood, the subject of the Crown's finances 'could still breed resentment'.⁴⁰⁸ It was against this

⁴⁰⁷ Arthur Sykes, 'A Little Moscow Raid', *Punch*, 13 Jun. 1896, p.114.

⁴⁰⁸ William M. Kuhn, 'Queen Victoria's Civil List: What does she do with it?', *Historical Journal*, vol. 36,

background of British disquiet about royal extravagances, coupled with knowledge of the poverty of many ordinary Russians, that the cost of Nicholas and Alexandra's coronation was discussed. Some commentators reacted with disdain believing the ceremonies to have been nothing less than 'a parade of empty vain-gloriousness'.⁴⁰⁹ Critics of the regime such as *Free Russia* condemned the coronation ritual as nothing less than 'a trick to blind and overawe' the people of the Russian empire. In 1893, a few short years before the coronation, the Salvation Army had denounced the 'sickening scenes of want, starvation and utter misery' in the Russian countryside as famine stalked the land.⁴¹⁰ Mindful of these images *Free Russia* berated the imperial regime for lavishing money on such ceremonials when much of the countryside had been so recently devastated. It was, said the periodical, a 'ghastly paradox [that] the only European country which can now afford [such] gorgeous pageantry is the only country which has not succeeded in preventing famines' amongst its own people.⁴¹¹ Similarly, the *Spectator* was uneasy with the cost of the coronation which it estimated to have been 5 million pounds. The periodical did not give a source for its claim but solemnly declared that 'it was difficult for a cultivated Englishman to study accounts of the preparations for the Russian coronation without a feeling of disquiet'.⁴¹²

In the celebrations to mark Nicholas and Alexandra's coronation the elites of the Russian Empire played a significant role. However, village elders and other "ordinary"

No. 3 (1993), p. 662.

⁴⁰⁹ Listed 'The Apotheosis of Russia', p. 135.

⁴¹⁰ *Darkest Russia*, 1 Feb. 1893, p. 3.

⁴¹¹ *Free Russia*, 7, 7, 1 Jul. 1896, p. 55.

⁴¹² *Spectator*, 23 May 1896, 297.

Russians were also invited to join the festivities in the Kremlin including a banquet in the medieval Terem Palace. There, in the apartments of Tsar Mikhail Fedorovich, Nicholas and Alexandra could believe themselves to be in harmony with their subjects such as they imagined had been common in the days of the first Romanov tsars. Richard Wortman has argued that Nicholas and Alexandra's coronation was specifically designed to impress upon foreign observers the image of 'a monarchy with mass democratic support'.⁴¹³ If that is the case then the tsar and empress were only partially successful. British reaction to these banquets for the lower classes reflected their confusion at Nicholas and Alexandra's relationship with the common people (the *narod*). The *Penny Illustrated News* viewed these encounters with condescension as 'magnificent ceremonials for the subjects of the White Tsar'.⁴¹⁴ Similarly the *Daily Telegraph's* correspondent observed with bewilderment the 'shaggy, unkempt, swarthy and rustic' guests of the tsar.⁴¹⁵ After the same event, unaware of the imperial couple's understanding of their relationship with their humblest subjects, Francis Grenfell was amazed to see 'a bevy of very old and dirty women who drank up the dregs of the wine and filled their aprons with the remains of bread and fruit'.⁴¹⁶

(iv) Khodynka Field

During Nicholas and Alexandra's reign British commentators mostly regarded the

⁴¹³ Wortman, *Scenarios of Power*, vol. 2, p. 343.

⁴¹⁴ *Penny Illustrated News*, 30 May 1896, p. 338.

⁴¹⁵ *Daily Telegraph*, 29 May 1896, p. 3.

⁴¹⁶ Grenfell, *Three Weeks*, p. 106.

imperial couple's encounters with their subjects at national festivities in positive terms.⁴¹⁷ However, one there is one particular event organised for the 'common people' in June 1896 that is remembered above all the others. The tragedy, which occurred on Khodynka Field just outside Moscow, retains a certain infamy in the chronicle of the last years of imperial Russia. Since the end of Imperial Russia writers and historians have viewed the events at Khodynka Field in terms of 'a sinister portent',⁴¹⁸ a 'Feast for the Slain'⁴¹⁹ and of a tsar not in control of his own destiny a 'monarch unable to control or discipline his own relatives'⁴²⁰ and a symbol of 'the divide between the court and society'.⁴²¹

An open-air feast to celebrate the coronation of a Russian monarch had taken place on the same site at least since the time of Peter the Great. However, it was not the first time that disorder had broken out. In 1856, when Alexander II was crowned, army regiments prepared the food two days in advance of the festivities. Not surprisingly, the food, which lay rotting under canvas, attracted the attention of packs of stray dogs. On the actual day of the feast to mark Alexander II's coronation, crowds of peasants flattened trees on the field in their haste to drink from fountains flowing with Crimean wine.⁴²² In 1883, when Alexander III was crowned, large numbers of police and soldiers patrolled the field in order to prevent possible terrorist outrages or a repeat of the scenes of disorder which had occurred twenty-seven years earlier. On the occasion of Nicholas II's coronation

⁴¹⁷ See for example, 'The Russian Lourdes by an Eyewitness to the Canonisation of Saint Seraphim 1 August 1903 in which the Tsar Participated' *The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine*, 68, n.s. 56, Sept. 1904.

⁴¹⁸ Marc Ferro, *Nicholas II: The Last of the Tsars* (London, 1990), p. 38.

⁴¹⁹ Edvard Radzinsky, *The Last Tsar: The Life and Death of Nicholas II* (London, 1992), p. 59.

⁴²⁰ Lieven, *Nicholas II*, p. 67.

⁴²¹ Figes, *A People's Tragedy*, p. 19.

⁴²² Wortman, *Scenarios of Power*, vol. 2, p. 45

however, security measures were relatively low key. Only one Cossack regiment was employed to keep order amongst the thousands who gathered in Khodynka Field which had previously been used for army manoeuvres and which was criss-crossed with a series of trenches.⁴²³

British contemporary interpretations of the tragic events during the 1896 coronation were more complex than later negative impressions might allow. For example, Queen Victoria was later sent some of the cups and other pieces of Carlton ware which the authorities had been planned to distribute.⁴²⁴ Seemingly, in the immediate aftermath of the disaster, the souvenirs did not provide the mute testimony of the terrible tragedy with which they have been identified in later years.

The authorities overseeing the feast in 1896 planned to distribute the gifts of food and enamel cups emblazoned with the imperial seal as well as hundreds of barrels of free beer at 10 o'clock in the morning. However, at dawn, the crowds of peasants who had walked overnight from central Moscow surged across the field, demanding food. Early reports from the British Embassy suggested that, in the ensuing crush, there were 700 dead and 500 injured. The embassy subsequently revised these figures upwards to 'little short of 3,000 persons'.⁴²⁵ An eyewitness account in the London *Evening News*, reported having seen 'hundreds of peasants trip and fall into the ditches while many more were trampled

⁴²³ Although now much built up the field has continued to be used by the Russian Army.

⁴²⁴ Churchill Archives, OCN 6/1/11, Letter from Sir Arthur John Bigge (Queen Victoria's Private Secretary) to Sir Nicholas O'Connor, 10 Aug. 1896.

⁴²⁵ TNA, FO 65/1527, Report from Sir Nicholas O'Connor to Lord Salisbury, 2 June 1896.

underfoot'.⁴²⁶ The Duke of Connaught telegraphed Queen Victoria assuring her that Nicholas and Alexandra were unharmed, adding that, although the incident 'was very deplorable' it was 'entirely the fault of the people themselves'.⁴²⁷ Such a reaction was perhaps to be expected from a member of a royal caste whose impressions were formed by information provided by the imperial court. However, support for this view came from a rather more unexpected source. According to the *Manchester Guardian*, the Russian peasants who had died on Khodynka Field were 'poor stupid people' who had acted on 'an impulse of the moment'.⁴²⁸

In spite of the many injuries and substantial loss of life, Nicholas and Alexandra visited the Field as part of the scheduled celebratory events. According to the *Daily Graphic* the festivities 'proceeded as merrily as if nothing had happened'.⁴²⁹ Sir Henry Lepel Griffin, was contemptuous of the autocrat who stood at the pinnacle of power in Russia but who had not been able to override his 'obsequious' courtiers who had seen fit to supervise the playing Glinka's *Life for the Tsar* within sight of [...] the corpses of his subjects, poor dumb animals slain by the carelessness, cowardice and imbecility of [these same] officials'.⁴³⁰ Griffin was a senior member of the Indian Civil service, had served in Afghanistan, and was Chair of the East India Company. He was known for his outspoken views.⁴³¹ His argumentative nature combined with this professional focus on India influenced his negative views of the Russian monarchy. However, on this occasion he

⁴²⁶ *Evening News*, 1 June, 1896, p. 1.

⁴²⁷ RA , VIC/11/47/H47/11, Letter from Arthur Duke of Connaught to Queen Victoria, 31 May 1896.

⁴²⁸ *Manchester Guardian*, 5 June 1896, p. 5.

⁴²⁹ *Daily Graphic*, 1 June 1896, p. 3.

⁴³⁰ *Evening News* 5 June 1896, p. 2.

⁴³¹ Katherine Prior, 'Sir Lepel Henry' (1838-1908) <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article33576> Jan. 2012 accessed 12 Dec. 2012.

was not alone. Adding to his earlier criticism of the coronation the fiercely anti-tsarist Aylmer Maude rebutted those who expressed sympathy for the tsar and empress. In exasperation he compared such reactions to ‘when a house falls in, killing and maiming several members of a family, one’s first thought is not to feel pity for the landlord’.⁴³² Maude’s bile knew no limits, as he raged on claiming that the very packages for which the peasants had died had ‘contained bad sausages, nasty sweets and rotten nuts’.⁴³³ Full of righteous indignation Maude declared that the whole event suggested that the ‘evil spirits of greed, deception and selfishness, which had caused the coronation to be planned and carried out, had become incarnate and wrought their work of destruction visibly before the eyes of men’.⁴³⁴ Charles Listed was rather less aggressive in his response to the events at Khodynka Field. However, even he believed that the disaster had revealed Nicholas’s utter fallibility and that the deaths of thousands of his subjects had served to remind this ‘small, slight young man at the centre of [such] dazzling glory that he was but a man’.⁴³⁵

At least four people from Britain went to Khodynka Field on the afternoon of the disaster Bishop Mandell Creighton, Sir Nicholas O’Conor and the Duke and Duchess of Connaught. The bishop reported that the crowd gave an enthusiastic welcome to the tsar that ‘the National Anthem was sung over and over again and hats were thrown heedlessly into the air which was thick with dust’ from the movement of the vast crowd.⁴³⁶ Queen

⁴³² Maude, *Coronation*, p.119.

⁴³³ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁴³⁴ Maude, *Ibid.*, p. 83.

⁴³⁵ Listed, ‘The Apotheosis of Russia’, p. 135.

⁴³⁶ Creighton, ‘Imperial Coronation’ p. 324.

Victoria had been concerned about Nicholas and Alexandra's safety having heard reports of 'a very angry feeling having been aroused amongst the people of Moscow'.⁴³⁷ However, the British Ambassador reassured her that on the contrary 'it is difficult to find in history any stronger instance of unbounded fealty than was shown by the thousands of Russian subjects who, in the midst of the dead and dying, lost all consciousness but that of loyal devotion to their young sovereigns'.⁴³⁸ In the light of his observations he concluded that the main concern of the peasantry was not to apportion blame or even to mourn but 'how news of the tragedy could be kept from their tsar and empress'.⁴³⁹ The London *Evening News* believed that this hope had been in vain. According to the paper's correspondent, Nicholas and Alexandra came face to face with the full horror of the tragedy. As the imperial party drove back to Moscow it passed a cart carrying an improvised hearse. In the article, which was melodramatically headlined "The Tsar's Tears", the *Evening News* recounted how Nicholas alighted from his carriage and lifted the tarpaulin, which covered a corpse. As he stared at it, said the newspaper, 'one could distinctly see the big tears rolling down his pale cheeks [and when someone in the crowd shouted] "Hurrah" he shook his head sadly [and Alexandra] covered her face with a handkerchief'.⁴⁴⁰

In the aftermath of the disaster there was much discussion as to why Nicholas and Alexandra reacted as they did and continued with the coronation celebrations. A reading

⁴³⁷ Churchill Archives, OCON 6/1/11, Letter from Queen Victoria to Sir Nicholas O'Connor, 3 Jun., 1896.

⁴³⁸ RA, VIC/11/H47/11, Letter from Sir Nicholas O'Connor to Queen Victoria, 31 May 1896.

⁴³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁰ *Evening News* 5 Jun., 1896, p.2.

of the tsar's diary reveals a characteristically laconic response to his visit noting 'there was not much going on there: we looked out of a pavilion onto a huge crowd while the band played the national anthem'.⁴⁴¹ Modern historians assert that public opinion was outraged when, despite the tragedy, the coronation banquets, balls and concerts went ahead.⁴⁴² However, although some contemporary commentators were indeed critical of the imperial couple there were others who "excused" their reaction in specifically Russian terms. For example, Mary Hickley's claimed that the festivities had not been cancelled because Russia was a 'barbarous country [where] human life seems of little account and the relatives of the deceased would have taken comfort from knowing that their loved ones had 'met their deaths in the very excess of loyalty' to the tsar and empress.⁴⁴³ In the opinion of the *Illustrated London News*, the imperial couple were 'terribly upset' but willingly agreed to continue with the pre-arranged programme.⁴⁴⁴ The magazine explained that although to British sensibilities their decision might appear unfeeling it was not to be judged by western mores and that the tsar and empress had suppressed their personal unhappiness 'for the *sake* of the survivors and in the interest of public order'.⁴⁴⁵

Mandell Creighton took a similar view, arguing that the imperial couple responded to the disaster as they did because they were 'prisoners of etiquette, tradition and the expectations of the people' which dictated that they 'lay aside personal feelings in order

⁴⁴¹M. Sutcliffe (ed.), *Nicholas's Diary 29 May 1896*, cited in *Nicholas and Alexandra: The Last Imperial Family of Russia* (London, 1998), p. 74.

⁴⁴² Figes, *People's Tragedy*, p. 18.

⁴⁴³ Hickley, *Gold, Glitter and Gloom*, p. 30.

⁴⁴⁴ *Illustrated London News*, 6 June 1896, p. 711.

⁴⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

to show themselves to their people'.⁴⁴⁶ The British ambassador also admitted that, while 'it seemed brutal dancing while thousands are weeping over the killed and wounded, the tsar and empress [felt] the importance of self-control'.⁴⁴⁷ Lady Marie Mallett, Queen Victoria's maid of honour, also declared that to 'civilised' i.e. British ears, accounts of 'rejoicing and revelry' in the wake of the disaster sounded very bad but, as she explained to her mother, the couple had dared not put off the festivities for political reasons.⁴⁴⁸

British discussion of Nicholas and Alexandra's engagement centred them firmly as part of the western, European elite. In contrast, British reaction to their coronation focused on the peculiarly Russian aspects of the events: the opulence, the eastern character of the empire, their relationship with their humblest subjects and, what they interpreted as the tsar and empresses specifically Russian reaction to the disaster at Khodynka Field. In 1904, when Russia went to war with Japan, British commentators reacted to Nicholas and Alexandra through the prism of what they already 'knew' about the imperial couple ranging from the tsar's protestations of peaceful intent which he had made in the first years of his reign to the empress's desire for a son. In addition British observers of Russian affairs considered the importance of the birth of Alexandra's son to the empress but also to Russia and the war with Japan. In addition, as we discuss in the following chapter, based on centuries of Russo-British interaction, commentators drew on a sort of British 'folk-memory' of Russia's tsars and empress's as they sought to

⁴⁴⁶ *The Times*, 15 Jun., 1896, p. 15.

⁴⁴⁷ Churchill Archives, OCON 4/1/15, Report from Sir Nicholas O'Connor to Thomas Sanderson, under secretary of state at the Foreign Office, 3 Jun. 1896.

⁴⁴⁸ Mallett, *Letters from Court*, p. 78.

understand and to explain Nicholas and Alexandra during 1904. In particular, using these themes, British observers of Russian affairs considered the imperial couple's relationship with their subjects and the extent of the tsar's influence on the course of the war with Japan.

Chapter 3: 1904, the Russo-Japanese War

*The Tsar himself has, from the first, been in more active sympathy [..] with the process of accumulation by which to establish Russia in a predominant position on the shores of the North Pacific.*⁴⁴⁹

*The Woman of the hour: The Empress of Russia. Now that her oft-repeated prayers have been answered she will be a prouder mother than ever and Russia can no longer say a spell is upon her.*⁴⁵⁰

As the quotes at the start of this chapter show, the year 1904 provided an opportunity for renewed British focus on the tsar and empress. During 1904 British commentators discussed the tsar's refusal to withdraw his troops from Manchuria, the ensuing war with Japan, the birth of his son and heir and the Dogger Bank Incident. A feature of British perceptions during these years was the understanding given to Nicholas, even when Britain and Russia came close to war. Similarly, much of British discussion of Alexandra during this time was sympathetic. As had been the case at her engagement, her ties with the British royal family and her supposed liberalism and pro-British outlook were highlighted in the press and in official correspondence

At the start of the war with Japan commentators analysed the response of the Russian

⁴⁴⁹ TNA, FO 181/801 Report from Sir Charles Scott to Lord Lansdowne, 13 Apr. 1904

⁴⁵⁰ *Daily Mirror*, 13 Aug. 1904, p. 7.

public to the conflict by drawing on an established British understandings of the Russian people's quasi-religious and feudal relationship with their rulers. When Russian troops failed to achieve the decisive victory many had assumed would be easily won, some British observers of Russian affairs were influenced in their analysis of events by their perception that historically a Russian ruler's officials sought to keep 'the truth' from their tsars. Commentators who hoped for the downfall of the regime considered the role of revolutionaries in fashioning events. In doing so they highlighted what they claimed were Nicholas's shortcomings as a man and as a tsar. Even those who were more understanding of the imperial regime were perplexed by the tsar's seeming belligerence in the light of his call at the start of his reign for international disarmament.⁴⁵¹

The war with Japan, which centered on Russian occupation of Port Arthur and Russo-Japanese territorial rivalry in the Far East, was not the only significant 'Russian' event, which caught British attention during 1904.⁴⁵² The first of these, the birth of a male heir in August 1904, was greeted with much enthusiasm in terms which echoed British responses to Alexandra's engagement in 1894. In contrast, a few months later in October 1904, the Dogger Bank Incident was met with anger in the press and amongst much of the public. However, a good deal of the anger was directed at the tsar's officials rather than Nicholas himself and, as we shall discuss, in private a number of British officials were willing to play down the importance of the incident and significance of the belligerent tone of the press.

⁴⁵¹ A. Eyffinger, *The 1889 Hague Peace Conference: 'The Parliament of man, the Federation of the World'* (The Hague and London, 1999).

⁴⁵² Ian Nish, *The Origins of the Russo-Japanese War* (Harlow and New York, 1985).

(i) **January 1904: War or Peace?**

In Britain, at the start of 1904, the image of Nicholas as an international statesman was largely a positive one, at the very least he was not generally regarded as war monger. In large measure this was because the tsar had instigated the 1899 Hague Peace Conference. Nicholas's stated aim in calling this conference had been to 'to put an end to these incessant armaments and to seek the means of warding off the calamities which are threatening the whole world'.⁴⁵³ Although the suggestion, that all great empires might reduce their armed forces and military hardware was rejected by Queen Victoria. As she explained in a letter to her eldest daughter, while a reduction in Russian, German and French armaments was 'a good thing' Britain could not act in a similar vein because of the necessity of defending her overseas territories.⁴⁵⁴ Other British commentators, however, enthusiastically hailed what the *Daily News* described as Nicholas's 'noble idea'.⁴⁵⁵ It was with the Hague Peace Conference relatively fresh in people's mind that observers reflected on the tsar's refusal to withdraw his troops from Manchuria. One suggestion contended that personal financial considerations, rather than the defence of Russia's wider national interests, lay at the root of the tsar's belligerence. The British ambassador, Sir Charles Scott, reported that 'a large amount of imperial money' had been invested on the Yalu River in Manchuria.⁴⁵⁶

⁴⁵³ T.J. Lawrence 'The Tsar's Rescript' in *International Journal of Ethics*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (Jan., 1899), pp. 137-151.

⁴⁵⁴ A. Ramm (ed.) *Beloved Darling Child: Last Letters between Queen Victoria and her Eldest Daughter 1886-1901* (Stroud, 1990), p. 220.

⁴⁵⁵ *Daily News*, 4 May 1898.

⁴⁵⁶ TNA, FO 181/812, Report from Sir Charles Scott to Lord Landsdowne, 2 Feb. 1904.

Scott did not divulge the source of his information but such claims were not limited to the private counsels of British diplomatic circles. Using anonymous Russian sources, the *Quarterly Review* claimed that the tsar had invested ‘millions’ in lucrative lumber concessions in the region.⁴⁵⁷ Even more damaging to the hitherto positive images of Nicholas, the *Review* brushed off suggestions of ‘the tsar’s love of peace’ as imaginative ‘eulogies’ and the propaganda of ‘flatterers, who, when His Majesty sleeps, quote profound passages from his snoring’.⁴⁵⁸ Unsurprisingly, the anti-tsarist *Anglo Russian Review* also promoted the theory that the need to defend his monetary investments lay behind Nicholas’s intransigence. In an article headlined ‘Insatiable Autocracy: a few hard facts’, the magazine used everyday terms of pounds, shillings and pence in order to starkly reinforce its message that: ‘The Autocrat of all the Russia’s possesses in Europe alone more than all the states of Western Europe taken together. In Asia the tsar’s possessions are more than three times larger than in Europe. From all his subjects he extracts a personal income amounting to some 90,000,000 roubles or about £16 4s 6d every minute of the day and night and yet he wants more possessions, more income, more servants’.⁴⁵⁹

The British Embassy, and some sections of the press, gave credence to rumours that the imperial family had invested vast sums in Manchuria but not all commentators believed that greed lay behind Nicholas’s attitude towards the Japanese. In a rather contradictory article the *Times* appeared to accept that financial gain lay behind

⁴⁵⁷ Anonymous, *Quarterly Review*, Jul. 1904, p. 206.

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁹ *Anglo-Russian Review*, vol. 8, no. 6, Dec. 1904.

Nicholas's attitude towards the Japanese and advised the tsar to 'sacrifice certain material interests' for the sake of peace but the newspaper also insisted that Nicholas acted as he did because he was a prisoner of Russian public opinion.⁴⁶⁰ In a lengthy article the newspaper reviewed the reasons for the apparent dichotomy between notions of the tsar as a 'notoriously pacific' ruler and the fact he had brought Russia 'to the very brink of war'. The newspaper dismissed as 'picturesque anecdotes' reports which suggested the tsar was 'struggling [...] in the cause of peace' and rejected as 'unthinkable' the possibility that the tsar was being 'systematically deceived' by his officials.⁴⁶¹ Although *The Times* acknowledged that the tsar was an autocrat it argued that the autocracy drew its strength from being the 'representative of national aspirations' and therefore could not gainsay his many 'ultra patriotic' citizens who wished Russian troops to remain in the Far East. Furthermore, *The Times* explained, Nicholas had only to recall the untimely fate of Alexander II at the hands of an assassin to understand that he could not act without regard to public opinion. In 1878 Alexander II had accepted the terms of the Congress of Berlin (under which Russian troops withdrew from Rumania and Bulgaria) but, in the opinion of *The Times*, in doing so he had not reflected the national will and had thus diminished his 'popularity and prestige' amongst his people. The article did not draw a direct comparison between the terms of the Congress and Alexander's bloody fate but it was one to ponder for their readers, if not the tsar himself.

⁴⁶⁰ *The Times*, 21 Jan. 1904, p. 8.

⁴⁶¹ *Ibid.*

(ii) Loyalty, Opposition and Disorder

People in Britain may have been divided over whether Nicholas really desired peace or the cause of his apparent reluctance to withdraw Russian troops from Manchuria, but most believed that any decision to go to war rested with the tsar and not with the Japanese.⁴⁶² For all that Russia's style of government was often perceived as having despotic and therefore Asiatic characteristics, Russia was a Christian, European power, her ruling dynasty firmly part of a network of European royal families. In contrast, for much of the British public, Japan, although recently an ally, was very firmly rooted in the Far East with all that implied about "pagan and inferior races". Therefore, when Japanese forces launched a devastating and pre-emptive attack on Russian ships in Port Arthur on the night of the 8/9 February 1904 it was as unexpected in Britain as it was in Russia. As Thomas Cowen, the *Daily Chronicle's* wartime correspondent recalled, the 'idea of white races dominating all others' was considered so natural that the news from Manchuria came like 'a thunderbolt from clear skies'.⁴⁶³

Beyond the initial shock, the conflict in Manchuria attracted a great deal of British interest. Amongst the dozens of reporters sent to the region one of the most innovative was Lionel James who telegraphed from a Japanese ship enabling his reports to appear in *The Times* the following day.⁴⁶⁴ For those, for whom even James's speed of despatch was insufficient, one company offered sightseeing trips to the war zone. Battlefield tourism

⁴⁶²*Observer*, 7 Feb. 1904, p. 5.

⁴⁶³Thomas Cowen, *The Russo-Japanese War: From the Outbreak of hostilities to the Battle of Liaotung* (London, 1904), p.1.

⁴⁶⁴Peter Slattery, *Reporting the Russo-Japanese War 1904-5: Lionel James's first wireless transmissions to The Times* (Folkestone, 2004), pp. 67-109.

was not new; during the nineteenth century sightseers had flocked to see military encounters during the Napoleonic Wars, the American Civil War, and the Franco-Prussian War. However, it was not until the beginning of the twentieth century that it took on a 'package tour' aspect.⁴⁶⁵ This particular trip to the Far East offered, what was said to be, the unique opportunity to see 'the first modern naval battle'.⁴⁶⁶ Seemingly confident of an early victory by Russian forces, the organisers also assured potential customers that their 'absolute safety [was] guaranteed'.⁴⁶⁷

Other commentators responded to the news from Manchuria with less equanimity than those for whom the war was a bizarre holiday or money making opportunity. In St Petersburg the British ambassador reacted with considerable foreboding. Indeed, his report could not have been more sombre since he was of the opinion that it mattered little whether Russian forces were successful as the war was likely to 'have fateful consequences' for the autocracy, the empire and the imperial dynasty.⁴⁶⁸ In contrast to this gloomy despatch, earliest reports in the British press depicted a groundswell of patriotism across Russia of which the tsar and empress were the focus. Thus, in the first days of the war, British journalists repeatedly observed crowds of patriotic Russians, evidence they assured their readers, of support for Nicholas and the war. For example, the *Daily Express* reported that one the streets and in the square in front of the Winter Palace: 'indignant'

⁴⁶⁵Frank Baldwin and Richard Sharpley 'Battlefield Tourism: Bringing Organised Violence Back to Life' in (eds.) Richard Sharpley and Phillip R. Stone, *The Darker Side of Travel* (Bristol, 2009), pp. 186-206.

⁴⁶⁶*Daily Express*, 13 Feb. 1904, p.1.

⁴⁶⁷*Ibid.*, I have been unable to ascertain whether anyone from Britain was foolhardy enough to embark on this tour.

⁴⁶⁸TNA FO 800/812, Report from Sir Cecil Spring Rice to Lord Lansdowne, 18 Feb. 1904.

crowds sang the national anthem ‘over and over again’.⁴⁶⁹ If the *Morning Post* is to be believed this patriotism was not limited to St Petersburg, since, according to the most pro-Russian newspaper, the tsar was receiving loyal telegrams from across the empire which typically expressed ‘feelings of enthusiasm at the rupture of diplomatic relations with Japan’.⁴⁷⁰

For British observers, one of the most unusual aspects of this phenomena were the numbers of students who joined in these public displays of support for the monarchy since the student body was not always associated with manifestations of loyalty to the regime. In 1874, students formed part of the so-called ‘Going to the People’ movement. In 1879, having failed to galvanise peasant opposition to the autocracy, some of its members founded a terrorist organisation, the ‘People’s Will’ and in 1881 succeeded in killing Tsar Alexander II. In spite of this particularly notorious incident it has been argued that the majority of Russian students were more concerned with disputes with their university tutors rather than with wider political matters.⁴⁷¹ As Susan Morrissey tells us, despite the impression given in published memoirs Russian students did not spend all their time reading Marx and fermenting discontent amongst the workers, their notoriety came stemmed from their disruptive and drunken behaviour in taverns, restaurants and brothels.⁴⁷² Given their rowdy reputation, it may have been the novelty of seeing “anti-establishment” students publicly declaring their loyalty to their sovereigns that led the

⁴⁶⁹ *Daily Express*, 15 Feb. 1904, p. 5.

⁴⁷⁰ *Morning Post*, 10 Feb. 1904, p. 9.

⁴⁷¹ Samuel D. Kassow, *Students, Professors, and the State in Tsarist Russia* (Berkeley and London, 1989), p. 390.

⁴⁷² Susan K. Morrissey, *Heralds of Revolution, Russian Students and the Mythologies of Radicalism* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 88-9.

Morning Post and *Daily Graphic* to focus on these particular responses to the war. For example, the *Daily Graphic* reported that a crowd of ‘600 hundred students bearing flags [had] gathered in front of the Winter Palace’ in a show of support for the tsar and empress.⁴⁷³ The *Morning Post* described a similar scene with an added piquancy, saying that when young, male students came to Palace Square to pledge their support they were rewarded for their efforts by the sight of Alexandra ‘blowing kisses’ to them.⁴⁷⁴

Impressive though they were these images of national unity did not last and by March 1904, with hope of an early Russian victory fading, British perceptions of the public response to the war became rather more considered. Their earlier impressions of a people united behind their tsar and empress appeared somewhat hasty, even naïve. Not surprisingly the *Anglo Russian Review* was amongst the first to question the reports of national unity thus far presented by the British press. Indeed, the war in general provided an opportunity for the magazine to refocus British attention on the excesses of the autocracy and discontent amongst the populace. On the front-page of its March issue the magazine asked: ‘Is Tsarism doomed? What is Russia fighting?’⁴⁷⁵ The magazine’s own answer to the first question was clearly in the affirmative. As for what Russia might be fighting evidently it was not the Japanese since, according to the magazine, the people ‘ardently desired to hasten the end of the autocracy’ which they believed would be

⁴⁷³ *Daily Graphic*, 20 Feb. 1904, p. 1.

⁴⁷⁴ *Morning Post*, 15 Feb. 1904, p. 5.

⁴⁷⁵ *Anglo-Russian Review*, Mar. 1904, vol. 7, No 9 p. 1.

brought about by successive Japanese victories.⁴⁷⁶

That the *Anglo Russian Review* highlighted examples of opposition to the regime was not unexpected. However, the magazine was not alone in identifying a change in the public mood and the existence of an altogether more sinister atmosphere in Russia than that which had prevailed at the outbreak of war. In the British press there was less talk of ecstatic crowds of students (and others) singing the imperial anthem and carrying portraits of the tsar. Even some mainstream commentators now questioned the validity of displays of patriotism, which they had so readily taken as evidence of support for the tsar. The *Observer*, for example, reported instances of militant activity within St Petersburg University. These contradicted British perceptions of the imperial couple's unity with the students of the Russian capital. According to the paper's account, the impressive facade of solidarity which had been presented to the British public at the commencement of hostilities now appeared to be crumbling. The *Observer* explained that students were now being urged by revolutionaries to charge 'the government with having dragged the nation into senseless war'.⁴⁷⁷ The *Times* also noted that when the students were urged by the university authorities to re-affirm 'their approval of the war, out of 5-6,000 students barely 200 signed the address to the tsar'.⁴⁷⁸ Amongst these reports of disquiet within groups who had apparently been the most vociferous supporters of the war the most serious allegation was made by *The Times*.

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁷ *Observer*, 6 Mar. 1904, p. 5.

⁴⁷⁸ *The Times*, 12 Mar. 1904, p. 18.

According to an article in the newspaper on 12 March 1904, spontaneous manifestations of support for the tsar and empress, which had appeared so impressive to British eyes, had not necessarily been entirely genuine. The newspaper claimed that across the Russian empire, from Vilna to Rostov-on-Don the 'the police [had] organised the loyal demonstrations [forcing] workmen to attend Te Deum[s] and to address felicitations to the tsar'.⁴⁷⁹ According to the same report even genuine demonstrations of support for Nicholas in Moscow had turned into something of a farce. The article explained that at the start of the war crowds of patriotic citizens had gathered in the centre of the city with portraits of the tsar but that these manifestations of support had turned into drunken brawls. When a loyal, but inebriated, mob hissed and booed the city's Governor-General (the tsar's uncle, Grand Duke Sergei Aleksandrovich) when he failed to appear on the balcony of his residence, the authorities banned future demonstrations.⁴⁸⁰

The crowds who had gathered to show their support for the war, whether genuine or not, had expected a Russian victory. However, as the weeks progressed it was impossible to hide from the public the lack of progress by Russian arms even if the extent of their difficulties remained unknown. In May 1904, according to the *Spectator*, not only was there a reduction in popular support for the tsar's war but there was also evidence that the authorities were crushing opposition by means of mass hangings and burials at the dead of night.⁴⁸¹ It was the periodical's view that the dispiriting news from Manchuria, rumours of untimely and violent deaths at the hands of the authorities, and the suspicion that the

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁸¹ *Spectator*, 28 May 1904, p. 832.

regime had kept back its best troops to suppress a possible uprising, had created a sense of foreboding that a violent storm was about to break across Russia.⁴⁸²

Commentators offered several reasons for Russia's failure to beat the Japanese. These included: the success of revolutionary propaganda, battlefield methods more suited to a bygone era, indiscipline in the ranks caused by poor leadership from the officer class and the supposed childlike character of the conscripts. Some observers also considered the role of the tsar in influencing events the Far East. British reports from the Front suggested that on occasion troops had retreated even at the moment of victory. For example, the Reuters correspondent, Lord Brooke, claimed to have overheard Russian officers shortly after one battle claim that their retreat from Liaoyang was really 'an advance northward'.⁴⁸³ Writing in the *Nineteenth Century and After* the anti-tsarist Carl Joubert offered his readers a different explanation for such apparently perverse behaviour. In an article, hopefully entitled "The Coming Revolution in Russia" Joubert claimed that just as groups of revolutionaries were agitating in the universities, so their comrades were undermining the Russian army's will to fight. According to Joubert, it was the success of the revolutionaries in convincing the peasant conscripts that the tsar's aims were not worth fighting for which explained scenes such as Lord Brooke had witnessed.⁴⁸⁴ Nevertheless, if Joubert's theory sprang from proof, rather than mere hope, he did not provide evidence of his sources.

⁴⁸² Ibid.

⁴⁸³ Brooke, *An Eyewitness*, p. 160.

⁴⁸⁴ Carl Joubert, 'The Coming Revolution in Russia' in *The Nineteenth Century and After*, 56 (Jul.-Dec 1904) p. 366.

Other commentators ascribed the failure of Russian arms to more mundane reasons-albeit even more deadly than the effect of propaganda in the ranks or a revolutionary conspiracy. Observers, familiar with battlefield techniques, concluded that it was the failure of Russian arms to adapt to modern warfare that had enabled the Japanese victories. Sir Ian Hamilton, sent by Lord Kitchener to observe the fighting in Manchuria, noted the use of outdated artillery techniques, the parade like regularity of the troops who stood shoulder to shoulder on the summit of ridges and the misguided gallantry of the officers who exposed their position and that of their men to the enemy.⁴⁸⁵ Lord Brooke graphically described the effects of Japanese firepower on one occasion as ‘an exhibition of scientific slaughter’.⁴⁸⁶ His professional colleague, Maurice Baring, believed that the problems were even more deep seated. From his observations at the front he noted a catalogue of errors on the part of the Russian troops who, he said, lacked ‘organisation, cohesion and discipline’.⁴⁸⁷ This observation echoed Sir Ian Hamilton’s understanding who regarded the ordinary private soldier through the prism of centuries of British impressions of the Russian peasant as docile, aspiring to little beyond their traditional way of life, regulated by a paternalistic master and a benevolent tsar. Thus, said Hamilton, Russian soldiers were fatalistic, frequently inebriated and, he contended, simple peasants who ‘except when drunk or defending their homes were in touch with nature, patient and stolid [without] the habitude of war’.⁴⁸⁸

⁴⁸⁵ Hamilton, *Staff Officer*, p. 230.

⁴⁸⁶ Brooke, *Eyewitness*, p. 239.

⁴⁸⁷ Baring, *With the Russians*, p. 62.

⁴⁸⁸ Hamilton, *Staff Officer*, p. 10.

Beyond consideration of the role of officers and revolutionaries, commentators also analysed the possibility that Nicholas, although he was thousands of miles away, was also influential in the progress of the war. Nicholas's father and grandfather had bivouacked with their troops in Bulgaria during the Russo-Turkish war (1877-78) but no Russian tsar had led his men into battle since Alexander I. Nonetheless, the image of the tsar at the head of his army remained a powerful one for British commentators. For example, *The Times* declared that, in past centuries, the presence of the tsar with the Russian army had been 'of great advantage'.⁴⁸⁹ Mindful of such impressions, Nicholas's first impulse had been to join his troops in Manchuria but was persuaded to remain in St Petersburg where, he told his mother, he suffered 'terrible pangs of conscience'.⁴⁹⁰ Nonetheless, although resident in the Russian capital, British correspondents believed that the tsar exerted a variety of influences over his men in Manchuria. There were two ways in which this was said to happen. Firstly, it was said that Nicholas was viewed by the men in the war zone as a 'divine being'. Secondly, he was perceived by his commanders as an unofficial, even unintentional, but significant military strategist.

An incident described by the journalist Thomas Cowen appeared to illustrate the first of these contentions and to show the reverence with which Russian forces regarded their tsar, even in the bloodiest of circumstances. Cowen claimed to have witnessed a Japanese attack on a Russian vessel which left the ship: 'riddled with holes, her bridge a twisted

⁴⁸⁹ *The Times*, 28 Apr. 1904, p. 4.

⁴⁹⁰ Maylunas and Mironenko, *Life Long Passion*, pp. 250-251.

mass of iron [and] her deck like a slaughterhouse'.⁴⁹¹ Nonetheless, in spite of the terrible condition of the vessel and the deaths of many of those who had served aboard her, according to Cowen when the men abandoned ship took with them a portrait of Nicholas all the while treating the tsar's image 'as a deity itself'.⁴⁹² Whether, given the horror caused by the Japanese attack, Cowen actually saw the incident he described is less important than the fact that his story served to reinforce traditional views of the tsar's relationship with his subjects.

Other British commentators believed that Nicholas's contribution to the war was rather more concrete, if not necessarily positive. The *Times* military correspondent, G.B. Bennett, for example, argued that Nicholas's role in the campaign went beyond that of a divine being, patron saint, guardian angel or talisman such as described by Cowen. In his opinion the cause of much of the reported confusion on the battlefield stemmed from Nicholas's more earthly influence. The tsar had no practical army experience beyond service as an officer in elite Guards regiments in the years before his marriage. As a result when he telegraphed hourly to the Front and his suggestions were acted upon as if they were 'imperial commands' there was inevitably confusion.⁴⁹³

In April 1904 Henry Norman, then Liberal Member of Parliament for Wolverhampton South, visited St Petersburg. Before becoming a politician he had been a journalist for the *Pall Mall Gazette* and assistant editor of the *Morning Chronicle*. In addition, having published a number of studies of the Far East and, having travelled widely in the region

⁴⁹¹ Cowen, *Russo-Japanese War*, p. 123.

⁴⁹² Ibid.

⁴⁹³ G. Bennett, *Empire of the East or Japan and Russia at War 1904-05* (London, 1905), p. 214.

and Norman was regarded as something of an expert.⁴⁹⁴ Through his friendship with Grand Duke Aleksandr Mikhailovich he met the tsar and, as he later told Sir Cecil Spring Rice, was impressed by Nicholas's 'statesman like grasp of the situation in the Far East'.⁴⁹⁵ Norman may have really been convinced by what the tsar had to say or perhaps his positive perception was partly influenced by learning that Nicholas had copies of his works in his private library.⁴⁹⁶ However, he was not alone in his positive estimation of Nicholas and his understanding of the war. Douglas Story's interpretation of events was based on a romantic understanding of the relationship between the monarch and his armed forces. He asserted that the tsar: 'personally supervises all great matters of policy, all plans of campaign. He is the Soul of the Army, the inspiration of the leaders of the war'.⁴⁹⁷

As the casualties mounted the perception that Nicholas's influence on the progress of the war was a positive one seemed, at best naïve and at worst foolish and damaging to the image of the tsar. In contrast to such as Norman and Story, the Russianist E.J. Dillon offered a more sceptical analysis of the tsar's effectiveness in Manchuria. He concurred with those Russians who, he said, derided claims promulgated by those he called the 'autocratic party' (the grand dukes) that the tsar stood on 'a higher plane' than mere mortals and could therefore see beyond everyday considerations his pursuit of the war.⁴⁹⁸

⁴⁹⁴ Henry Norman was the author of *The Real Japan* (London 1892) and *The Peoples and Politics of the Far East: Travels and Studies in the British, Spanish and Portuguese Colonies, Siberia, China, Japan, Korea, Siam and Nepal* (London 1895).

⁴⁹⁵ TNA, FO 181/801, Sir Cecil Spring-Rice to Foreign Office, 9 Apr. 1904.

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁷ Story, *The Campaign*, p. 241.

⁴⁹⁸ E.J. Dillon, 'The Situation in Russia, The Prince of Peace as an Advocate of War' *Contemporary Review*, vol. 87. (Jan.-Jun. 1905), p.308.

Other commentators also contradicted claims by their compatriots which contended that Nicholas had a firm grip on the situation at the Front. Such commentators seem to have claimed that Nicholas was unaware of the reality of events in Manchuria in the belief that, had he known the extent of the carnage, events might have unfolded differently. The *Spectator*, for example, alleged that Nicholas was forced to rely on information about the progress of the war from letters sent to him by his relatives in Copenhagen and Berlin.⁴⁹⁹ The popular digest magazine *Public Opinion* concurred that: ‘the tsar finds it almost impossible to ascertain the truth’ and claimed that he had been forced to send out ‘special commissioners to act as spies’ at the Front.⁵⁰⁰ These explanations may have gone some way to explaining to a British audience Russia’s failure to achieve a swift victory over the Japanese but such views also echoed well-established perceptions of earlier Russian rulers who were not told ‘the truth’ by their officials. These claims, partly based on longstanding popular British impressions of the Russian monarchy as well as contemporary observation, were not confined to the columns of the press. Following an audience with the tsar, the British ambassador, Sir Charles Hardinge, concluded that because the tsar was forced to rely for information from his ministers, he ‘was not always [in possession] of the facts’.⁵⁰¹

(iii) 21 October 1904: The Dogger Bank Incident

For all the discussion in the press of Russia’s conflict with Japan, the consequences of the

⁴⁹⁹ *Spectator*, 11 Jun. 1904, p. 909.

⁵⁰⁰ *Public Opinion*, 1 Jul. 1904, p. 8.

⁵⁰¹ TNA, FO 881/8327, Sir Charles Hardinge to Foreign Office, 31 Oct. 1904.

war in the Far East did not impinge on most people in Britain. In October 1904, the Dogger Bank Incident, when three British fishermen were killed by the action of the Baltic Fleet, changed this feeling of distance between Britain and the war in Manchuria. Suddenly the war had come to British waters. The British responses to the Dogger Bank Incident, in the press, in diplomatic circles and in the public sphere took a number of forms. There were speeches calling for bloody retribution, indignation and emotional newspaper articles. In an atmosphere of intemperate articles, jingoism, pathos and melodrama, a minority, who publicly offered calm reflection, were berated as Russian apologists. However, as had been the case in some earlier unpleasant Russo-British encounters, in the public mind a good deal more sympathy was given to the Russian ruler than to the Russian state. As a result even some of the most bellicose comments were often tempered with an acceptance that Nicholas felt remorse for the tragedy even if his ministers dragged their feet over the issue of compensation and suitable punishment for the fleet's commander.

The Russian Baltic Fleet was despatched from Kronstadt in the late autumn of 1904 with the intention of relieving the Russian forces then besieged in Port Arthur. The voyage involved a journey halfway around the world and, from the beginning, a number of factors militated against its success. Few of the ships' crews had much experience of sailing outside of the Baltic and rumour amongst the Russian sailors claimed that many of the vessels were unfit for the long sea voyage. The *Dmitri Donskoi*, for example, was over twenty years old whilst the *Svetlana*, although relatively new, was a yacht belonging to the Grand Duke Aleksei Aleksandrovich and, as a pleasure craft, was believed to offer

little protection from enemy shells.⁵⁰² So desperate were some of the men to remain ashore that on the eve of departure, the ships medical officers were inundated with spurious claims of illness.⁵⁰³ Among those who did embark on the ill-fated voyage was Lieutenant Boris Vyrubov who, for a short time, was married to the empress's infamous confidante Anna Vyrubova. He later offered an unflattering assessment of the commander of the flotilla, calling Admiral Rozhdestvensky 'a blockhead without any talent'.⁵⁰⁴

On the night of 21 October 1904, the Russian Fleet came across a group of trawlers from Hull fishing for cod off Dogger Bank. Because as Japanese warships had been constructed in British shipyards, the Russians assumed the Japanese were familiar with the waters of the North therefore, suspecting an ambush the Russians opened fire; three British sailors were killed and a number wounded. A sailor and a priest onboard a Russian vessel were also caught in the crossfire and later died but the Baltic Fleet sailed off into the night.

Perhaps news of the attack did not make it ashore immediately or it was not at first considered to be as serious as later became the case. It had been no secret that the Baltic Fleet had been preparing to leave Russian waters. At least as early as 14 October *The Times* reported that the fleet would, in all probability, pass through Danish waters the following day however, the newspaper made no mention of the disaster until three days

⁵⁰² J.N. Westwood, *Witnesses of Tsushima* (Tokyo, 1970), p. 17.

⁵⁰³ Ibid. p.70.

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid. p.121.

after it occurred.⁵⁰⁵ The news did not reach the Foreign Office until 24 October and, as a result, so *The Times* claimed, when three survivors arrived at the Foreign Office there was considerable delay before a 'leading official' was found to speak to them.⁵⁰⁶

In spite of the initially slow response when details of the incident were eventually made public they made sober reading for many people in Britain. A letter writer to *The Times*, with the patriotic nom de plume of 'A.N. Englishman', called for: 'a striking public expression of regret on the part of the Russian authorities, compensation for the victims, and the punishment of at least one Russian officer'.⁵⁰⁷ In the same issue of the newspaper, another enigmatic letter writer who went by the name of 'Far East', describing the Russians in terms which conjured up images of an uncivilised and Asiatic people, railed against the Baltic Fleet's 'barbarous cruelty'.⁵⁰⁸ These two letters were the opening salvo in a war of words against Russia which were to fill the columns of the British press. On more than one occasion the Russian ambassador in London was concerned to calm the situation lest it lead to war. He assured the British Foreign Secretary that 'no mistake could be greater than supposing that [Russia] was hostile towards Britain'.⁵⁰⁹

The events off Dogger Bank were naturally most keenly felt in Hull-the victims' home port where the story was avidly reported by the *Hull Daily News*. However, in its initial report, the newspaper focused on a sensational story, which, had it not been for a quirk of

⁵⁰⁵ *The Times*, 14 Oct. 1904, p. 3.

⁵⁰⁶ *The Times*, 25 Oct. 1904, p. 7.

⁵⁰⁷ *The Times*, 25 Oct. 1904, p. 8.

⁵⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰⁹ TNA, FO 881/8327, Report from Lord Lansdowne to Sir Charles Hardinge, 29 Nov. 1904.

fate, might have carried even more serious consequences than the death of three fishermen. According to the Hull newspaper Britain's Queen Alexandra had been holidaying, as she often did, with her sister (the dowager empress of Russia) at their family home in Denmark. Though they had been due to return on the night of the disaster it was only due to poor weather and a royal dislike of travelling on the Sabbath that had prevented the queen from falling victim to Russian guns.⁵¹⁰

The question of a Russian apology preoccupied many commentators. In Parliament the member for Hull Central, Sir Henry Seymour King, demanded 'an immediate and abject apology from the Russians'.⁵¹¹ As we have noted, during earlier reigns British commentators tended to sympathise with or give the benefit of the doubt to Russia's rulers, convinced as they often were of their good intentions even as they berated the Russian state. This was also the case on this occasion as an article in the digest magazine *Public Opinion* shows. Thus, the magazine declared that it accepted what it called the tsar's 'credible' apology for the 'atrocious blunder' but demanded 'a sign of regret and reparation from [the tsar's] ministers'.⁵¹²

A week after the tragedy the funerals for the British victims provided an opportunity for manifestations of popular anti-Russian feeling and for renewed chauvinism. In London a large crowd heckled the Russian Ambassador.⁵¹³ In Hull the local newspaper used the occasion to indulge in emotional (even gory) language in its description of the funeral cortege passing through Hull carrying 'the coffin in which lay the headless body of the

⁵¹⁰ *Hull Daily News*, 24 Oct. 1904, p. 3.

⁵¹¹ Westwood, *Tsushima*, p. 105.

⁵¹² *Public Opinion*, 28 Oct. 1904, p. 546.

⁵¹³ TNA, FO 881/8327, Report from Lord Lansdowne to Sir Charles Hardinge, 27 Oct. 1904.

martyred skipper'.⁵¹⁴ With bathetic imagery such as this it is little wonder that, two months after the tragedy, the Russian consul in Hull was offered police protection against possible attack by an angry mob.⁵¹⁵

As the situation threatened to develop into an international crisis, not everyone was swept up in this belligerent mood. Sections of the public feared that if Britain continued to bait Russia the outcome could be catastrophic. A public meeting in London's Finsbury Park condemned 'in the most emphatic manner the unseemly conduct of those who treated the Russian ambassador with discourtesy'.⁵¹⁶ Similarly, the Manchester Peace Society 'deplored most strongly' the inflammatory language of some sections of the British press.⁵¹⁷ In an attempt to calm matters a retired admiral, Robert Edmund Fremantle (Commander in Chief of British Forces in China during the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-5) wrote to *The Times*. Drawing on his years of naval experience he insisted that the Russians had acted in 'panic and ignorance' rather than malevolent intent.⁵¹⁸ Also in *The Times* Alexander Murray, the Liberal M.P for Midlothian warned that Russia was 'a proud nation' and if Britain continued to 'rub its nose in the dirt' it might well 'precipitate a conflict to shake the [British] empire to its very foundation'.⁵¹⁹ In a similar vein, Philip Burne Jones (the son of the pre-Raphaelite painter), condemned intemperate newspaper headlines and advised that it would be better to allow Russia 'to retire without loss of

⁵¹⁴ *Hull Daily News*, 27 Oct. 1904, p. 1.

⁵¹⁵ TNA, FO 65/1733, Foreign Office to Sir Charles Hardinge, 24 Dec. 1904.

⁵¹⁶ TNA, FO 65/1730, J. Davis to Foreign Office, 31 Oct. 1904.

⁵¹⁷ TNA, FO 65/1730, Foreign Office Report, 31 Oct. 1904,.

⁵¹⁸ Edmund Robert Fremantle, letter to *The Times*, 26 Oct. 1904, p. 9.

⁵¹⁹ *The Times*, 1 Nov. 1904, p. 10.

dignity or self respect'.⁵²⁰

In Whitehall, after an initially unhurried response, the Foreign Office instructed the recently appointed ambassador-Charles Hardinge, to inform the Russian authorities that Britain viewed 'the action of the squadron [...] as a brutal and unqualified outrage'.⁵²¹ On 26 October Edward VII wrote to Nicholas as uncle to nephew, sure that his 'kind heart would deplore the loss of life'.⁵²² Although his tone was sympathetic the king, nevertheless, expressed some bewilderment at the tsar's claim that he had only heard of the incident from 'a foreign source' and furthermore, that the Russian squadron had not stopped 'to offer assistance to the wounded'.⁵²³ By way of response to his uncle's missive, late on 28 October 1904, the British ambassador was summoned to Tsarskoe Selo where Nicholas begged Hardinge to 'speak frankly'.⁵²⁴ The tsar commiserated with the ambassador for having had to deal with so many difficulties since his recent appointment. He also explained that, having noted that the king and queen had made a donation to a fund for the sailor's families, he and the empress would like to 'make gifts of money' to those affected by the incident in the North Sea.⁵²⁵

Specifically in regard to the cause of the tragedy, Nicholas was less accommodating. Indeed, Hardinge found him defensive, offended and exasperated. He complained that the British press had been hasty and too ready to accept accounts of the Hull fishermen

⁵²⁰ Ibid.

⁵²¹ TNA, FO 881/8327, Report from Lord Lansdowne to Sir Charles Hardinge, 27 Oct. 1904.

⁵²² RA, VIC/W45/53, Letter from King Edward VII to Tsar Nicholas II, 26 Oct. 1904.

⁵²³ Ibid.

⁵²⁴ TNA, FO 65/1730, Report from Sir Charles Hardinge to Foreign Office, 30 Oct. 1904.

⁵²⁵ Ibid.

‘without admitting the possibility of [other] explanations’.⁵²⁶ Hardinge replied diplomatically that the press had indeed been ‘unnecessarily defiant in tone’ but that much popular talk of British naval preparations for war against Russia had been ‘exaggerated’.⁵²⁷ He tactfully reminded the tsar that in Britain it was not possible to control the press. Hardinge, with a patrician’s understanding of the ‘lower orders’, explained the newspapers in writing as they did were simply reflecting the feelings of the masses ‘who recognised that no question of politics was involved but that some of their brothers and fellow workmen, while in pursuit of their innocent vocation, had been killed and injured and they called upon the government for protection’.⁵²⁸ The tsar apparently accepted Hardinge’s explanation but bemoaned the fact that ‘the press had become a tyranny which [in regard] to foreign politics was capable of great mischief from which it was difficult to escape’.⁵²⁹

It was the ambassador’s personal and professional desire to smooth relations with Russia. However his implication that the British response had been overblown in some quarters was shared by other members of the British establishment. For example, Lord Onslow, who visited St Petersburg in December 1904, reasoned that the British public would have been placated if the Russian fleet had simply admitted their error immediately. In a report to the Foreign Office he explained: ‘When an incident of that kind happened to men of the class of the Hull fishermen, the feelings of the working classes were excited in a

⁵²⁶ TNA, FO 881/8327, Report from Sir Charles Hardinge to Foreign Office, 31 Oct. 1904.

⁵²⁷ Ibid.

⁵²⁸ TNA, FO 65/1730, Report from Sir Charles Hardinge to Foreign Office, 30 Oct. 1904.

⁵²⁹ Ibid.

manner that would not be the case if the sufferer had been more highly placed. If the Russian admiral had called at a Channel port and reported the circumstances with expressions of regret I do not think more excitement would have been caused than when a motor car accidentally runs over someone and the owner is prepared to make liberal compensation'.⁵³⁰

Francis Plunkett, Britain's ambassador to Vienna, took an equally complaisant attitude to the incident, which he insisted was 'not in itself overwhelmingly tragic'.⁵³¹ However, unlike Hardinge who aspired to smooth things over with the Russians, Plunkett hoped that the public's anger might provide the necessary catalyst to end hope of an Anglo-Russian entente. In a report to Whitehall he explained that the vehemence of the British public's response showed that a closer understanding with Russia, such as he said had been entertained by 'certain fanciful diplomatists', was now 'a bubble which had burst'.⁵³² Even Vice-Admiral Fremantle, who had previously defended the fleet, was reported by the *Steam Ship Traveller* magazine as saying that the trawler men had been deliberately fired upon. Their aim in order to 'create a war' with Britain and distract the Russian public from the debacle in the Far East.⁵³³

In the face of official British insistence that there had been no torpedo ships in the North Sea that night, the Russian authorities did not give up hope of obtaining evidence which might support their case. For example, the Russian foreign minister, S.D. Sazonov, suggested that if the Japanese had indeed been preparing to attack the Baltic Fleet they

⁵³⁰ Surrey, Onslow Family Papers 173/13 vol. 3, Report from Lord Onslow to Foreign Office, Dec. 1904.

⁵³¹ TNA, FO 65/1729, Sir Francis Plunkett to Foreign Office, 26 Oct. 1904.

⁵³² Ibid.

⁵³³ *The Steamship Traveller*, No 1, vol. 1, Nov. 1905, p. 1.

would 'have been likely to disguise themselves as fishermen'.⁵³⁴ The tsar too continued to hold out hope that the Baltic Fleet might yet be exonerated and he sent a supportive telegram to 'my dear squadron' assuring them that 'the misunderstanding will soon be at an end'.⁵³⁵ Further to this end, on 15 November 1904, advertisements were placed in the *Jutland Post* promising 'a large reward for information regarding the presence of suspicious vessels' on the night of the tragedy.⁵³⁶ A week later a Dutchman gave an interview to a German newspaper, in which he claimed to have been an 'eyewitness to the action in the North Sea'.⁵³⁷ As late as January 1905 a Norwegian sea-pilot came forward to say that 'he had seen torpedo ships with their light extinguished' just hours before the Baltic Fleet opened fire.⁵³⁸

In March 1905, at a tribunal in The Hague, which was convened to diffuse the tension, even two Englishmen stated that when they were in Hull 'we heard from the fisherman themselves that torpedo boats were present at Dogger Bank at the time of the cannonade of the Russian squadron. Besides, we made friends with people who were undeniable Japanese'.⁵³⁹ Although both sides seemingly remained convinced that right was on their side, the Russians agreed to pay £65,000 compensation which included a personal donation from the tsar to the families of those affected by the action of the Baltic Fleet.⁵⁴⁰ The incident was now officially closed and it was hoped that Russo-British relations might taken on a more cordial aspect. The positive reaction in Britain to the birth

⁵³⁴TNA, FO 65/1729, Foreign Office to Charles Hardinge, 24 Oct. 1904.

⁵³⁵TNA, FO 65/1731, Foreign Office Report, 10 Nov. 1904.

⁵³⁶TNA, FO 881/8327, Sir Charles Hardinge to Lord Lansdowne, 15 Nov. 1904.

⁵³⁷TNA, FO 881/8327, Report of Capt. R.A. Allenby, 22 Nov. 1904.

⁵³⁸TNA, FO 65/1734, Foreign Office Report, 23 Jan. 1905.

⁵³⁹TNA, FO 65/1735, Witnesses at the Paris Tribunal, 3 Mar. 1905.

⁵⁴⁰TNA, FO 65/1735, Sir Charles Hardinge to Lord Lansdowne, 8 Mar. 1905.

of Nicholas and Alexandra's son August 1904 gave hope that this might indeed be a possibility.

(iv) August 1904: the Birth of an Heir

For much of 1904 British discussion of Russian affairs naturally centred on Nicholas, his reasons for taking Russia to war, and the extent of his role in determining its possible outcome as well as the events on the Dogger Bank. With occasional exceptions such as at the start of the war Alexandra was largely absent from British analysis of events in the Far East and its repercussions on the home front. For a brief moment, in the late summer of 1904, this changed when the empress gave birth to a son. In response to the news of the birth of a male heir she became the subject of press articles in ways which reflected the positive impressions of her which had been common at the start of her life in Russia. More widely, news of the heir's birth provided an opportunity to reiterate Nicholas and Alexandra's family ties to the British royal family. Discussion in the British press also considered the effect of the birth on the Japanese war and on the internal politics of the Romanov family. The birth of a son and heir had been long awaited. When Nicholas ascended the throne in 1894, his brother George was designated heir and on his death in 1899 the responsibility passed to the tsar's youngest brother, Michael. The Grand Duke Michael was ten years younger than the tsar and the indulged baby of the family. His pet name amongst his brothers and sisters was "Floppy".⁵⁴¹ Even after 1899 when he was first in line to the throne his name was frequently linked with women whose ancestral pedigree made them unsuitable to be Romanov brides. The Grand Duke always seemed more

⁵⁴¹ Ian Vorres, *Last Grand Duchess: The Memoirs of Grand Duchess Olga Alexandrovna* (London, 1964), p. 83.

likely to wed for romantic rather than dynastic reasons and, in 1912 he contracted a morganatic marriage with a divorcee, Natalia Sheremetyevskaya.

The spring of 1904 marked the tenth anniversary of Nicholas and Alexandra's engagement and November would mark their tenth wedding anniversary. Although by 1901 the imperial couple had four daughters none of them were designated heir because, since the reign of Tsar Paul I (1796-1801), male succession to the throne had been given precedence over female members of the dynasty. Michael's personal life, Alexandra's 'inability' to produce a son, and a Romanov family prophecy that Grand Duke Vladimir Aleksandrovich was destined to rule Russia, gave hope to Nicholas's dynastically ambitious relatives.⁵⁴²

The importance of a male heir was also felt in British diplomatic circles where the empress was regarded as sympathetic to Britain. In 1900, when the empress was pregnant with her fourth child, the British Ambassador hoped that: 'she may have an heir [since] from what I hear privately she is our most staunch ally and nobody dares even hint at anything against England in her presence. With a man of weak disposition like the [tsar] such an influence at his side should be a great safeguard for us'.⁵⁴³ When, in June 1901, yet another daughter (Anastasia) was born, Edward VII felt moved to commiserate with Nicholas. Mindful of the perceived role of the empress in defending Britain's point of view, the king confided to his nephew 'I cannot help sharing your natural disappointment

⁵⁴² Wortman, *Scenarios of Power*, vol. 2, p. 170.

⁵⁴³ Cambridge University Library (hereafter CUL) Hardinge Papers, vol. 3, Sir Charles Hardinge to Foreign Office, 1 Nov. 1900.

that a fourth daughter instead of a son has been born'.⁵⁴⁴

On 13 August 1904, when Alexandra finally gave birth to a son whom they christened Aleksei it was a moment of great happiness for the imperial couple. As Dominic Lieven explains, his birth lifted a very public burden from the imperial couple and from the empress in particular, who bore the responsibility of failing to produce a son.⁵⁴⁵ Amongst contemporary commentators the birth was considered significant for three main reasons. Firstly, because Alexandra's previous children had all been girls. Secondly, the arrival of a male heir was said to have secured his parents position on the throne-at least for the time being-against the intrigues of their relatives. Thirdly, Aleksei's birth gave encouragement to his father at a time of national trial and was regarded as having boosted morale amongst Russia's beleaguered forces in Manchuria, who believed that God had smiled on their cause. Manifestations of British reaction to the birth of the heir included a mixture of tabloid enthusiasm for a royal birth, analysis of the political and personal implications for the imperial couple, and an examination of its impact on the course of the war with Japan.

In its analysis of the significance of the birth, the London *Evening News* considered the personal toll, which it believed, the failure to give birth to a son had taken on the empress. It was the newspaper's contention that at the time of her marriage Alexandra had been 'a bright happy girl' but, her failure to meet the expectations of a nation and of

⁵⁴⁴ RA, VICW60/125/A, Letter from King Edward VII to Tsar Nicholas II, 19 Jun. 1901.

⁵⁴⁵ Lieven, *Nicholas II*, p. 162.

the Romanov family, had turned her into ‘a wretched and depressed tsarina’.⁵⁴⁶ In order to illustrate the empress’s unhappiness and to describe her new found maternal joy the newspaper composed a ditty entitled “His Majesty the Baby”.

The poem’s voice is that of a mother- a stereotypical, warm hearted Cockney of the popular imagination, who refutes assertions that the birth of the Russian heir is nothing to with her. The poem is light-hearted but it narrates a serious British response to the birth. It reveals a woman’s sympathy for Alexandra under the burden of the expectations of an empire and a dynasty. It also encompasses two themes which were popular in discussion of the empress; it identifies her as a member of the British royal family and reflects, albeit in jocular fashion, British perceptions of the central importance the tsarevich’s birth at time of war with Japan:

T’ ain’t my affair?
Good Lawd. Ain’t I a moother too?
I ain’t the Queen of Rooshia it is true.
But I’m a woman with a woman’s heart, I ’opes to feel for them as suffers
And I’m that bloom’ in glad that the kids a boy
I feel as if I’d like to jump for joy.

T’aint my affair?
What when Victoria’s own grandouter
Is going to show them Rooshians what she orter? Them as ’ave laughed to scorn
'er purty little gels? The narsyt 'eathen duffers! Them to look down on 'er! Oh
Lawd! 'Cause they wus kep awaitin' by Almighty Gawd!

T’ain’t my affair?
'Tis all the world’s affair. It seems to me! It appears all so lurvly, cawnt you see?

⁵⁴⁶*Evening News* 13 Aug. 1904, p. 2.

Just when the bloomin' war was at its werry wurst and them there Japs a winning.
The giddy little kiddy comes along. As if so set alright the bloomin' wrong.⁵⁴⁷

In a more overtly serious vein, students of Russian history were aware that in past centuries unpopular or ineffectual Russian monarchs had been overthrown and even killed at the instigation of other members of the ruling dynasty. Amongst the most notable palace coups were those that had brought to the throne Empress Elizabeth (1741-61) and Catherine the Great (1762-96). Bearing these events in mind commentators believed that a palace coup remained a possibility, even in the twentieth century. Although no evidence has come to light which suggest the existence of any imminent plans to replace the tsar with a senior member of the Romanov clan many of the grand dukes were ambitious men who might well have been frustrated by Nicholas's approach to his role. The *Spectator*, for example, asserted that had it not been for the birth of their son Nicholas and Alexandra might have been overthrown by rivals within the Romanov family.⁵⁴⁸ In an article which recalled assertions from the start of her association with Russia that Alexandra would have a liberalising effect on the monarchy, the *Spectator* was confident that, on account of her son's birth, Alexandra would now recover her 'beneficial influence over the court'.⁵⁴⁹ The *Illustrated London News* agreed that a palace coup had been avoided but the magazine was cautious in its analysis of the direction of future events suggesting that the imperial couple had only achieved a temporary reprieve. The magazine explained that since the Russian people were 'extremely superstitious', the birth

⁵⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁸ *Spectator*, 20 Aug. 1904, p. 244

⁵⁴⁹ Ibid.

of a fifth daughter would have led them to believe that ‘the tsar no longer enjoyed God’s favour’.⁵⁵⁰ However, the article argued that although many Russians rejoiced at the news of Aleksei’s birth, some of the tsar’s relatives remained dissatisfied with the progress of the war and ‘might yet instigate a palace revolution’.⁵⁵¹

Whether members of the ruling dynasty remained discontented or whether Alexandra might now be better placed to direct a pro-British policy was largely a matter of conjecture but the *Daily Express* was certain of the Russian public’s response to the birth of an heir. In an article headlined ‘Russia’s baby boy: A nation gone mad over an infant’ the newspaper had little doubt that, amongst the mass of ordinary Russians, the news was welcomed.⁵⁵² Indeed, according to the *Express*, war news was no longer of any interest to the Russian public and such was the demand for pictures of the baby that enterprising photographers were selling images of any new born infants which they passed off to their customers as that of the tsarevich.⁵⁵³ The populist *Daily Mirror* was equally delighted with the news from Russia and devoted three enthusiastic pages (including its front-page) to the birth of the heir to the Russian throne. It offered the congratulations of the entire British nation to the imperial couple boldly asserting that ‘in spite of all [our] differences the heart of England [now] beats in unison with that of Russia’.⁵⁵⁴ The newspaper took the opportunity to remind its readers of the imperial couple’s links with Britain. Nicholas and Alexandra had enjoyed much of their courtship in Russia and Hesse Darmstadt and it was

⁵⁵⁰ *Illustrated London News*, 20 Aug. 1904, p 249.

⁵⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵² *Daily Express*, 16 Aug. 1904, p. 2.

⁵⁵³ *Daily Express*, 16 Aug. 1904, p 1.

⁵⁵⁴ *Daily Mirror*, 13 Aug. 1904, p. 1.

only after their engagement that they spent a relatively long period of time together in England. However, in keeping with its theme of Anglo Russian unity, and to emphasise the strength of the ties between the two ruling houses, the *Mirror* asserted that it was at Windsor Castle that the tsar had ‘wooded and won his future bride, a granddaughter of Queen Victoria’.⁵⁵⁵

Such was the significance of the birth of a Russian heir that British press coverage was not limited to mass circulation newspapers. The tone and language of the Anglican *Church Times* was naturally somewhat more reserved than its populist peers but it was no less animated in response to the news. The focus of the newspaper’s attention centred, as some of the tabloid press had done, on the fact that Aleksei was ‘a great grandchild of our own Queen Victoria’.⁵⁵⁶ Although Russia was engaged in a war, which some commentators believed to have been due to the tsar’s greed, the *Church Times* remained confident that Nicholas had done all he could to prevent the conflict. Indeed, an article, on 19 August 1904, praised the tsar for what it called his ‘peaceful intent’.⁵⁵⁷ Furthermore, in an echo of British reaction to the Dogger Bank Incident, the newspaper appeared to blame the Russian government rather than the tsar for the conflict. Thus the *Church Times* insisted that ‘there is a strong feeling of respect in this country [for the tsar who, whatever] his ministers may have done in his name, has shown so earnest a desire for the

⁵⁵⁵ *Daily Mirror*, 13 Aug. 1904, p. 3.

⁵⁵⁶ *Church Times*, 19 Aug. 1904, p. 207.

⁵⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

peace of the world'.⁵⁵⁸

In contrast to the exuberance of much of the press, the digest magazine *Public Opinion* chose to focus on a rather more bleak aspect of the news from Russia. An article on 19 August noted that for the superstitious, 'it was an unfortunate omen that at the time of [the heir's] birth the commander of the Russian Pacific Fleet had been killed by a Japanese shell whilst on board his flagship the *Tsarevich*'.⁵⁵⁹ *Public Opinion's* rather gloomy anecdote was reflected in an article in the *Spectator*. The periodical speculated what might have happened had Alexandra given birth to a fifth daughter and concluded that news might have so 'depressed the tsar' he might well have made peace and ended the bloodshed in the Far East.⁵⁶⁰ Nicholas and Alexandra named their son Aleksei, a choice the press found intriguing. A number of sources for the name were promulgated. The *Daily Mirror*, for example, asserted that Aleksei had been chosen because their 'son was born on the same day as [Aleksei Petrovich] the last tsarevich born to a reigning tsar'.⁵⁶¹ Aleksei Petrovich had been the son of Peter the Great and his relationship with his father had been fraught to say the least. The two men were completely unlike: while Peter was dynamic, forceful and determined Aleksei appeared to prefer spending his time in reading devotional literature. At one point he encountered the wrath of his father when he expressed a wish to enter a monastery. When Peter's second wife, Catherine, gave birth to a son the tsar planned to give him precedence in the order of succession. As a

⁵⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁹ *Public Opinion* 19 Aug. 1904, p.1.

⁵⁶⁰ *Spectator*, 20 Aug. 1904, p. 244.

⁵⁶¹ *Daily Mirror*, 13 Aug. 1904, p. 3.

result Aleksei left Russia to ask for help from the Habsburg court in overthrowing his father only to be brought back to St Petersburg. The hapless Aleksei was then imprisoned and died after an interrogation by the tsar.⁵⁶² It was hardly a positive example of a father and son relationship and, in view of his untimely end (possibly at the hands of his own father), some commentators found the choice of name extremely perturbing. The *Spectator* believed that by calling their child Aleksei the imperial couple had, at the very least, shown ‘a curious contempt for historic omens’.⁵⁶³

Although the *Spectator* believed it knew the origin of the child’s name other commentators were divided in their opinion as to its source. The men fighting in Manchuria had been made honorary godfathers to the newborn heir and it was a link with the war, rather than with Nicholas’s ill-fated ancestor, which the *Illustrated London News* believed had influenced the choice of name. According to the magazine Nicholas was ‘very close’ to his uncle Grand Duke Aleksei Aleksandrovich (then the Grand Admiral of the Russian Navy) and it was after this relative that the child had been named.⁵⁶⁴ However, as one commentator noted, the grand duke preferred ‘to conduct his nautical manoeuvres at Monte Carlo or Paris’.⁵⁶⁵ In the knowledge of the grand duke’s reputation for pleasure rather than duty, which gave him an image unsuited to wartime, *The Times* offered a third source for the child’s name. The newspaper claimed that the imperial couple had named their son after Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich (r. 1645-76) the second

⁵⁶² Paul Bushkovitch, *Peter the Great* (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 141-9.

⁵⁶³ *Spectator*, 20 Aug. 1904, p 241.

⁵⁶⁴ *Illustrated London News*, 20 Aug. 1904, p 249.

⁵⁶⁵ Edward Arthur Brayley Hodgetts, *The Court of Russia in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1908), p. 228.

Romanov tsar. There is some evidence for believing that was indeed the case. It was certainly a more plausible suggestion than those offered by either the *Spectator* or the *Illustrated London News*. After the fall of imperial Russia the former foreign minister, Aleksandr Izvolsky, recalled that it had become the ‘fashion amongst Nicholas II’s intimates to eulogise Aleksei the “Most Tranquil tsar” [who was said to have been] given to pious exercises, devoted to his family [and have made a] place at his councils for the beautiful and virtuous Tsarina, Nathalie Narichkine’.⁵⁶⁶ More contemporary evidence of the imperial couple’s attachment to this early modern tsar could be observed during 1903, the year which marked the two hundredth anniversary of the founding of St Petersburg. In order to celebrate the birth of the city which had been founded by Peter the Great, Nicholas and Alexandra had hosted a lavish costume ball in the Winter Palace. Peter was remembered as a reforming, European looking tsar but as a sign of their rejection of his attitude toward ‘traditional Russia’, the imperial couple came dressed as the last Muscovite tsar, Aleksei Mikhailovich and his first wife Maria Miloslavkaia.⁵⁶⁷

On 24 August 1904 Aleksei was baptised in the imperial chapel of the Grand Palace at Peterhof. The guests included the child’s great-grandfather, King Christian IX of Denmark, and most of the extended Romanov family. King Edward VII and Kaiser Wilhelm II were amongst the tsarevich’s several godparents although the king himself did travel not to Russia but sent Prince Louis of Battenberg (the husband of the empress’s sister Victoria) to act as his proxy. The imperial children’s British governess, Margaret

⁵⁶⁶A.Izvolsky, *The Memoirs of Alexander Izvolsky: Formerly Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs and Ambassador to France* (London, 1920), p. 264.

⁵⁶⁷Wortman, *Scenarios of Power*, vol. 2, pp. 377-78.

Eager, accompanied her eldest charges to the ceremony and her account mixes the romantic with the improbable. Thus, she wrote: ‘in the middle of the service when the tsarevich was being anointed he raised his hand as if in blessing [as a sign that] he would be a good father to his people’.⁵⁶⁸

The tone of much of the British press at this time, if less saccharine, was largely sympathetic. An article in *The Times* was typical. It reiterated recurring popular notions which separated the tsar as a person from the actions of his ministers and reminded its readers of the family ties between the two reigning houses. Thus, *The Times* declared: ‘despite the British people’s [recent] controversies with the Russian government, they have always cherished a kindly feeling towards Nicholas II, a feeling which springs partly from the impression they have formed of his personal character and partly from the recollection of how close is the tie which exists between him and our own Queen Alexandra, while the empress is to them, above all else, the granddaughter of our Queen Victoria’.⁵⁶⁹

Ties of kinship were also uppermost in the *Public Opinion*’s analysis of the appointment of Edward VII as the child’s godfather. Sections of the British press had described Nicholas’s decision to give the future Edward VII a central role at the funeral ceremonies for Alexander III as a specifically political act in order to show his friendship for Britain. Perhaps mindful of this precedent, *Public Opinion* recognised that people might see Edward VII’s appointment as godfather as another ‘political act’ which they

⁵⁶⁸ Eager, *Six Years*, p. 282.

⁵⁶⁹ *The Times*, 25 Aug. 1904, p. 7.

might either detest or applaud.⁵⁷⁰ However, the weekly digest advised it had no political significance but was simply ‘a sign of family feeling’.⁵⁷¹

British perceptions of Nicholas and Alexandra had passed through several phases during 1904. The tsar was viewed in some quarters as financially acquisitive, as a prisoner of public opinion or a victim of his ministers’ shortcomings. It was widely accepted that support for the war was waning amongst most of the population and that Alexandra had secured her husband’s place on the throne (temporarily at least) when she gave birth to a son. In contrast to the furious attacks on the Russian government in the British press, Nicholas avoided personal criticism over the Dogger Bank Incident. The British ambassador and other members of the diplomatic corps brushed off the seriousness of the incident and suggested that generous compensation to the families of the men who had died would be enough to calm the situation. In spite of the war with Japan and the deaths of several North Sea fishermen British perceptions of the tsar remained largely positive. In the following chapter we shall discuss the resilience of these images and the extent to which they were challenged as a result of Bloody Sunday and the outbreak of revolution across Russia.

⁵⁷⁰ *Public Opinion*, 19 Aug. 1904, p. 229.

⁵⁷¹ *Ibid.*

Chapter 4: The 1905 Revolution

*Neither a revolution nor an insurrection is threatened. The descendants of the Romanovs mounting the scaffold and condemned to death as a traitor to his people is a picture which only the wildest imagination or ignorance of the Russian national character can conjure up.*⁵⁷²

*His Majesty is living in seclusion which has been systematically imposed upon him by his advisers who are jealous of others to their sovereign [...] under these circumstances it is not surprising that the tsar should be so little in touch with his people.*⁵⁷³

The violence which occurred across Russia during the year 1905 gave British commentators pause for thought. For writers, trade unionists and others who were opposed to the regime Nicholas's violent response to events served to lay bare the ruthlessness of the autocracy. The responses of those who were sympathetic to the regime were somewhat more nuanced. In the light of uprisings throughout the Russian Empire British commentators re-considered the nature of Nicholas's relationship with his people. Did he perceive that his subjects had been led astray by more dominant personalities bent on revolution? Had he been justified in suppressing the revolt? Was his attitude to the events of 1905 formed from credible evidence that the mass of Russians were loyal or where the imperial couple being deceived by their officials, as perhaps they had been over events in the Far East during 1904? In addition commentators considered the tsar's

⁵⁷²A.S. Rappoport, 'Is Russia on the Eve of Revolution?' *Fortnightly Review* vol. 77, Jan-Jun. 1905, p. 381.

⁵⁷³TNA, FO 881/8475, Report from Sir Charles Hardinge to Lord Lansdowne, 28 Feb. 1905.

decision to permit a Duma and a number questioned whether this was the result of a genuine desire to seek a closer union with his people or a deception in order to bide time before reasserting his autocratic authority. Others looked back in Russian history and perceived the Duma in terms of a renewal of the sacred bond between the tsar and his subjects which permitted the reassertion of traditional Russian society.

(i) The Blessing of the Waters and Bloody Sunday

In retrospect, the opening days of 1905 can be seen as an omen for the violence and unrest which was to mark the whole of the year. On 19 January 1905 (n.s.), the ceremony of the Blessing of the Waters to commemorate Christ's baptism in the Jordan took place on the banks of the river Neva. It was conducted in the presence of the tsar and the grand dukes. The empress, the diplomatic corps and members of the press watched from the windows of the nearby Winter Palace. From across the river in the Peter and Paul fortress, the cannons, some rounds of which were live, fired an imperial salute. The shrapnel caused considerable damage to the Winter Palace and a quantity was later found in the pavilion in which the tsar had been standing.

Many years after the revolution Nicholas's sister, Grand Duchess Olga, recalled the incident at the Blessing of the Waters. According to her account the tsar had explained: 'I knew someone was trying to kill me. I just crossed myself. What else could I do?'⁵⁷⁴ If Olga's memory of the day's events is accurate Nicholas evidently believed he had escaped an assassination attempt. Nonetheless, a contemporary report in *The Times* noted

⁵⁷⁴ Vorres, *Last Grand Duchess*, p.120.

that a commission of enquiry set up to investigate the incident had dismissed allegations of an army plot.⁵⁷⁵ However, the British ambassador, Sir Charles Hardinge, was wary of official claims that he had witnessed a very unfortunate accident. At the very least, Hardinge believed, it showed a careless disregard for the life of the autocrat. As Hardinge wrote, however the authorities chose to explain the events at the Blessing of the Waters it was ‘undeniable’ that troops have been implicated in an incident by which the tsar’s life had been ‘seriously endangered’.⁵⁷⁶ The British ambassador’s report revealed a sense of unease about the incident and for the tsar’s safety have been said to explain Nicholas’s absence from the capital a few days later when troops fired on hundreds of workers as they attempted to present a petition at the Winter Palace.⁵⁷⁷

Unsurprisingly, given the importance of this event in the founding myth of the Soviet regime, much has been written about the impact of Bloody Sunday on imperial Russia. Analysis has centred on Russian perceptions of the massacre and its influence on the course of future events.⁵⁷⁸ In contrast, little has been written on specifically British responses to the massacre. For example, in their extensive studies of British-Russian diplomacy before the revolution, neither Keith Neilson nor Michael Hughes devote more than a few lines to the British embassy’s reaction to the events that day.⁵⁷⁹ However, the march and the ensuing massacre were so extraordinary that they attracted discussion and analysis from a broad range of contemporary British commentators.

⁵⁷⁵ *The Times*, 21 Jan. 1905, p. 5.

⁵⁷⁶ TNA, FO 881/8473, Report from Sir Charles Hardinge to Lord Lansdowne, 19 Jan. 1905.

⁵⁷⁷ Abraham Ascher, *The Revolution of 1905: Russia in Disarray*, vol. 1. (Stanford, 1994), p. 78.

⁵⁷⁸ Walter Sablinsky, *The Road to Bloody Sunday: Father Gapon and the St Petersburg Massacre of 1905* (Princeton, 1976)

⁵⁷⁹ Neilson, *Britain and the Last Tsar*, p. 260. Hughes, *Diplomacy before the Russian Revolution*, p. 89.

The killing and wounding of hundreds of unarmed workers on Bloody Sunday may have appeared all the more shocking to British commentators because Father Gapon, who led the ill-fated march to petition the tsar, had previously enjoyed a degree of official sanction. His “Assembly of Factory and Mill Workers of the City of St Petersburg” drew its philosophy from the so-called *Zubatov* unions which, although disbanded by the time of Bloody Sunday, had promoted the idea of the crown as mediator between Russia’s workers and their employers.⁵⁸⁰ A contemporary report claimed that Gapon had corresponded with the empress from whom he was said to have received ‘high praise for his ideas’.⁵⁸¹ However, the authorities had told Gapon that Nicholas would not receive the petition and had ordered him to call off the march. When Gapon refused, at least one British newspaper believed the stage was set for confrontation. Thus, in a front page headline, *Lloyds Weekly* asked: ‘Will the strikers triumph or will they be shot down?’⁵⁸² The subsequent issue ran the stark headline: ‘By Order of the tsar. Men, women and children butchered’.⁵⁸³ In the immediate aftermath of Bloody Sunday rumours suggested that Nicholas had fled Russia aboard a ship bound for Copenhagen or that he had escaped to his palace in the Crimea.⁵⁸⁴ In fact the tsar was resident at nearby Tsarskoe Selo but he did not appear in public until February, and then only under constrained circumstances.

In the weeks following the massacre British discussion of Bloody Sunday centred on the degree of the tsar’s foreknowledge of Gapon’s plans, the extent to which Nicholas

⁵⁸⁰ Ascher, *Russia in Disarray*, pp. 24-25.

⁵⁸¹ Perris, *Russia*, p. 289.

⁵⁸² *Lloyds Weekly News*, 22 Jan. 1905, p. 1.

⁵⁸³ *Lloyds Weekly News*, 29 Jan. 1905, p. 12.

⁵⁸⁴ *Spectator*, 28 Jan. 1905, p. 125.

might be personally culpable for the deaths of his subjects and whether he was the master of his own destiny. Journalists, diplomats and authors of anti-tsarist propaganda agreed that the events of Bloody Sunday had negatively affected the relationship between the tsar and his subjects. It could hardly be otherwise given the reports of the number of dead and injured, although the number has never been independently verified. At the time the British Embassy noted official claims that there had been seventy-six fatalities including three policemen.⁵⁸⁵ G.H. Perris estimated the figure to have been much higher and claimed that ‘500 had been killed and 1,500 wounded’.⁵⁸⁶ At least two broadsheet dailies thought the fatalities were higher than official sources were prepared to admit. In the aftermath of such an unprecedented incident there was no easy or neutral way to establish the truth of the number of casualties. As result, correspondents could only rely on rumour, perhaps based on anti-tsarist propaganda for news of the victims. The *Times*, for example, reported ‘20,000 were dead and 4,000 injured’.⁵⁸⁷ In its earliest reports of the incident the *Manchester Guardian* seems to have added the two figures together and solemnly declared that ‘24,000 men, women and children’ had been killed as they marched to deliver their petition.⁵⁸⁸ The true numbers of dead and injured will never be known but modern estimates suggest that the number of wounded ran into the hundreds⁵⁸⁹ with at least one hundred fatalities.⁵⁹⁰

Whatever the true figure the violent reaction of Nicholas’s troops towards the workers

⁵⁸⁵ TNA, FO 881/8473, Report from Sir Charles Hardinge to Lord Lansdowne, 23 Jan. 1905.

⁵⁸⁶ Perris, *Russia*, p. 314.

⁵⁸⁷ *Times*, 23 Jan. 1905, p. 5.

⁵⁸⁸ *Manchester Guardian*, 30 Jan. 1905, p. 7.

⁵⁸⁹ Rogger, *Russia in the Age of Modernisation and Revolution 1881-1917*, p. 209.

⁵⁹⁰ Lieven, *Nicholas II*, p. 140.

on their way to the Winter Palace necessarily challenged images of the tsar as the father of his people, even amongst commentators who did not necessarily fully sympathise with the workers' demands. In the light of claims by three unidentified English eyewitnesses that the troops had fired without provocation, Hardinge told Whitehall that he was at a loss to explain: 'the callous indifference of the Russian military authorities in taking the lives of quiet and orderly workmen who were unarmed and showed no sign of aggressive action'.⁵⁹¹

Nicholas and Alexandra's own response to Bloody Sunday was mixed. On the one hand the imperial couple were said to have given £5,000 to relieve the needs of those families whom the troops had deprived of their breadwinner.⁵⁹² They regarded the massacre with sorrow but they also believed that the troops had had little option but to act as they did.⁵⁹³ Their views were akin to those Hardinge identified amongst the educated classes in St Petersburg whom he noted 'were somewhat ashamed of the massacre of innocent lives [although they argued] that Gapon's movement was purely revolutionary and could only have been dealt with by force'.⁵⁹⁴ Having reflected on these views and the wider elite's fears of workers being "led astray", Hardinge was now less emotional than he had been in his first report. His analysis reflected the elite's understanding of the petitioners as people who were loyal subjects of the tsar but who had fallen under the influence of ruthlessly persuasive radicals. Thus, in contrast to his immediate response to

⁵⁹¹ TNA, FO 881/8473, Report from Sir Charles Hardinge to Foreign Office, 23 Jan. 1905.

⁵⁹² Dillon, 'The Prince of Peace', p. 319.

⁵⁹³ Maylunas and Mironenko, *Lifelong Passion*, pp. 256-257.

⁵⁹⁴ TNA, FO 881/8473, Report from Sir Charles Hardinge to Lord Lansdowne, 27 Jan. 1905.

the massacre, the ambassador now focused, not on the loss of life but on the “fact” that ‘the workers had been ignorant of the demands made in the petition’ and insisted that they had been ‘duped by extremists who hoped to provoke disorder’.⁵⁹⁵

As was often the case during Nicholas’s reign, in interpreting the events of Bloody Sunday, in apportioning blame and looking to the future more sympathetic commentators were faced with a dichotomy. As we have shown, in the first years of his reign the tsar was reported to be an Anglophile, more liberal than his late father, and when he called for the convening of an international peace conference in The Hague, he was seen by some as a man of peace. Such images were very persuasive and even the war with Japan had failed to shake them entirely. As a result the *Daily Mail* rejected claims that Nicholas had personally ordered the troops to fire on the crowd on Bloody Sunday. The newspaper explained the action of the troops in terms which echoed age old perceptions of a Russian ruler prevented from acting for the good of the people by a nefarious court. Thus, the *Mail* presented the tsar to its readers as a ruler who was intimidated by his uncles and cousins into acting against his more peaceful inclinations. By way of illustration the *Mail* published a cartoon which showed a fearsome collection of gigantesque grand dukes glowering at a miniscule tsar who wore a stage halo and nervously held in his hand a large olive branch.⁵⁹⁶ Similarly, the *Spectator* alleged that ‘under the influence of the grand dukes’ he had empowered his uncle Vladimir ‘to deal with the agitation as he

⁵⁹⁵ TNA, FO 881/8473, Report from Sir Charles Hardinge to Lord Lansdowne, 26 Jan. 1905.

⁵⁹⁶ *Daily Mail*, 26 Jan. 1905, p. 3.

deemed fit'.⁵⁹⁷

The discussion about Bloody Sunday was not limited to columns of the mainstream or anti-tsarist press, the Anglican *Church Times* also discussed the events that day. As Bernard Palmer, a former editor and the author of a history of the newspaper noted, the *Church Times* reflected the opinions of the more conservative elements in the Church and the wider establishment. Most notably it 'ranged itself with the opponents of women's rights' and 'trembled in its editorial shoes' at industrial unrest which, it claimed, threatened 'the whole fabric of civilisation'.⁵⁹⁸ However, in regard to Bloody Sunday, despite its social conservatism, the *Church Times*, writing in religious terms, called on the autocracy to 'atone for the slaughter'.⁵⁹⁹ Nonetheless, the article exonerated Nicholas from personal blame and in order to explain the tragedy, fell back on well established notions of a well-meaning tsar surrounded by a conniving bureaucracy and devious imperial court. Thus, the newspaper argued, although the tsar was an absolute monarch he could not always act as he would like since he was surrounded by advisers who 'shirk from nothing' to defend their interests.⁶⁰⁰ In contrast to the *Church Times* understanding response in regards to the extent of Nicholas's personal culpability in the massacre another Church newspaper *The Rock* took a more radical stance. Its tone was very different to those English churchmen who sought unity with the Russian Orthodoxy. According to its editorial the deaths of hundreds of the tsar's subjects had shattered

⁵⁹⁷ *Spectator*, 28 Jan. 1905, p. 125.

⁵⁹⁸ Bernard Palmer, *Gadfly for God: A History of the Church Times* (London, 1991), p. 96.

⁵⁹⁹ *Church Times*, 27 Jan. 1905, p. 6.

⁶⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

Russia's 'faith in their Little Father the Tsar and the spirit of blind idolatry [had] been broken more effectively than if every icon had been destroyed'.⁶⁰¹

The question as to the extent of Nicholas's foreknowledge of Gapon's plan to lead a march of petitioners to the Winter Palace occupied a number commentators. At least two were scathing of the claims that Nicholas had been unaware of Gapon's plan. For example, in the *Quarterly Review*, E.J. Dillon insisted that for days before the proposed march Nicholas had received 'clear and exhaustive accounts of [Gapon's] movement'.⁶⁰² In its coverage of the tragedy the *Today* magazine was heavy with sarcasm. In an article which discussed Nicholas's role in the debacle the magazine noted: 'apologists maintain that the tsar was kept in ignorance of the whole terrible business and when he learned the "real truth" his heart bled for his people. However, this cardiac explosion appears to have taken place at Tsarskoe Selo in the security of a strongly garrisoned palace and was not, unfortunately, attended by any fatal results'.⁶⁰³

For the anti-tsarist author Carl Joubert the events of Bloody Sunday provided an opportunity to depict the tsar as a weakling, as a coward and as a ruler who was surrounded by advisers prey to the wiles of cunning revolutionaries. In his hopefully entitled polemic *The Fall of Tsardom*, Joubert attempted to counter popular images of a typical tsar-powerfully built and omnipotent. He ridiculed Nicholas's slight build and claimed that he was a coward who lived in constant fear of assassination. Thus, he

⁶⁰¹ *The Rock*, 27 Jan. 1905, p. 1.

⁶⁰² E.J. Dillon, 'Prince of Peace', p. 325.

⁶⁰³ *Today*, 1 Feb. 1905, p. 1.

asserted, the tsar: 'is spare and short in stature with narrow shoulders, like most little men he is highly endowed with self-importance. He is not remarkable for his physical or moral courage and lives in a state of perpetual anxiety. On one occasion he was driving in an open carriage, a little girl bravely threw a bouquet of flowers into the carriage. A certain general who was seated beside him had to fish Nicholas up from the bottom of the carriage; but not before he had convinced him that they were very fine flowers and quite harmless'.⁶⁰⁴

Joubert offered an intriguing theory by way of explanation as to why the tsar had refused to meet Gapon. It was one which managed to suggest the existence of a band of revolutionaries with contacts at court and give the impression of an isolated monarch unable to trust those around him. Joubert noted that the Russian revolutionary movement recognised the existence of an (albeit, in their terms, misplaced) bond of trust between the tsar and many of his subjects. As a result, Joubert informed his readers, fearing that 'a few vague promises might pacify' the workers, a group of revolutionaries had successfully persuaded Nicholas's closest advisers to persuade him not to accept the petition.⁶⁰⁵

In London at least two members of the Establishment sought to defend the tsar from his critics in the British press. The first, the Permanent Secretary at the Foreign Office, Sir Thomas Sanderson, bemoaned the 'carping' tone in the press who, he said, failed to give

⁶⁰⁴ Carl Joubert, *The Truth about the Tsar and the Present State of Russia* (London, 1905), p. 22.

⁶⁰⁵ Carl Joubert, *The Fall of Tsardom* (London, 1905), p. 79.

the tsar 'sufficient credit for the good qualities which he undoubtedly possesses'.⁶⁰⁶ Another well-connected source, Sir Francis Knollys (Edward VII's private secretary) made a sterling attempt to exonerate the tsar. In a letter to Hardinge he suggested that, since the tsar's mother (Queen Alexandra's sister) had been unaware of 'any disturbances' in St Petersburg, it might be presumed that the tsar 'was also kept in the dark as to what was going on'.⁶⁰⁷ According to Nicholas's diary the dowager empress was 'in town' that Sunday, her residence was only a short distance from the Winter Palace.⁶⁰⁸ It therefore seems more than possible that she would have heard the troops firing on the crowd, even if she was unaware of the reasons. We can only speculate as to why Knollys made such a claim. It may have been family loyalty or the solidarity of king's, perhaps the British royal family hoped that by spreading such stories they might prevent a backlash against the king and queen whose family ties to the Romanov dynasty had been highlighted only a few months earlier.

If the king was worried that his association with the Romanov dynasty might be used against him by radical politicians and others within his own country he could take some comfort from articles in two widely read middlebrow publications which at least depicted his niece, Alexandra in a positive light. The first in the *Evening News and Mail* asserted that in the immediate aftermath of Bloody Sunday, while portraits of the tsar had been destroyed, those of the empress had been 'treated with respect'.⁶⁰⁹ A few weeks later on

⁶⁰⁶ CUL Hardinge Papers vol. 7, Sir Thomas Sanderson to Sir Charles Hardinge, 8 Feb. 1905.

⁶⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁸ Maylunas and Mironenko, *Lifelong Passion*, p. 256.

⁶⁰⁹ *Evening News and Evening Mail*, 23 Jan. 1905, p. 3.

the 22 February referring to the recent assassination of Grand Duke Sergei Aleksandrovich, *Today* magazine suggested that should Nicholas fall victim to an assassins plot Alexandra might also be killed. In sentimental terms the magazine asked its readers to remember that the empress was ‘the daughter of our sweetest and bravest princess and [to] concern themselves with her safety [...] every minute she is in danger. It is conceivable that she may not be as fortunate as her sister Grand Duchess Elizabeth in escaping her husband’s fate’.⁶¹⁰

Amongst the many articles, letters and reports about Bloody Sunday: the horrified, the understanding, the scathing and the sentimental, the claims and counter claims, there was one unique British response. On 31 January 1905 a headline in the *Daily Mirror* declared in a sensational headline that the tsar was ‘to be tried at Smithfield’.⁶¹¹ According to the accompanying article a Smithfield butcher by the name of Harris was displaying an effigy of the tsar in his shop window. He had organised a group of salesmen into a jury with the intention of putting the tsar on trial who, if found guilty, would be hanged with what the newspaper described as ‘gross familiarity’.⁶¹² For all that newspapers and other commentators in Britain were free to criticise the tsar it would seem that critics such as Harris were rather more constrained by an atmosphere of deference towards royalty, even foreign (and despotic) royals. The British authorities were sufficiently alarmed at the prospect that the Russian monarch might be ‘hanged’ that Scotland Yard were tasked with investigating the matter. However, in a letter to the Home Office, the Yard admitted

⁶¹⁰ *Today*, 22 Feb. 1905, p. 2.

⁶¹¹ *Daily Mirror*, 31 Jan. 1905, p. 6.

⁶¹² *Ibid.*

they would be unable to prevent the butcher from carrying out his threat since he could easily barricade himself in his house and hoist ‘the effigy on a pole through the chimney onto the roof’.⁶¹³ The fact that his scheme had attracted their interest may have been sufficient for him to abandon his plan, since there appears to be no further account of him in the archives.

(ii) W.T. Stead interviews the tsar

Although a great deal of the comment about the events of 1905 was made by astute and well qualified commentators, few observers could provide an account of Nicholas’s attitude towards Gapon and to the unfolding crisis in Russia based on his own words. A notable exception in this regard was W.T. Stead, social commentator, journalist and newspaper editor. Stead interviewed Nicholas (and briefly met Alexandra) in the summer of 1905. As we have noted earlier this was not Stead’s first visit to Russia, neither was it the first time that he had interviewed a member of the imperial family. A keen advocate of Russo-British rapprochement since the 1870s, he had interviewed Tsar Alexander III in 1888 and Nicholas II in 1898 and 1899. Given Stead’s unstinting support for the imperial regime, it is ironic therefore, that the 1898 interview was censored when it was published in Russia.⁶¹⁴

Stead approached his task with a number of positive preconceptions and a good deal of sympathy for the tsar’s attitude towards calls for reform. He believed that Nicholas knew

⁶¹³ TNA, HO 45/10 315/125890, Report from New Scotland Yard to the Home Secretary, 1 Feb. 1905.

⁶¹⁴ Slatter, ‘Jaakoff Prelooker and the Anglo Russian’, p. 58.

best his people's needs but was enslaved by a bureaucratic machine. Modern commentators such as Keith Neilson have noted that 'not even the repressive actions of the tsarist regime could dissuade Stead that Nicholas II was essential to the future of Russia'.⁶¹⁵ In retrospect Stead's views may appear naïve, even ill-informed. But unlike many other British commentators who wrote about the events of 1905, he wrote from a position of one who had entrée to the highest echelons of Russian social and political society.

In order to meet the tsar, Stead travelled to the family villa at the imperial resort of Peterhof on the Gulf of Finland. Stead admitted that he did not feel quite so 'at home' as he had at Tsarskoe Selo some years earlier, noting that, although the tsar's manner 'was easy he seemed to have a slight hiccough or heartburn which made me feel uncomfortable'.⁶¹⁶ In addition Nicholas appeared somewhat preoccupied: 'his attention was taken up by something beyond my head outside the window'.⁶¹⁷ However, Stead was a resilient man confident of his ability to help the tsar overcome his political difficulties, and he was not easily put off by his uninterested air. At one point in their conversation Stead offered to telegraph across the world that the tsar had assured him that the 'four fundamental liberties' would be granted to Russia before the election of the Duma.⁶¹⁸ When Nicholas suggested that this idea was somewhat premature Stead turned the subject of their discussion to some articles which he was planning to write for the *Times*. He

⁶¹⁵ Neilson, *Britain and the Last Tsar*, p. 95.

⁶¹⁶ Baylen, *Tsar's Lecture General*, p.50.

⁶¹⁷ Ibid.

⁶¹⁸ Ibid., p. 70.

explained that the subject of one of his essays was to have the title ‘the Emancipation of the Emperor’. On receiving this information even Stead had to admit that the tsar ‘did not exactly look beaming’ but he ploughed on even going so far as to ask Nicholas if he would correct the proofs before publication.⁶¹⁹

Undaunted by Nicholas’s irritation, Stead referred to Gapon in the course of his conversation. According to his subsequent account, on hearing the priest’s name the tsar became extremely animated calling him ‘that pig’ and declared ‘all that nonsense ought to have been stopped long before it reached such a head’.⁶²⁰ In regard to the question of did Nicholas know about Gapon’s intention, Stead accepted the tsar’s claim that he had only heard about the priest’s march on the eve of Bloody Sunday.⁶²¹ The inference was that at that late hour it had been impossible for Nicholas to find a peaceful solution given Gapon’s insistence the march go ahead.

Stead’s aim in speaking to the tsar had been to publicise what he believed was the tsar’s well-intentioned attitude towards demands for reform. However, his visit to Peterhof was not entirely taken up with politics. While he was waiting for his audience to begin he heard the sound of children’s feet running into the palace and the noise of a baby (the tsarevich) crying in the corridor. Shortly afterwards Stead was introduced to Alexandra and his description provides a relatively rare image of the empress during the first Russian revolution. Some commentators, who saw her, albeit usually from a

⁶¹⁹ Ibid.

⁶²⁰ Baylen, *Tsar’s Lecturer General*, pp. 65-7.

⁶²¹ Baylen, *Tsar’s Lecturer General*, p. 76.

distance, often noted her statuesque height and confident regal aura in contrast to her husband's more nervous public persona. On this occasion however, Stead observed a rather more timid person who appeared to have spent a large amount of time out of doors. Specifically, he recalled that 'she was not as tall' as he had expected, her 'face was wind reddened', an unusual feature in a member of the upper classes.⁶²² When Stead attempted to kiss her hand she nervously withdrew it 'as if afraid he might bite it'.⁶²³

(iii) Nicholas meets with the workmen at Tsarskoe Selo

Modern historians such as Andrew M. Verner, have suggested that in deciding to go ahead with his march after he had been forbidden to do so Gapon was indulging in 'monarchist fantasies' in which he imagined the tsar coming to the aid of the working men.⁶²⁴ This idea of the ordinary people's 'primitive right' to petition a tsar conformed to British images of the masses circumventing the bureaucracy to appeal directly to their ruler.⁶²⁵ It was with this in mind that G.H. Perris explained the violent manner in which Nicholas had refused their petition had made 'a deep and indelible impression' [and that] cries of direct antagonism to the monarchy' could be heard on the streets.⁶²⁶ In February 1905 the tsar had the opportunity, if not to make amends, at least to persuade the workmen that he really had their best interests at heart. Although no Briton is known to have been present at the encounter both the press and the British ambassador offered reports which suggested that Nicholas had not sought to placate the men. The sources for

⁶²² Ibid.

⁶²³ Ibid.

⁶²⁴ Verner, *Crisis of Russian Autocracy*, p. 149.

⁶²⁵ Perris, *Russia*, p. 342.

⁶²⁶ Ibid.

these accounts is not known but they were plausibly well informed and may have come from the workmen themselves or perhaps court officials who were present as the tsar gave his speech. The *Spectator* described how ‘thirty workmen [were] routed out of bed before dawn, roughly washed and newly clad [were taken to Tsarskoe Selo] where the Lord’s anointed spoke in an almost inaudible voice [and granted] his pardon to the workers for the crime, which they imagined, and still believe, he had committed against them’.⁶²⁷ *The Times* claimed that the tsar had acknowledged that the life of the workmen was hard but those who had marched to the Winter Palace were ‘a rebel mob’.⁶²⁸

The popular *Daily Graphic* illustrated its cynical attitude towards the entire encounter by means of a cartoon which suggested that the delegates at Tsarskoe Selo were not even genuine workmen. It reflected well worn notions which suggested that the tsar was prevented from knowing “the truth” which had been a feature of British discussion about the Russo-Japanese War. The cartoon showed a room in which a number of policemen were disguising themselves as peasants by means of false beards and peasant-style clothing. On a wall was a poster which advertised a play entitled: ‘the Tsar’s Solicitude’ at the ‘Theatre Imperial, Tsarskoe Selo’.⁶²⁹ An accompanying “review” described the “play” as a ‘screaming farce’.⁶³⁰

The British ambassador reported that the tsar had read an address to the deputation in ‘a low, hurried voice without looking at the men or conversing with them [and then]

⁶²⁷ *Spectator*, 16 Dec. 1905, p. 601.

⁶²⁸ *Times*, 2 Feb. 1905, p. 2.

⁶²⁹ *Daily Graphic*, 2 Feb. 1905, p. 5.

⁶³⁰ *Ibid.*

immediately left the room' and did not join them for refreshments.⁶³¹ After lunch the men were given a souvenir copy of Nicholas's speech and packed off back to St Petersburg. If the tsar had assumed his message might give reassurance to the workers of his concern he was to be disappointed since it was widely reported that their factory colleagues doubted that the men had really met the tsar.⁶³² Nicholas had appeared more like a nervous minor functionary of the sort who traditionally came between the tsars and their people rather than an all powerful but benevolent ruler. In reporting what had occurred at Tsarskoe Selo, Hardinge offered no opinion as to whether Nicholas should have received Gapon's petition or acquiesced to any of their demands. However, he wearily observed that, had the tsar been more amenable to the men, he 'might have succeeded in arousing enthusiasm and inspiring a sense of loyalty to the person of the sovereign which would have been a stronger safeguard for autocracy than any display of armed force'.⁶³³

(iv) Loyalty and Alienation

In February 1905 the tsar's uncle, Grand Duke Sergei Aleksandrovich, was assassinated as he drove from his apartments in the Kremlin. In April 1905, Dmitry Sipyagin the Minister of Interior was murdered, in June the governor of Finland fell victim to a terrorist's gun and in August Vyacheslav Plehve the Minister of the Interior was killed. In the meantime calls for an end to the war with Japan grew louder. In April at a public

⁶³¹ TNA, FO 881/8473, Report from Sir Charles Hardinge to Lord Lansdowne, 2 Feb. 1905.

⁶³² Ibid.

⁶³³ TNA, FO 181/85, Report from Sir Charles Hardinge to Lord Lansdowne, 2 Feb. 1905.

meeting in Rostov-on-Don, professional men as well as the working classes demanded an immediate cessation to hostilities. One speaker proposed that ‘the Romanovs pay all the cost of the war out of [their] millions deposited in the Bank of England’.⁶³⁴ The murder of the grand duke and the allusion to Nicholas and Alexandra’s personal wealth, the defence of which had been said to be behind the war in Manchuria, struck at the heart of the imperial family. Yet, because these instances of political discontent were centred within the metropolitan areas of Russia it was possible to view them as actions of an unrepresentative urban minority. However, during 1905 much of the Russian countryside was engulfed with violence. Manor houses and estates were burned and looted by peasant mobs. Given that the majority of those involved in the violence were peasants and that the object of their violence was the elites it had the possibility to present a challenge to many mainstream British perceptions of Nicholas and Alexandra’s relationship with their subjects.

The historian Leonid Heretz has argued that the manifestations of peasant violence were not symptoms of antagonism towards the tsar but on the contrary were undertaken in the belief that Nicholas had given them freedom to act as they did.⁶³⁵ This was very much the understanding of several British commentators who questioned whether the violence in the countryside really was a sign of alienation between the ruler and his peasant subjects as some on the Left claimed. *The Times* for example, insisted that the burning and looting of estates and the murder of a number of landlords were not manifestations of anger with

⁶³⁴TNA, FO 881/8580, Consul Medhurst to Lord Lansdowne, 25 Apr. 1905.

⁶³⁵ Leonid Heretz, *Russia on the Eve of Modernity: Popular Religion and Traditional Culture under the Last Tsars* (Cambridge, 2004), p. 173.

the monarchy since the peasantry remained deeply loyal to the institution.⁶³⁶ In keeping with endlessly repeated assertions that Russian tsars were kept in ignorance by their bureaucrats, the article went on to say that the peasantry were ‘firmly convinced that [they and] “the Little Father” were victims of the same officials’.⁶³⁷ In a similar vein an article in the *Fortnightly Review* by A.S. Rappoport rejected the suggestion that ‘Russia was standing on a volcano’ of revolution.⁶³⁸ Nothing, Rappoport asserted, could be further from the truth since ‘no one who has lived amongst the peasants and breathed their air of fatalism’ could imagine such a thing happening.⁶³⁹ Likewise, Maurice Baring explained the riots in the countryside were manifestations of hunger rather than a political uprising. In his account of the time he spent in Russia during 1905 he asserted that, if given enough to eat, the peasant was content with his lot, was uninterested in politics and that if anyone attacked the tsar ‘he will tear him to pieces’.⁶⁴⁰ These frequent, if unsubstantiated, claims of peasant loyalty and identification with the tsar provided commentators with ready tools with which to explain the actions of the mass of Russians in the countryside. However, when the crew of the battleship *Potemkin* mutinied in the summer of 1905 the paternalistic terminology and references to innate peasant loyalty could not so easily be employed to interpret events on the Black Sea. Nonetheless, although commentators discussed the danger to the imperial regime should the mutiny spread they did not identify any grievances specifically aimed at Nicholas and Alexandra.

⁶³⁶ *The Times*, 14 Mar. 1905, p. 5.

⁶³⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶³⁸ A.S. Rappoport, ‘Eve of Revolution’, p. 392.

⁶³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴⁰ Maurice Baring, *My Year in Russia* (London, 1907), p. 65.

The mutiny of the battleship *Potemkin* in the summer of 1905, its causes and the violence which followed in the port of Odessa, has sometimes taken on an iconic status in the history of Russia's struggle against autocracy, not least because of Sergei Eisenstein's 1925 film of the same name.⁶⁴¹ However, its potential significance for the autocracy was no less real for all that. The Russian navy was in a parlous state in the summer of 1905. The Far Eastern Fleet had been more or less completely destroyed in February 1904 and much of the Baltic Fleet had met with a similar fate at the Battle of Tsushima in May 1905. In the wake of Bloody Sunday the British ambassador had noted that 'as long as the soldiers remain loyal [to the tsar] and to their military oath there is no danger of dissatisfaction among the troops'.⁶⁴²

The *Potemkin* mutiny was only one of very many instances of unrest in the armed forces that year but it was a symbol of the fragility of the imperial government and demonstrated the fine dividing line between the continued existence of a stable, if autocratic, regime and its collapse into chaos and revolution. By the summer of 1905 G.H. Perris believed that the loyalty of the troops could no longer be guaranteed. Perris examined the gravity of the cumulative effect of a number of incidents involving the armed forces on the future of the regime. For example, he noted the frequency with which 'subversive literature' had been found in army barracks, the mutinous incidents 'in the Baltic Fleet, on Kronstadt and on the Black Sea' as well as 'the incident of the Neva

⁶⁴¹ Robert Weinberg, *The Revolution of 1905: Blood on the steps* (Bloomington, IL. 1993), pp. 132-143.

⁶⁴²TNA, FO 881/8473, Report from Sir Charles Hardinge to Lord Lansdowne, 27 Jan. 1905.

Salute'.⁶⁴³ Perhaps of greater significance for the future course of events, Perris highlighted the "ties of kinship" between the civilians who rioted and the ordinary rating or private soldier who were 'peasants and workmen at one remove'.⁶⁴⁴ Similarly, the *Spectator* reiterated that, in order to survive, the monarchy had to be assured of the support of the armed forces. Thus, the periodical explained that were the whole of the Black Sea fleet to revolt (a prospect it thought not impossible) the future for the regime would be very grave indeed since the 'tsar has no other fleet left with which to coerce the mutineers [and] all southern Russia is boiling with revolutionary fervour'.⁶⁴⁵ In a second report on 8 July 1905 the magazine argued that the survival of the autocracy hung by a slender thread. In particular it argued that events on the *Potemkin* might be replicated in the army since: 'if a battleship can mutiny why not a regiment? Every ruling man in Russia knows that if the regiments revolt, even if they [simply] refuse to fire, the system has collapsed'.⁶⁴⁶

(v) Reform or Reaction

An accumulation of months of social, economic, political and military turmoil eventually persuaded the tsar, albeit reluctantly, to agree to a measure of reform. In order to explain what was happening in Russia during this period, British commentators continued to draw on a number of earlier themes. They included Nicholas's understanding of his role as a specifically Russian monarch, the role of the army in supporting the autocracy, the

⁶⁴³ Perris, *Russia*, p. 346.

⁶⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁵ *Spectator*, 1 Jul. 1905, p. 1.

⁶⁴⁶ *Spectator*. 8 Jul. 1905, p. 38.

alleged duplicity of Russian officials and the apparent disloyalty of members of the imperial family. British interpretations of the 1905 reforms were also coloured by their perceptions of the advent of British democracy and the long gestation of Russia's reforms. Although when Nicholas met with the workmen at Tsarskoe Selo he had appeared extremely timid, his public pronouncements and stubborn defence of the autocracy gave the impression of a confident, determined individual. However, British commentators began to identify other traits in the tsar's character at this time including his apparent inability to be assertive when confronted by a stronger personality.

Nicholas's initial response to the crisis was in keeping with his understanding of Russian history and his perception of his role as tsar. In early March 1905 he accused those he believed were responsible for the disorders of wanting a form of government innately alien to Russia.⁶⁴⁷ As Dominic Lieven has emphasised, the tsar's political philosophy was partly influenced by a belief in a past, when the relationship between the autocrat and his subjects had allegedly been characterised by a 'fatherly, accessible authority'.⁶⁴⁸ True to this way of thinking Nicholas asked private citizens and institutions to send him ideas and suggestions for ways in which the state organisation might be improved. Despite the tragedy of Bloody Sunday Russians seemed not to have entirely lost their confidence in the tsar's goodwill and his call for suggestions met with considerable success. As Abraham Ascher notes, following the tsar's initiative, from across Russia, 'zemstovos, city councils, cultural and professional societies' responded

⁶⁴⁷ Ascher, *Russia in Disarray*, p. 112

⁶⁴⁸ Lieven, *Nicholas II*, p. 113.

with suggestions and much enthusiasm.⁶⁴⁹ However, Nicholas's attitude towards the question of constitutional change could appear inconsistent. For example, the British ambassador was unable to explain why, on one occasion, the tsar had told a politically conservative zemstvo delegation that he favoured separate representation of the nobility, peasants and towns in any future consultative body since had only recently told another group the exact opposite.⁶⁵⁰

The tsar's seeming frequent change of mind caused some British commentators to doubt his commitment to constitutional reform. When in August 1905, Nicholas agreed to the creation of a Duma which was to be elected on a limited franchise and which would not enjoy any legislative powers. British responses to the new body which was to have no legislative function and which was to be elected in a limited franchise were varied. They ranged from the extremely optimistic to the bluntly dismissive. The British ambassador, for example, was of the opinion that in accepting the need for a Duma 'the autocracy has been dealt a blow'.⁶⁵¹ However, the *Spectator* dismissed it as 'a clever device to grant a minimum of substance with the maximum of flourish'.⁶⁵² *Punch* magazine took a typically satirical response to the news. It took the view that not only had the tsar failed to really concede his autocratic powers but that he had so little wit that he relied on his baby son for political advice.⁶⁵³

Whatever the reality the reforms did little to quell the unrest in Russia's industrial cities.

⁶⁴⁹ Ascher, *Russia in Disarray*, p. 113.

⁶⁵⁰ TNA, FO 881/8581, Report from 'Sir Charles Hardinge to Lord Lansdowne, 7 Jul. 1905.

⁶⁵¹ TNA, FO 881/8581, Report from Sir Charles Hardinge to Lord Lansdowne, 20 Aug. 1905.

⁶⁵² *Spectator*, 26 Aug. 1905, p. 277.

⁶⁵³ *Punch or the London Charivari*, 4 Jan. 1905, p. 13, vol. 11.

By early autumn more than one million factory workers, 700,000 railwaymen, 50,000 government employees and tens of thousands of shop-workers, were on strike.⁶⁵⁴

Nonetheless, in September, in contrast to its forbidding tone in June, the *Spectator* considered that the internal unrest was of little consequence since Nicholas could rely on loyal regiments to defend the crown.⁶⁵⁵ The periodical argued that the army held the key to the future of the monarchy and that: ‘until the army expresses a will which is not that of the throne [...] the Romanovs are at least as strong as their opponents probably much stronger’.⁶⁵⁶

This was hardly a ringing endorsement of Nicholas’s future as tsar and indeed, the internal situation in Russia continued to deteriorate. British Consuls in Warsaw, Kiev and Rostov on Don, Odessa and Baku reported the cities having been left in the hands of the mob for days on end. Moscow was said to be ‘in total darkness and the water supply cut off’ while the cost of food in the city was said to have risen ‘to famine prices’.⁶⁵⁷ In October a British resident in Baku was attacked, in early November the British Consul building in Kiev was riddled with bullets.⁶⁵⁸ Just before Christmas 1905 the British Embassy was so worried about the internal situation in Russia that it advised London to plan for an evacuation of British subjects. In order to facilitate an orderly departure the Embassy suggested that ‘merchant steamers be chartered at once’ and warned that London

⁶⁵⁴ Verner, *Crisis of the Russian Autocracy*, p.226.

⁶⁵⁵ *Spectator*, 16 Sept. 1905, p. 379.

⁶⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵⁷ TNA, FO 65/1703, Report from British Embassy by unnamed official to Foreign Office, 31 Oct. 1905.

⁶⁵⁸ TNA, FO 881/8669, British Embassy to Foreign Office, Nov. 1905.

they might need to ‘send a man of war’ to the ports threatened by mutiny.⁶⁵⁹

In response to the spiralling turmoil, the tsar met with his ministers, most notably the interior minister P.N. Durnovo and his finance minister Count Sergei Witte. Together they examined ways in which the unrest might be quelled but for much of the public the tsar seemed inscrutable. In seeking an answer to the tsar’s apparent *sang-froid* the *Daily Mirror* revisited claims previously made in the British press to explain Nicholas’s public silence at times of national crisis. On this occasion, under the banner headline ‘How the tsar is being deceived’, the *Mirror* explained that before the imperial train halted at a country station the police selected ‘the healthiest and cleanest peasants and supplied them with good clothes’ before later presenting them to the imperial couple.⁶⁶⁰ It was by this ruse, the *Mirror* asserted, that the tsar and empress were reassured as to the economic, material and physical well-being of their people as well as being provided with evidence of their loyalty.

Notwithstanding these claims of centuries British observation of Russia had long concluded that, should the mass of the people be given a say in the government of the country, they would be temperamentally and educationally ill-prepared. Yet, when the news of the so-called October Manifesto reached London, *The Times* was triumphant declaring that: ‘The People have won the day. The tsar has surrendered. The autocracy has ceased to exist’.⁶⁶¹ The *Daily Express* was just as ecstatic insisting that the *ancien*

⁶⁵⁹ TNA, FO 800/72, British Embassy to Foreign Office, 20 Dec. 1905.

⁶⁶⁰ *Daily Mirror*, 30 Oct. 1905, p. 1.

⁶⁶¹ *The Times*, 31 Oct. 1905, p. 5.

regime had fallen and that Russia was entering an embryonic democratic phase akin to that enjoyed in England during the thirteenth century following the sealing of the Magna Carta.⁶⁶² The *Daily Express*'s choice of the phrase 'Russia's Magna Carta' was especially interesting.⁶⁶³ In the English national myth Magna Carta-the barons' success in 1215 in limiting the arbitrary power of the feudal King John- was an especially potent symbol of English freedoms and democracy.

As W. Harrison reminds us, most British people were 'confident that their own Mother of Parliaments was a suitable model for all nations [and that] the Russian solution to the crisis was the formation of a constitutional monarchy dominated by liberals and moderates'.⁶⁶⁴ However, the *Express* recognised that just as King John had been reluctant to concede to the barons' demands, so Nicholas had been less than wholehearted when he signed the manifesto. In an anonymous article published under the intriguing nom de plume 'A. Diplomat' the *Express* cautioned that it would be 'the wildest madness [and] would undoubtedly rob him of his throne' should the tsar follow King John's example and attempt to retake his autocratic powers.⁶⁶⁵ While the *Daily Express*, in typically parochial style, boasted of British democracy, other people in Britain, including political radicals and members of the working class, believed that British democracy had some way to go before it was worthy of such plaudits. A few days after the Manifesto was published, in early November 1905, the Social Democratic Federations held a

⁶⁶² *Daily Express*, 31 Oct. 1905, p. 1.

⁶⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶⁴ W. Harrison, 'The British Press and the Russian Revolution of 1905-1907', *OSP*, NS Vol. 7, 1974, pp76-95, p. 80.

⁶⁶⁵ *Daily Express*, 2 Nov. 1905, p. 4.

demonstration in Trafalgar Square in support of Russian workers. A collection amongst the crowd raised eight pounds. The gathering provided an opportunity to compare the battle for democracy in Russia with British working class struggle for economic, social and political change. One speaker, a member of the London Trade Council, praised the Russian workers and those he said that were struggling against 'despotism'.⁶⁶⁶ In an impassioned speech he exhorted his compatriots to 'rise up against those things which oppressed them' and he berated his compatriots for not having 'the pluck to do as the Russian comrades were doing'.⁶⁶⁷

Many British commentators whose views of the events of 1905 we have considered were professional 'Russian specialists', journalists, trade unionists and diplomats. As we have noted there was a substantial British community in Russia whose plight during the revolutionary upheavals was recorded by provincial Consuls. However, the view of 'ordinary' expatriates their experiences their fears and their opinions during this time were largely aired in private. One whose analysis of the 1905 revolution is known on account of the letters he wrote home is Walter Philip. During 1905 he was the head of the Russo-Scots department store Muir and Merrieles. Philip's widowed mother, Alice married Andrew Muir in 1861 and it was a result of these family connections, as well as his strong business acumen, that Walter eventually became a partner and company director of this famous store.⁶⁶⁸ During his time at Muir and Merrieles, the Tolstoyan Aylmer Maude, would have liked to see the overthrow of the autocracy and an end to the

⁶⁶⁶ *Times*, 6 Nov. 1905, p. 14.

⁶⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶⁸ Pitcher, *Muir and Mirrieles*, pp. 112-13.

fawning court which surrounded the monarchy, Philip's personal inclinations, as well as his business interests, led him to a quite different point of view. He preferred the retention of the status quo or, at the very least, the exclusion of the masses from most of the machinery of government. A comfortably off and successful businessman he viewed the events of 1905 through the eyes of one used to the deference of the 'lower classes'. His letters home during the revolutionary upheavals of that year show no sympathy for those who fought the autocratic regime but much relief when order is finally restored.⁶⁶⁹ When Nicholas did institute reforms and allowed for the creation of a Duma, Philip interpreted Russian responses in the light of his understanding of Russian history.

In letters to his wife Laura, on the occasion of the October Manifesto, Philip reflected on the relationship between the tsar and his people and the role of the 'court party'. This so-called 'court party'-Nicholas's cousins and uncles- were, as Keith Neilson tells us, thought to be 'corrupt', 'anti-British' and politically 'reactionary'.⁶⁷⁰ Given its anti-British bias, it is not surprising that Philip noted his delight that the 'court party has had its wings clipped'.⁶⁷¹ He even envisaged that their residences on the Neva 'were to be let' and the grand dukes, whom he viewed as extremely meddlesome, 'will go abroad'.⁶⁷² Viewing the October Manifesto through the prism of his understanding of Russian history, Philip hoped that, free of the nefarious influence of his uncles and cousins, Nicholas might enter into a period of renewed unity with his people such as he believed Alexander II had done

⁶⁶⁹ See Chapter 4.

⁶⁷⁰ Neilson, *Britain and the last Tsar*, pp. 59-63.

⁶⁷¹ Leeds Russian Archive University of Leeds Bagenal Collection (hereafter, Bagenal) 1015/146, Letter from Walter Philip to Laura Philip, 31 Oct. 1905.

⁶⁷² Ibid.

more than forty years earlier. First as tsarevich, and later as tsar, Alexander II had visited Moscow where he was met by popular demonstrations of loyalty.⁶⁷³

In addition to creating sentiments of support to the dynasty-both real and constructed-Alexander used his visits outside of St Petersburg to make overtly political points. Thus, in 1862, Alexander took the opportunity to re-affirm the autocratic principle and to rebuke the Moscow nobility for what he called their ‘betrayal of the bond of affection’ with the tsar.⁶⁷⁴ Alexander’s attitude to the nobility echoed Nicholas’s reaction to the workers who had marched with Gapon. To what extent Philip was fully cognisant of the comparison between the two rulers is unclear but his “remembered” images of the success of Alexander II’s visit to Moscow had clearly impressed him. He felt sure that, when the terms of the Manifesto were fully understood, ‘a strong feeling in favour of the emperor [would] seize all classes and, were the tsar to come to Moscow, he would have a welcome as [great] as was given to Alexander II’.⁶⁷⁵ In early December and again in the New Year Walter Philip wrote to his wife. As a businessman whose livelihood had been under threat by the revolution his relief that the worst seemed to be over was palpable. He believed that the violence which had engulfed Moscow in recent months had opened the eyes of the populace to the realities of revolution.⁶⁷⁶ He positively gloated that ‘arrests were in full swing’ and was gleeful that the “natural order” of things had been restored that, as a

⁶⁷³ Richard S. Wortman, ‘Rule by Sentiment: Alexander II’s Journey’s through the Russian Empire’ *American Historical Review*, vol. 95, No. 3. (Jun., 1990), pp. 745-771.

⁶⁷⁴ Wortman, ‘Rule by Sentiment’, p. 762.

⁶⁷⁵ Bagnal 1015/146, Letter from Walter Philip to Laura Philip, 1 Nov. 1905.

⁶⁷⁶ Bagenal, Letter from Walter Philip to Laura Philip, 5 Dec. 1905

result, 'the lower classes were [now] bowing and scraping to us, as good as gold'.⁶⁷⁷

The tsar had agreed to the October Manifesto because he had been persuaded it was necessary to restore calm in the country. It failed to do so but, although the imperial regime tottered, it did not fall. Nonetheless, the perception grew that support for Nicholas and Alexandra amongst the key stalwarts of the monarchy the armed forces and senior members of the imperial family was severely weakened. An air of *fin de regime* was given credence by a succession of diplomatic and press reports. For example, on 21 November, the British embassy in Stockholm treated as credible 'the firm conviction' of the king of Sweden that Alexandra and her children had fled to Denmark.⁶⁷⁸ Two weeks later, the *Daily Mirror* claimed that a naval mutiny at Sevastopol had so 'benumbed [the tsar that he was in] a state of mental torpor'.⁶⁷⁹ Unrest in the navy was not the only threat to the regime. In early December, *The Times* revealed a sense of alienation within a guards regiment said to be barracked close to the imperial residence at Tsarskoe Selo. According to the newspaper it was not a desire for revolution which had caused the troops to mutiny. Indeed, if the article is to be believed it was the very opposite. The regiment sought to crush unrest and were frustrated that the tsar had not 'allowed them to march on the revolutionaries'.⁶⁸⁰

During these months of unrest British diplomatic and press reports added to impressions that support for the tsar was crumbling in the very highest echelons of Russian society.

⁶⁷⁷ Bagenal, Letter from Walter Philip to Laura Philip, 2 Jan. 1906.

⁶⁷⁸ TNA, FO 881/8669, Report from unnamed British Embassy official to Foreign Office, 21 Nov. 1905.

⁶⁷⁹ *Daily Mirror*, 2 Dec. 1905, p. 4.

⁶⁸⁰ *The Times*, 2 Dec. 1905, p. 5.

Reports of testy relations between the grand ducal families and the imperial couple and the former's dynastic aspirations were not new. A few days before the signing of the October Manifesto Sir Cecil Spring Rice had observed that in the salons of Grand Duchess Maria Pavlovna 'the language used about [the tsar] and his wife is most violent'.⁶⁸¹ However, these latest reports suggested that the situation had progressed beyond unpleasant gossip and that a palace coup was now a very real possibility. On 4 December, the *Daily Telegraph* reported what it said were 'strange rumours at Tsarskoe Selo' and asked 'will the Tsar be compelled to flee?'.⁶⁸² Furthermore, the report went on, there was talk of 'a violent scene involving the Grand Dukes Kiril and Vladimir in which the tsar was [reported] as having been wounded in the arm'.⁶⁸³ In regards to how the tsar had been injured, whether in a duel, an assassination attempt or as self-defence, the *Telegraph* did not say. The *Telegraph* was not known for its sensational style of reporting and, as a result, this may have given the story an air of credence to the newspaper's readers.

Only a few months earlier during the constitutional crisis of the summer and early autumn, some British commentators had bemoaned the reactionary influence of the Russian grand dukes. However, despite their apparently malevolent influence, on occasion the *Daily Mail* at least recognised the critical role these senior members of the Romanov family played as bulwarks of the tsarist regime. Therefore when the *Mail* bluntly asserted that Nicholas had been 'deserted by the majority of the Grand Dukes' it

⁶⁸¹ Churchill Archives, CASR 4/1, Sir Cecil Spring Rice to Prime Minister, Arthur Balfour', 24 Oct. 1905.

⁶⁸² *Daily Telegraph*, 4 December 1905, p. 5.

⁶⁸³ *Ibid.*

seemed that Nicholas's reign was drawing to a close.⁶⁸⁴ The newspaper also seemed willing to reject any pretence at a defence of Nicholas and ridiculed his apparent attempt to regain the loyalty of his troops by means of what the newspaper called 'a ludicrous manifesto' the chief provisions of which were that the soldiers were to receive an increase in pay to 3/5 of a penny a day and be provided with a separate piece of soap every month.⁶⁸⁵

In the light of months of internal unrest, mutinies within the armed forces and reports of disgruntled grand dukes an article in the *Daily Express* suggested that Nicholas was mentally and physically worn down. According to the *Express*, he had been seen 'pacing in the imperial park looking worn and haggard' and well-known lack of decisiveness in the face of a crisis was 'now more marked' so that he frequently countermanded orders which he had given only a short while previously.⁶⁸⁶ Warming to its theme of a doomed monarch the *Express* drew parallels between events in Russia and the fall of the French monarchy over a hundred years earlier and claimed that the tsar had 'shown an extraordinary desire' to study the French Revolution.⁶⁸⁷ However, whether Nicholas looked to the past in an attempt to avoid the mistakes of Louis XVI, or whether he studied the events of 1789 in order to discover his own fate, the *Express* did not say.

During 1905 British commentators revealed a number of inconsistent perceptions of the imperial couple. A number of them enthusiastically greeted the creation of a Duma

⁶⁸⁴ *Daily Mail*, 9 Dec. 1905, p. 7.

⁶⁸⁵ *Daily Mail*, 22 Dec. 1905, p. 5.

⁶⁸⁶ *Daily Express*, 23 Dec. 1905, p. 1.

⁶⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

and even though it had been wrought from the tsar by violence they insisted that the mass of the people remained loyal. Traditional notions that the true state of affairs in the country was being kept from the tsar were repeated during this time to explain Nicholas's reaction to events. However, for all the supposed loyalty of the tsar's subjects commentators also described the fragility of the regime as specifically represented by Nicholas and Alexandra when they spoke of the empress having fled abroad and the tsar having been involved in a violent altercation with senior grand dukes. As if in a premonition of the final years of the regime, some reports claimed that Nicholas was physically and mentally weakened by the strains of eleven years of rule. At the end of 1905 it seemed to several British commentators that although the autocratic regime was resilient perhaps Nicholas himself had had enough and, exhausted by events and his hectoring relatives, he might not resist if the grand dukes launched a palace coup. As we shall discuss in the following chapter between 1906 and 1913, in the light of the establishment of the Duma and Nicholas and Alexandra's relatively informal encounters with the peasantry, British commentators considered whether or not they had observed a reaffirmation of Nicholas and Alexandra's relationship with their subjects sufficient to overcome to difficulties created by the revolutionary events of 1905.

Chapter 5: The Years of the Constitutional Monarchy 1906-1913

Not only has there been no attempt to dispense with the rule of the tsar but what is more striking still, the name of the tsar has been constantly used by the agitators to urge the people to rise. ⁶⁸⁸

During 1905, the tsar received praise from some quarters for instituting constitutional change but, inevitably, given the brutality of the regime's response to the revolution, his prestige and personal standing suffered. However, as the quote at the start of this epigraph suggests, the violence and divisions of 1905 did not entirely alter British perceptions of Nicholas and Alexandra's relationship with their subjects. Established images of peasant loyalty, and devotion to the crown remained popular and persuasive ways of understanding the Russian monarchy. Nonetheless, only the most myopic observer could have failed to notice that after 1905 Russia was a very different country from that which it had been before the unrest.

During the years of the constitutional monarchy British opinion was sometimes more polarised. An increasingly assertive Labour party sought to provide a conduit for opposition towards the regime. In Parliament and in the trade unions the Labour movement protested against what it saw as the excesses of tsarist Russia, the pogroms and the crushing of political opposition. Their reactions to events were influential in forming

⁶⁸⁸Lionel Declé, *The New Russia* (London, 1906), p. 24.

attitudes towards the royal and imperial visits of 1908 and 1909. Alongside feelings of revulsion at state violence commentators considered the Duma. Responses to the embryonic parliament were perhaps more nuanced than might be gained from a reading of post-revolution interpretations of these years. In particular commentators considered the opening of the Duma in a ceremony in the Winter Palace and the nature of the Duma's role: discussion centred on whether it ought to draw attention to the regime's errors or work with the government. In addition, commentators were divided over the tsar's right to dissolve the Duma when he chose.

The discussion of the Duma took place against the background of Nicholas and Alexandra's encounters with their peasant subjects during celebrations to mark a series of national jubilees including the three hundredth anniversary of the founding of the Romanov dynasty. These years also set the tone for discussion of Alexandra which would become a common feature of perceptions of the empress especially after the 1917 revolution. The empress's personality, her health and her religious focus, as well as her alleged interest in the spirit world, were subjects which both fascinated and appalled British observers of Russian affairs.

(i) 1906: The First Duma

In the spring of 1906 Nicholas and Alexandra came to St Petersburg by sea from Peterhof for the opening of the newly established Duma. The previous autumn the British press had reacted positively, if with caution, towards the establishment of an elected Duma. By the time of its inauguration some months later sections of the press tended to be less

convinced that the Duma had solved Russia's problems or that the country would develop peacefully towards greater democracy. The *Daily Mail*, for example, claimed that the imperial programme had not been published in advance because the authorities feared a terrorist outrage.⁶⁸⁹ According to the newspaper Nicholas and Alexandra's arrival in the capital was so low key that the *Mail's* reporter was the sole witness as they disembarked at the palace quay.⁶⁹⁰ The *Mail* may have exaggerated in order to claim a 'scoop' or to add to the drama surrounding the opening of Russia's first national Duma. However, the undoubted absence of show and ceremonial may also have reflected Nicholas's ambivalent attitude towards the Duma. He had agreed to the formation of a consultative body but, as a result of his upbringing, he remained convinced that, in God's eyes, he alone was responsible for governing Russia. Although the tsar may have chosen not to bestow his approval on the Duma by means of the pomp and circumstance which was normal for such occasions, the sight of Nicholas and Alexandra forced to come 'secretly and stealthily' to their capital gave the impression that the couple feared a hostile public mood.⁶⁹¹ Such a negative view rather contradicted the traditional images of the close relationship between Russian rulers and their people.

In an attempt to assert his autocratic authority, Nicholas presided over the opening of the Duma, not in the Tauride Palace (where it was to sit), but in the Winter Palace the citadel of Romanov power. Nicholas entered the throne room to the strains of the Russian national anthem accompanied by Alexandra, the dowager empress and members of the

⁶⁸⁹ *Daily Mail*, 11 May 1906, p. 7.

⁶⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹¹ *Ibid.*

extended Romanov family. It was said that Alexandra, who had been responsible for the design of the opening ceremony, had been anxious to imbue the inauguration with specifically Russian features and to avoid similarities with any western models.⁶⁹² Flanked by the imperial crown, sceptre, and orb which had been brought from Moscow for the occasion, the tsar addressed the deputies from an imperial dais. As R.S. Wortman tells us, the purpose of the presence of the symbols of monarchy was to demonstrate the sacred source of Nicholas's authority and to underline his pre-eminence as representative of the nation.⁶⁹³

A contemporary report in the *Spectator* provided an eyewitness account of the opening of the Duma and the tone of the reception with which the imperial party were met: it was distinctly uninviting. Thus, the article noted, the hall was full of 'surly peasants and men of the intelligentsia who stood like the depressed and shabbily clothed, but rightful heirs at the funeral in some comic melodrama'.⁶⁹⁴ The unfolding ceremony offered little further comfort for the imperial couple. The empress and the other female members of the Romanov family were dressed in formal court attire, their décolletage covered in jewels. However, if the intention of the court had been to overawe the deputies with their magnificence, it appears to have backfired. As Bernard Pares later explained, the peasant deputies 'were shocked by the display of wealth at such a critical moment, when the tsar

⁶⁹² Maylunas and Mironenko, *Life Long Passion*, p. 292.

⁶⁹³ Wortman, *Scenarios of Power*, vol. 2, p. 403.

⁶⁹⁴ *Spectator*, 12 May 1906, p. 783.

had to appeal to his people to help him save the country'.⁶⁹⁵

In 1906 Nicholas was nearly forty years old. Since his coronation ten years earlier he had taken his country to war and crushed a revolution. However, for many commentators Nicholas failed to meet British popular expectations of a Russian tsar either in his physical stature or in his body language. At the time of his marriage and coronation Nicholas's slight build, diffident appearance and deference to his family's wishes, seemed merely the endearing traits of a modest youth who had been unexpectedly thrust into the limelight.⁶⁹⁶

A decade after his accession, the tsar's uncertain demeanour appeared profoundly inappropriate. His critics depicted him as malleable, weak and susceptible to the malevolent influence of those around him. The *Times* account of the inauguration of the Duma bleakly indicated that Nicholas had singularly failed to stamp his authority on the occasion. The newspaper noted that he appeared very 'timid [...] glancing furtively at his subjects' and that while the members of the imperial court greeted him with 'wild hurrahs, apart from some peasants who joined in, the deputies were icily impassive'.⁶⁹⁷ Rather surprisingly, the *Tribune* newspaper, which the Russian ambassador to Britain once described as his 'bête noire' on account of its anti-Russian stance, offered a rather more complimentary account of the ceremony in the Winter Palace.⁶⁹⁸ In contrast to

⁶⁹⁵ Pares, *Memoirs*, p. 104.

⁶⁹⁶ See Chapter 2.

⁶⁹⁷ *The Times*, 11 May 1906, p. 5.

⁶⁹⁸ Barry Hollingsworth, Benckendorff's 'Bete Noire': The Tribune and Russian Internal Affairs 1906-1908 in (eds.) William Harrison and Avril Pyman, *Poetry, Prose and Public Opinion, Essays presented in memory of Dr. N.E. Andreyev* (Avebury, 1984), pp16-132, p.106.

reports of a frosty reception from the deputies and images of a tsar ill at ease amongst his subjects, the newspaper contended that Nicholas had spoken ‘in a clear voice which was heard throughout the hall’ and that although his face was extremely pale he had ‘descended from the throne with a firm carriage and left the hall to deafening cheers’.⁶⁹⁹ Although the *Tribune* was more positive in its coverage of the opening ceremony than might have been expected, the *Anglo Russian Review* ran true to form. Throughout the spring and late autumn of 1906 the periodical ran a series of articles on the Duma but its analysis of ceremony in the Winter Palace focused on Nicholas who, in its view, was an inept monarch, dominated by stronger personalities. Describing the tsar as ‘that fool’, one article recalled how the people had been met by violence in January 1905 and speculated as to whether Nicholas, or those who had influence over him at court, might respond to the Duma in the same manner.⁷⁰⁰ By June 1906 the *Review* was optimistic that the Duma would go from strength to strength and, rather than securing the throne, that this would be to Nicholas’s detriment since before long the Russian people would ask themselves ‘is the tsar needed at all?’⁷⁰¹

Amongst commentators who were more sympathetic to Nicholas than the *Anglo Russian Review* there was a feeling in some quarters that Russia’s future had not yet been secured. Maurice Baring looked to the example of earlier revolutions and noted, with unfortunate prescience, that in studying history ‘we see how, in every epoch, in obedience to some mysterious law, a fatal mist seems to blind those in authority, and how they deliberately

⁶⁹⁹ *Tribune*, 11 May 1906, p. 7.

⁷⁰⁰ *Anglo-Russian Review*, May 1906, p. 1017.

⁷⁰¹ *Anglo-Russian Review*, Jun. 1906, p. 1034.

choose to court the disastrous perils which seem so obvious to us'.⁷⁰² At the British Embassy, the prognosis of the new ambassador was equally as gloomy. Sir Arthur Nicolson believed that the advent of the Duma had placed Nicholas in an invidious position. In spite of the disasters of the war with Japan, Bloody Sunday and the violent suppression of many of the regime's opponents, Nicolson insisted that the tsar had 'enjoyed immense prestige and popularity because it was believed his heart was with his people and that he was prevented by evil counsellors from giving effect to his good intentions'.⁷⁰³ However, the ambassador now warned that should the tsar neglect the voice of the people's representatives it could no longer be due to ignorance [...] and cannot fail to be disastrous to the imperial person and to the continuance of the autocratic regime'.⁷⁰⁴

Almost immediately after the opening of the Duma, that which Nicolson had feared came to pass: the tsar and the deputies became set on confrontation. The latter made a number of demands including one that the peasants be given land from the largest estates. Horrified by their radicalism and unwilling to give them credence, Nicholas refused to personally accept the 'Reply to the Speech from the Throne'. The result of his rebuff to the deputies was effectively a stand-off and so began a battle of wills between the fledgling parliament and the autocracy.

There were a variety of British responses to the impasse in St Petersburg and the tsar's

⁷⁰² Baring, *A Year in Russia*, p. 186.

⁷⁰³ TNA, FO 181/871, Report from Sir Arthur Nicolson to Foreign Office, 9 May 1906.

⁷⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

subsequent decision to close the Duma. Some were supportive of the tsar's intransigence. Others hoped his attitude would bring the overthrow of the Romanovs a step nearer. During this period of national uncertainty Nicholas and Alexandra lived quietly away from the public gaze but the tsar did grant an audience to Nicolson in order for him to present his official credentials. The new ambassador travelled to the tsar's holiday residence at Peterhof where, as was characteristic of such an occasion, and a reflection of the tsar's attitude towards foreign diplomats, there was no discussion of internal affairs. Nonetheless, Nicolson gauged that political events were not weighing heavily upon the tsar since he noted in his diary that Nicholas was in 'excellent spirits and looking in robust good health'.⁷⁰⁵ In his report to London, Nicolson explained the tsar's attitude towards the Duma as follows: 'They do not believe that the Duma is representative of the people but to have been elected largely under false pretences. They think that if the Duma is allowed a free hand it will flood the country with purposeless and ineffective talk and will disgrace itself in the eyes of the world by its absurdities'.⁷⁰⁶ Nicolson was personally inclined to regard the Duma with similar disdain observing, the deputies had occupied their days 'in somewhat sterile debates'.⁷⁰⁷

Nicolson was not alone in his negative observation of the Duma. Even Bernard Pares, who had made a study of Russian history, who spoke the language fluently and who had travelled frequently to Russia, appears to have been unprepared for the realities of a Russian Duma. In particular he was frustrated by the amateurishness of some of the

⁷⁰⁵ TNA PRO 30/81/13, Diary of Sir Arthur Nicolson, 4 Jun. 1906.

⁷⁰⁶ TNA, FO 181/871, Report from Sir Arthur Nicolson to Foreign Office, 22 May 1906.

⁷⁰⁷ TNA, PRO 30/81/13, Diary of Sir Arthur Nicolson, 30 May 1906.

educated deputies and the resilience of traditional peasant attitudes towards the tsar. Thus, Pares observed in report to Lord Cranley, ‘I have been to the Duma everyday so far. I am struck most of all by two things, the inexperience of many of the members, especially some of the peasants and the radical intelligentsia. The peasants say silly things such as “apply direct to our Father the Tsar”.’⁷⁰⁸

When Nicholas refused to be browbeaten by the Duma’s demands Walter Philip, was pleased with his resolute stance towards the deputies as he explained in a letter to his friend Charles Hagberg Wright. The Chief Librarian at the London Library, Wright had lived in Russia, spoke the language fluently and was an avid Tolstoyan and a supporter of the Society of Friends of Russian Freedom. His interests led him to advocate reform in Russia but though he claimed to have met Lenin at luncheon he had thought him both ‘dogmatic and mediocre’.⁷⁰⁹ Philip told his friend that he was ‘delighted’ at the tsar’s riposte to the Duma.⁷¹⁰ He argued that, far from the reasoned ‘voice of the nation’, which its supporters claimed, the Duma was the voice of a nation ‘without principles or common sense’.⁷¹¹

Amongst the tsar’s opponents the radical magazine *Justice: the Organ for Social Democracy* believed that Nicholas was eager to dissolve the fledgling parliament and had only allowed it to remain open for ‘fear that it would provoke a general rising’.⁷¹² Edited by Harry Quelch, *Justice* had been founded in 1884. An indication of Quelch’s personal

⁷⁰⁸ Surrey, 173/24, Bernard Pares to Lord Cranley, Jun1 1906.

⁷⁰⁹ John Wells, *Rude Words, A Discursive history of the London Library* (London, 1991), p. 145.

⁷¹⁰ Bagenal 1015/146, Letter from Walter Philip to Charles Hagberg Wright, 28 Jun. 1906.

⁷¹¹ Ibid.

⁷¹² *Justice: the Organ of Social Democracy*, 23 Jun. 1906, p. 14.

enthusiasm for revolution in Russia can be gauged from the fact that he facilitated the publication of the revolutionary émigrés journal, *Iskra* in Britain.⁷¹³ *Justice* and its editor were confident that, whether or not the Duma was closed prematurely, Nicholas could not prevent a revolution. In an article in keeping with Quelch's ardent revolutionary beliefs, and in apocalyptic terms, *Justice* declaimed that nothing will 'stop the avalanche coming down on the heads of Russia's rulers, let Nemesis have what is her due. Russia has suffered long at the hands of tsardom. Her retribution will be great'.⁷¹⁴

When Nicholas did order the closure of the Duma it created a furore amongst its supporters in Britain.⁷¹⁵ The decision coincided with a visit to Britain by a number of Russian deputies and when the Liberal Prime Minister, Henry Campbell Bannerman, theatrically asserted his support for the elected by body by declaring *La Douma est morte! Vive La Douma!*, the Russian ambassador lodged an official protest.⁷¹⁶ However, although the Liberal government vocally opposed the closure of the Duma, the British ambassador believed that, after weeks of uncertainty, the tsar had shown effective leadership and put the deputies in their place. One can detect in his attitude an element of disdain for people outside of the upper class elites who sought a role in government, a characteristic which he shared with his predecessor. In the privacy of a letter to Hardinge the ambassador was fairly sanguine in the immediate aftermath of the Duma's closure. As he explained: 'Daily life [in St Petersburg] is proceeding as normal. The mills are

⁷¹³ Harry Quelch' (1838-1913), J. Savile, ODNB, 2004, accessed 21 June 2012.

⁷¹⁴ *Justice*, 23 Jun. 1906, p. 14.

⁷¹⁵ Neilson, *Britain and the last Tsar*, p. 79.

⁷¹⁶ Neilson, *Britain and the last Tsar*, p.279.

working and the English foremen had their game of cricket yesterday.⁷¹⁷ With a patrician air he added that ‘the Duma was getting a little bit above itself and was showing tendencies to usurp government functions’.⁷¹⁸

Nicolson had not long been in post and his opinions may have been influenced by his relative lack of experience in Russian affairs. However, the ‘Russianist’ Maurice Baring also took an unsympathetic view of the deputies. In an article for the *Morning Post*, Baring challenged those in Britain who believed the closure of the Duma to have been an ‘arbitrary act’ and rather than finding fault with the tsar, blamed the Kadets (Constitutional Democratic Party) for the constitutional crisis.⁷¹⁹ Baring irritably berated the deputies of the Constitutional Democrats for having acted as ‘an assembly sitting in judgement on the autocracy’.⁷²⁰ Russia had ‘demanded statesmanship’ but, he said, the Duma had responded with ‘a *rechauffe* of ultra-radical doctrines of which western democracies have long since tired’.⁷²¹

(ii) June 1908: Edward VII’s visit to Reval

A great deal has been written by historians about British diplomatic relations with Russia during the reign of the last tsar but there has been little analysis of the variety of reactions of the British public, politicians and advocates of the development of a liberal democracy in Russia, to the royal visits of 1908 and 1909. These visits attracted comment from a

⁷¹⁷ CUL, Hardinge Papers, vol. 12, Letter from Sir Arthur Nicolson to Sir Charles Hardinge, 23 Jul. 1906.

⁷¹⁸ Ibid.

⁷¹⁹ *Morning Post*, 23 Jul. 1906, p. 5.

⁷²⁰ Ibid.

⁷²¹ Ibid.

variety of quarters. A number returned to a theme which had preoccupied them at the start of the Nicholas's reign, namely the role of the imperial couple within international politics and their ties with the British royal family. Others considered the visits in the wider context of Anglo Russian relations and Britain's role as the preeminent democratic state in Europe.

In the months after Edward VII's coronation in 1902 the king made a series of official visits to the royal courts of Berlin, Lisbon, Madrid and Rome, but he did not travel to Russia. In January 1906, in the continued absence of a royal visit, E.J. Dillon advised the Foreign Office that 'the king should come here [to St Petersburg] at once to make an agreement' directly with the tsar.⁷²² Nicholas himself complained to the British ambassador that he 'felt neglected' and pointed out that the French president 'had come to both Tsarskoe Selo and Peterhof in perfect safety'.⁷²³ However, although the establishment regarded the cordial relations between the two ruling houses as a potentially useful tool of British foreign policy, plans for a royal visit remained in abeyance.⁷²⁴ The internal situation in Russia was judged so serious that in June 1906 a visit by Britain's Channel Fleet was cancelled, causing much offence in imperial circles but jubilation in revolutionary ones.⁷²⁵ It was not until 21 May 1908 that the Foreign Office finally made an announcement (which emphasised the family rather than political nature of the visit) that the king intended shortly to visit 'the Tsar of Russia with whom

⁷²² TNA, FO 800/72, Report from Sir Charles Hardinge to Lord Grey, 16 Jan. 1906.

⁷²³ CUL, Hardinge Papers, vol.12, Report from Sir Cecil Spring Rice to Sir Charles Hardinge, 10 Mar. 1906.

⁷²⁴ CUL, Hardinge Papers vol. 12, Sir Cecil Spring Rice to Sir Charles Hardinge, 15 Mar 1906.

⁷²⁵ TNA, FO 881/8756, Sir Arthur Nicolson to Lord Grey, 25 Jun. 1906.

he is closely allied by ties of friendship and near relationship'.⁷²⁶

Although this was to be Edward VII's first visit to Russia as a reigning monarch he had made several visits to the country as Prince of Wales. His first visit in 1866 was to attend the wedding of Princess Dagmar to the future Tsar Alexander III. Dagmar was his wife's sister. In a letter to Queen Victoria (the then Prince of Wales) explained that would interest him 'beyond anything else to see Russia'.⁷²⁷ Aware of the possible political difficulties raised by such a visit, Edward told the Prime Minister, Lord Derby, that he was 'only too happy to be the means of promoting entente cordiale between Russia and Britain'.⁷²⁸ According to Edward's biographer, Philip Magnus, the visit was a great personal success, the prince being met on his arrival by Tsar Alexander II and subsequently entertained lavishly in St Petersburg and Moscow.⁷²⁹ It was therefore with warm feelings towards Russia that, in 1873, the prince went to St Petersburg to attend the wedding of his brother, Alfred, to the Grand Duchess Mariia Aleksandrovna. Edward greatly enjoyed his visit particularly a boar hunt at which 80 beasts were killed.⁷³⁰ By 1881, when he embarked for Russia to attend Tsar Alexander II's funeral, Edward's diplomatic credentials in regards to Russo-British relations seem to have been well established. The relative frequency of his visits to Russia would have meant he was well known to the tsar's family and the imperial entourage and as a result the Foreign

⁷²⁶ *The Times*, 21 May 1908, p. 10.

⁷²⁷ Philip Magnus, *King Edward VII* (London, 1964), p. 94.

⁷²⁸ Magnus, *Edward VII*, p. 94.

⁷²⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷³⁰ Magnus, *Edward*, p. 127.

Secretary, Lord Granville, was in no doubt that his visit would be ‘productive’.⁷³¹

The mutual awarding of honours, in which flattery mingled with diplomacy, was typical of visits between members of European royal houses. The occasion of Alexander II’s funeral was no exception: the prince invested the new tsar, Alexander III, with the Order of the Garter.⁷³² In 1894, when Alexander III died, Edward received even more plaudits for his influence over Russo-British relations than those proffered by Lord Granville thirteen years earlier. On Edward’s return to London, having attended the late tsar’s funeral, Lord Rosebery praised him enthusiastically for the ‘good and patriotic work which you have accomplished [for the] country, [for] Russia and the peace of the world’.⁷³³

In 1908 British reaction to the announcement that the king was to travel to Reval was animated; there was little room for disinterest let alone neutrality on the subject. In part this was due to the fact that it came less than a year after the conclusion of the Anglo-Russian Convention. The agreement, which had proved controversial in some quarters, was signed in August 1907. It had three main strands. Firstly, Persia was divided into British and Russian spheres of influence. Secondly, the Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey obtained the Russian government’s agreement that it would deal with the Emir of Afghanistan only through the British authorities and thirdly, Russia agreed to acquiesce to

⁷³¹ Lee, *Edward VII* (London, 1927), p. 504.

⁷³² Magnus, *Edward VII*, p. 171.

⁷³³ Lee, *Edward VII*, p. 507.

Chinese suzerainty over Tibet.⁷³⁴ Obtaining the agreement had taken painstaking and patient work by politicians, civil servants and diplomats. Although the entente was signed during the term of a Liberal government, diplomatic feelers had been extended towards the Russians by the previous Conservative administration (1902-1905) led by Arthur Balfour. However, these particular overtures had come to naught when relations between the two countries reached a nadir during Russia's war with Britain's ally-Japan, not least on account of the Dogger Bank Incident. After the election of a Liberal government in December 1905, the Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey, his Permanent Under Secretary (PUS), Sir Charles Hardinge and newly appointed British Ambassador in St Petersburg, Sir Arthur Nicolson focused their energies on bringing about an Anglo Russian Entente.

The Convention was agreed in the wake of Russia's defeat by the Japanese in Manchuria and the 1905 revolution. Humbled by her war with Japan and the autocracy's failure to quell the political and economic violence which had been an especial feature of the years since the outbreak of hostilities in the Far East--Russia was hardly in a position to embark upon another imperial adventure. However this did not mean that the British authorities were entirely easy in regards to Russian foreign policy. In particular Britain's longstanding fear of a Russian invasion of India remained a bugbear, especially amongst those who were wary of a rapprochement. Following Britain's own salutary experiences in the Boer War the authorities in India were convinced that in the event of a similar

⁷³⁴ Rogers Platt Churchill, *The Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907* (Cedar Rapids, 1939), Firuz Kazemzadeh, *Russia and Britain in Persia 1864-1914* (New Haven, CT, 1968), K.M. Wilson, 'Creative Accounting: The Place of Loans in the Commencement of the Negotiations of the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 38, 3 (2002), pp. 35-82.

imperial conflict Russia might well take advantage of the situation to damage Britain's overseas interests. During the chaos of the Russo-Japanese War and particularly in wake of the Dogger Bank Incident when Britain and Russia seemed on the brink of war some British commentators suspected that Russia might use the moment to 'advance towards India'.⁷³⁵ Bearing this in mind, and in the light of historical concern about Russian intentions in Central Asia, the Committee for Imperial Defence planned for a war with Russia and estimated that an army of 535,000 men would be required to defend the sub-continent.⁷³⁶ A report from a British military attaché in the region which found that there was 'no evidence at all of any immediate Russian threat to India' did little to persuade the sceptics or those with an interest in bolstering the army in India.⁷³⁷

Unable, or unwilling, to fund the forces thought necessary to defend India, the Liberal government worried about the consequences, not least the inevitable loss of prestige to the Mother Country and to the Empire, should Russia invade India. The timing of the Liberal government's desire to reduce spending on the Indian army and concern about Britain's naval ability to hold the Straits against Russian aggression, fortuitously coincided with Russia's need to avoid conflict overseas while the autocracy struggled to re-establish domestic order.

A history of suspicion between Britain and Russia, a loathing in some quarters of the autocracy and the violent suppression of the 1905 revolution ensured that any agreement

⁷³⁵ TNA, Cabinet Memorandum Entitled 'Possible Objectives in a war with Russia', October 1904, CAB 17/60

⁷³⁶ Zara Steiner and Keith Neilson, *Britain and the Origins of the First World War* (Basingstoke, 2003), p.87.

⁷³⁷ Keith Neilson, *Britain and the Last Tsar: British Foreign Policy and Russia 1894-1917* (Oxford, 1995), p. 259.

with Russia had the potential to be controversial. For these reasons, and in keeping with the view held by his predecessors at the Foreign Office, Grey believed that policy towards Russia should largely be decided himself with advice from his PUS and a small number of others who shared his views on European affairs. Against this background of confidential discussions within a small clique, the British public were kept in the dark about the negotiations as Grey effortlessly cultivated a persona of aloofness from the hurly burly of daily politics.⁷³⁸ However, Grey also sought to prevent discussion of it within the elites. Most notably he avoided consulting his colleagues in the Cabinet for fear that those who were opposed to the autocracy might cause a storm and that the more radical elements might even wreck the delicately balanced talks.

In spite of Grey's wish to keep the details of any negotiations secret the subject of Russia's internal affairs was never far from the minds of anti-tsarists and Russophobes. For such commentators the notion of rapprochement with a despotic state jarred with Britain's long held sense of itself as a liberal, democratic society and 'the only defender of liberty in Europe'.⁷³⁹ There was a sense that an agreement gave the tsar and the reactionary forces in Russian society an opportunity to gather the strength necessary to crush the opposition once and for all.⁷⁴⁰ Antipathy towards the Russian government was most evident in the House of Commons during the months leading up to the agreement as a result of a succession of the violent pogroms against the Russian Jewish community.

⁷³⁸ K.G. Robbins, 'Public Opinion, press and pressure groups' in F.H. Hinsley (ed.), *British Foreign Policy under Sir Edward Grey* (Cambridge, 1977), p. 72.

⁷³⁹ Jonathan Parry, *The Politics of Patriotism, English Liberalism, National Identity and Europe 1830-1886* (Cambridge, 2006), p. 207.

⁷⁴⁰ K.G. Robbins, 'Public Opinion, press and pressure groups', p. 84.

During 1906 at the height of the violence, thousands of Jews fled Russia, many settled in Britain including London, Manchester and Hull. Their arrival caused concern in some quarters that these impoverished migrants only added to the overcrowding and unsanitary conditions in the poorer districts of Britain's cities. In response, on behalf of the government, Earl Percy, the Member of Parliament for Kensington South, made vague noises of sympathy and suggestions about acquiring territory in Africa to resettle the exiles.⁷⁴¹ However, for Radical Liberal and Labour members of parliament the forced departure of hundreds of men, women and children from their homes and from their country represented all that was despicable about the Russian autocracy.

In July 1906, concern amongst Radicals in the Liberal party, as well as Labour members of the House, that a planned visit of a squadron of the Royal Navy to Kronstadt represented approval of the Russian regime led to its cancellation. Talks with the Russians were nearly thrown into disarray, if not abandoned, in July 1907 when, as we have noted, the Liberal Prime-Minister Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman so publicly showed his support for the recently dissolved Duma. However, the Foreign Secretary and the British Ambassador in St Petersburg doggedly pursued an agreement. Grey and his spokesman in the House were asked by a succession of Members of Parliament to tie any agreement with Russia to an undertaking by her to institute internal reforms. At least one, the Labour Member for West Ham South, William Thorne, proposed that diplomatic

⁷⁴¹*Hansard*, 5 Jul. 1906, vol. 160, pp. 291-2.

relations with the autocracy should be completely severed.⁷⁴² On 8 July 1907 the Independent Labour Party passed a resolution denouncing the spirit of reconciliation with Russia which it accused of using ‘barbarism to suppress constitutional freedom’.⁷⁴³ However, the government simply rebuffed suggestions that ‘Russian internal affairs [were] relevant to negotiations between the two governments’.⁷⁴⁴

When the negotiations were concluded those who had been intimately involved including Grey, Hardinge and Nicolson congratulated themselves on the successful outcome and the sense that Britain had achieved the greater share of the bargain. Their enthusiasm with the Convention was shared by the *Spectator* which looked back to the recent past when fear in Whitehall of a Russian invasion of India meant that ‘every action of the Romanovs was [thought to be] dictated by a secret hope of ultimately conquering India’.⁷⁴⁵ The Convention having been signed the periodical now cautioned that friendship with Russia needed to be ‘kept in repair’ and even that Britain must now give ‘proper consideration to Russia’s legitimate claims and aspirations’ in the Balkans and in Constantinople’.⁷⁴⁶ For its part the *Quarterly Review* bemoaned the Radicals in Parliament who, it said, had previously regarded the first Russian constitution with favour ‘simply because it was a stumbling block to Tory governments and now that friendly relations had been established were bent on condemning the [latest] Russian

⁷⁴² *Hansard*, 19 Jun., 1906, vol., 159, p. 360.

⁷⁴³ Jennifer Siegel, *Endgame: Britain and Russia and the Final Struggle for Central Asia* (London and New York, 2002), p. 23.

⁷⁴⁴ *Hansard*, 7 Aug. 1907, W. Runciman (M.P. Dewsbury) on behalf of Sir Edward Grey in response to T.F. Richards (M.P. Wolverhampton West), vol., 180, p. 72.

⁷⁴⁵ *Spectator*, 22 Feb. 1908, p. 286.

⁷⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

constitution'.⁷⁴⁷ The satirical magazine *Punch or the London Charivari* took a sideways look while making a serious point in its reaction to the details of the agreement to divide Persia between Russia and Britain. In cartoon which depicted a British Lion and a Russian Bear stroking different parts of a Persian cat the feline complained that it had not been consulted about the attention it was being given by the two larger beasts.⁷⁴⁸ The Tory inclined *Blackwood's Magazine* was especially despondent that Britain had concluded such an arrangement with Russia and declared that she had 'surrendered every political advantage'⁷⁴⁹ and had achieved nothing but 'loss for England.'⁷⁵⁰ In a letter to *The Times* Colonel C.E. Yate agreed that 'commercially and industrially Britain and India' had lost heavily.⁷⁵¹ The colonel, who had seen action during the Afghan War (1880-81), blamed the state of affairs on Sir Edward Grey's refusal to consult experts in Middle Eastern and Central Asian affairs, choosing instead to rely on his ambassador in Russia for advice.⁷⁵²

Amongst those who perceived the Anglo-Russian Convention in negative terms a number also opposed Edward VII's visit to Reval for very similar reasons. Its opponents argued that the king's presence in Russia implied British support for the suppression of Russian dissent. In the House of Commons James O'Grady, the Labour M.P. for Leeds East demanded that 'representation be made to the king that the visit to Reval be deprived

⁷⁴⁷ *Quarterly Review*, No. 416, Jul. 1908, pp. 253-254.

⁷⁴⁸ *Punch or the London Charivari*, 2 Oct. 1907, p. 244.

⁷⁴⁹ *Blackwood's Magazine*, Jan. 1908, No., 1107, vol. 183, p. 162

⁷⁵⁰ *Ibid.* p. 153.

⁷⁵¹ Colonel C.E. Yate, Letter to *The Times*, 4 Oct. 1907, p. 10.

⁷⁵² *Ibid.*

official status'.⁷⁵³ O'Grady argued that 'in the eyes of Europe this country had always stood up for the representative institutions'.⁷⁵⁴ Yet, he explained, in spite of this 'liberal heritage' the country's head of state planned to visit Russia where: '100 members of the first Duma and 50 members of the second Duma are either in Siberia or in chains as common criminals awaiting a trial which may never take place'.⁷⁵⁵

O'Grady's description of the fate of the deputies may have been exaggerated for political effect but he was not alone in the House in opposing the visit. The radical socialist William Thorne (M.P. for Plaistow in east London)⁷⁵⁶ complained that the British royal family's ties with the house of Romanov were being used for political ends to the benefit of an authoritarian regime. A speech he gave on the subject gives an indication of the passion which the king's visit aroused amongst its opponents. Thorne was contemptuous of both the king and the tsar. He asserted that it was 'quite bad enough that the head official of the United Kingdom [i.e. the king] should be related to such a monster [the tsar] but that if his avuncular feelings must be humoured by a visit to his nephew he ought to have the decency to pay that visit in private, or even better, incognito'.⁷⁵⁷ Another vociferous critic, the Member of Parliament for Tyrone East, bemoaned what he said was Britain's 'fraternisation with the hangman of liberty'.⁷⁵⁸

Not everyone in Britain was against the proposed visit. Amongst those who favoured it

⁷⁵³ *Hansard*, 26 May 1908, 189, p. 966.

⁷⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵⁶ William Thorne, *My Life's Battles* (London, 1925).

⁷⁵⁷ *Justice*, 30 May 1908, p. 6.

⁷⁵⁸ *Hansard*, 3 June 1908, p. 264.

some argued that the king's presence at Reval would represent British support for the Russian people and the fledgling democrats. For example, in a letter to the *Spectator*, Bernard Pares outlined his view that far from condoning a reactionary regime the king's visit would aid the development of parliamentary democracy in Russia.⁷⁵⁹ The *Daily Express* took a similar, positive view. In typical tabloid 'British is best' fashion the newspaper declared that the king's visit would be welcomed by the Russian people since he was 'the very type of constitutional monarch many of them so ardently desire'.⁷⁶⁰ Other supporters of the visit argued that its cancellation would harm the substantial British community living and working in Russia although this was contradicted in the House when one honourable member informed the Commons that many of his former constituents who were resident in St Petersburg were 'in harmony with the struggle of the Russians around them'.⁷⁶¹

In the Foreign Office Charles Hardinge met calls for the visit to be cancelled with some derision. In a letter to Hugh O'Beirne at the Petersburg embassy he denounced Ramsay Macdonald alleging that he was in collusion with Russian revolutionaries.⁷⁶² In keeping with the governing elite's belief in its own innate right to direct foreign policy, Hardinge brushed off calls in parliament for the visit to be cancelled as the 'work of mere busybodies'.⁷⁶³ The opponents were a minority in the House and when it was put to the

⁷⁵⁹ Bernard Pares 'Letter to *Spectator*', 6 Jun. 1908, p. 7.

⁷⁶⁰ *Daily Express*, 5 Jun. 1908, p. 3.

⁷⁶¹ *Hansard*, 3 June 1908, p. 227.

⁷⁶² CUL Hardinge Papers vol. 13, Sir Charles Hardinge to Hugh O'Beirne, 27 May 1908.

⁷⁶³ CUL Hardinge Papers vol. 13, Sir Charles Hardinge to Sir Edward Goschen, 2 Jun. 1908.

vote they were defeated by 225 votes to 59.⁷⁶⁴

In keeping with the emphasis on the family nature of the visit, the king was accompanied by Queen Alexandra and their eldest daughter, Princess Victoria. Since Nicholas's accession it had been almost a cliché in some British quarters that the tsar was extremely shy and, as a result, lacked authority. This view of the tsar was taken up by the *Daily News* which had been prominent in providing a forum for British opposition to the visit. One article had sarcastically described Nicholas as: 'The Man of the Week, a hapless pitiful figure'.⁷⁶⁵ Reporting from Reval the newspaper continued claimed that Nicholas had 'a diffident [...] nervous manner as if he wished the fuss and parade were over and he could go home to play with his children'.⁷⁶⁶ The *Daily Telegraph's* special correspondent (possibly E.J. Dillon) also noted that Nicholas, although surrounded by friends and family, seemed 'rather self-conscious and slightly embarrassed'.⁷⁶⁷ The *Telegraph* was often more thoughtful in its response to the tsar but the newspaper's impression on this occasion hardly presented the tsar with any great conviction. If the tsar was ill at ease with relatives whom he had known since boyhood, the article implied there was little immediate prospect of his stamping his authority on his country.

In addition to the coverage on the *Daily News* and the *Telegraph* an article in the populist *John Bull* magazine on 6 June was light hearted but it had serious intent. In a reference to Edward VII's well known passion for horse racing, *John Bull* depicted

⁷⁶⁴ *Hansard*, 3 June 1908, p. 264.

⁷⁶⁵ *Daily News*, 6 Jun. 1908, p. 5.

⁷⁶⁶ *Daily News*, 10 Jun. 1908, p. 7.

⁷⁶⁷ *Daily Telegraph*, 10 Jun. 1908, p. 11.

Nicholas dressed as a jockey riding a horse called 'Duma'. The advice from the king (in the guise of the horse's owner) to the 'jockey' was that he would 'do better without the whip'.⁷⁶⁸ A rather more scurrilous report about the tsar centred on the relationship between the tsar and his mother which appeared in E.A. Brayley Hodgett's 1908 account of the Russian court. Apparently based on rumours current at the time of the overbearing influence of the dowager empress over her son, Brayley Hodgetts told his readers of a cartoon. Supposedly drawn by Alexandra, for the amusement of her ladies in waiting, it was said to have depicted the tsar with his crown, wearing a bib and tucker, seated in a high legged baby chair to which he was securely fastened, while his mother was severely lecturing him.⁷⁶⁹

In spite of the opposition in some quarters in Britain, the visit was deemed a social and political success by the king, the tsar and the British government. Much of the credit was apportioned to the role that the family ties between the British royal family and the Romanovs had played in proceedings. An article in the populist *Daily Graphic* was typical of this genre. The newspaper reminded its readers that 'the empress was the daughter of Edward VII's late sister Alice' and enthused that Reval had seen a combination of 'a happy family picnic [and] a festival of international peace'.⁷⁷⁰

These intimate ties allowed the king to make his own particular mark on the visit when, without prior approval from his ministers, he made the tsar an Admiral of the British Fleet. He later implausibly claimed to have been totally unaware of the

⁷⁶⁸ *John Bull*, 6 Jun. 1908, p. 541.

⁷⁶⁹ Brayley Hodgetts, *The Court of Russia*, pp. 280-1.

⁷⁷⁰ *Daily Graphic*, 6 Jun. 1908, p. 6.

constitutional impropriety of his action.⁷⁷¹ However, the government understood that, in a country where the person of the monarch was paramount, the king's visit had secured the future of the 1907 Anglo-Russian Convention in a way in which no diplomat or official could have hoped to achieve. In Britain the anti-tsarists were never reconciled to the 1907 agreement but when Edward VII visited Reval in 1908 his bonhomie, his diplomatic skills and his position as a member of Nicholas and Alexandra's extended family, and the warm feelings they no doubt recalled from 1894 when he had offered his solicitude towards the bereaved Romanov family, sealed the agreement. Amongst those who had supported both the visit and the Anglo-Russian Convention there was deep satisfaction at the outcome. As Hardinge reported cheerfully to the Cabinet, Nicholas had 'repeatedly [declared that the visit] had sealed and confirmed the intention and spirit of the agreement'.⁷⁷²

(iii) August 1909: The Tsar visits the Isle of Wight

The diplomatic and family success of the king's visit to Reval was underlined in the summer of 1909 when Nicholas and Alexandra paid an official visit to Britain, albeit though for security reasons, they did not set foot on the mainland. Instead they lived aboard the imperial yacht anchored off the Isle of Wight. There were a multitude of responses to the visit from a wide number of sources including politicians, trade unionists and senior members of the Anglican clergy as well as broadsheet and tabloid newspapers. In addition, members of the general public flocked to catch sight of the tsar and empress

⁷⁷¹ Magnus, *Edward VII*, p. 408.

⁷⁷² TNA, CAB 37/93, Sir Charles Hardinge to the Cabinet, 12 Jun. 1908.

during the few days they spent visiting the island.

Political responses to the visit, in some instances tempered by the expediency of Russo-British relations, were largely divided along ideological lines. As had been the case vis-à-vis the Reval, visit much of the opposition centred on British perceptions of internal events in Russia. When a House of Commons motion calling for the postponement of the visit was defeated by 166 votes the ‘oppositionists’ proclaimed it a victory. Thus, they explained that while British citizens were free to oppose their government, such a situation did not pertain in Russia.⁷⁷³ More widely, discussion focused on conflicting impressions of Nicholas as a bloodstained tyrant or a sincere and wholehearted constitutional monarch. *The Spectator* asked for the public’s understanding of the difficulties faced by the tsar as he struggled to deal with unrest. Not for the last time there were made comparisons between Nicholas’s reign and that of Louis XVI of France, when the periodical asserted that the Labour Party had failed to comprehend that Nicholas’s actions were not due to his free will but as a result of being surrounded by ‘a reactionary camarilla’.⁷⁷⁴ According to the *Spectator*, this sinister group constantly reminded him of the unhappy fate of Louis XVI and warned him that by ‘introducing constitutionalism he [was] risking his own life and that of his children’.⁷⁷⁵ At least one provincial newspaper was sympathetic to the tsar and offered this laudatory explanation of his actions. The *Birmingham and Standard Despatch* believed that Nicholas was ‘extremely well disposed towards the constitutional movement and [was] with complete honesty of purpose trying

⁷⁷³ *Anglo-Russian Review*, vol. 11, 12 Jun. 1909.

⁷⁷⁴ *Spectator*, Jul. 3 1909, p. 8.

⁷⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

to do his best in exceptionally trying times'.⁷⁷⁶ Such sympathetic perceptions however, were stridently rejected by other commentators.

The mass circulation *Star* called such perceptions 'simply nauseating', it ridiculed claims that Nicholas was a constitutional monarch and denounced the tsar as 'a despot, in league with men who have made massacre and murder a fine art'.⁷⁷⁷ Similarly, the *Nation* refused to welcome the man 'who dragooned his dissenters; [...] the man who gave the order to slaughter a peaceful crowd on St Vladimir's Day; the man by whose will martial law is maintained, the prisons crowded [...] to the faults of a weakling he has added the crimes of a despot'.⁷⁷⁸ Even support for the visit from some members of the Duma who had recently visited Britain failed to dampen the controversy. In a fiery speech Keir Hardie, Labour M.P. for Merthyr Tydfil, fulminated against both the visit, and as he perceived them, the misguided deputies. On leaving for home the Russian delegation had expressed the hope that Britain would replicate for the tsar the warm welcome which they had received. Keir Hardie angrily accused the deputies of being 'insolent'.⁷⁷⁹ He challenged the king to 'drive the tsar of Russia through the streets of London and [then, he said, the Duma] would find out who represented the people of England-the Labour Party or Mr Asquith, Sir Edward Grey and the king'.⁷⁸⁰ A mass meeting was convened in London's Trafalgar Square to protest against the visit. It was attended by a crowd of nearly 7,000 people who held aloft banners upon which were written: "A Message from

⁷⁷⁶ A cutting from the *Birmingham and Standard Despatch*, 17 Jun. 1909.

⁷⁷⁷ *Star* 19 Jun. 1909.

⁷⁷⁸ *Nation*, Jul. 1909, p. 483.

⁷⁷⁹ *The Times*, 12 Jul. 1909, p. 6.

⁷⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

Hell, Welcome Little Father” and “Down with Nicholas the Tyrant”. The speeches reflected these sentiments. One speaker denounced Nicholas as a ‘scoundrel’ and shouted to the crowd ‘Let the king kiss him, let Mr Asquith [the Prime Minister] beslobber him, let Sir Edward Grey [the Foreign Secretary] kiss his boots. The people spurn him and spit in his face’.⁷⁸¹

As part of its discussion of the visit, *Justice: the organ of social democracy* was less overtly vitriolic than the speeches we have noted above. However, it was no less cutting in its effect. Using the medium of a dream the periodical managed to attack the entire Romanov dynasty and to depict Nicholas as the worst of the lot. According to this scenario, the tsar, having returned to his apartments from ‘a typical function at Tsarskoe Selo, the laughter and music of the voluptuous scene still buzzing in his brain; the fumes of the wine, the perfumes of the women still titillating his senses’ fell into a state of ‘exhausted depression’.⁷⁸² According to *Justice*’s imaginative scene, as he slept the tsar was berated by his long dead ancestors ‘murderers, prostitutes [and] imbeciles who pointed at him and cried you Nicholas, last of the tsars are the weakest, the most cowardly, the most cruel, the most bloodthirsty, the vilest of us all’.⁷⁸³

The tsar and empress’s visit to the Isle of Wight took place in August 1909 and coincided with the Cowes Regatta. Perhaps because of the summer holidays and the diverting attention of the yacht races there was a relative dearth of comment, at least in comparison to the fevered debate which had been a feature of discussion before the visit.

⁷⁸¹ *The Times*, 26 Jul. 1909, p. 6.

⁷⁸² *Justice*, Jul. 1909, p. 6.

⁷⁸³ *Ibid.*

There were, however, some significant exceptions to this absence of news. They included the sarcastic, the reserved and the enthusiastic. Opinion was very broadly divided between members of the public who welcomed the imperial couple and left wing politicians, as well as social reformers in the Church and amongst the laity who protested against the visit. The *Daily News*, for example, which had provided a channel for opposition to the king's visit to Reval, continued to give voice to those who opposed the autocracy. The newspaper reported Keir Hardie's caustic observation that having been unable to prevent the visit he was: 'grateful that the tsar is being guarded in the Solent [and] the course of a race changed to protect us from this contamination [...] little wonder that the heavens are draped in grey when we remember the degradation brought upon the British name by this man being received in our midst'.⁷⁸⁴ Even the usually temperate *Daily Telegraph* announced its intention to reserve a welcome for Nicholas until the day when the tsar 'grants his people the same liberties of speech as the Germans possess'.⁷⁸⁵

On the day that the imperial party arrived off Cowes an eclectic mix of well-known public figures, including the former headmaster of Rugby school, John Percival, Bishop of Hereford and his Anglican colleague, Charles Gore, Bishop of Birmingham, together with the social reformers Sidney Webb and Bertrand Russell, wrote to *The Times*. The four men had very different characters, but they all had an interest in social reform and Russian affairs. In their letter they drew the public's attention to the persistence in Russia of martial law which had been introduced in response to the unrest of 1905 and protested

⁷⁸⁴ *Daily News*, 3 Aug. 1909, p. 5.

⁷⁸⁵ *Daily Telegraph*, 3 Aug 1909, p. 4.

against what they said were an increasing number of capital sentences in the country.⁷⁸⁶

The following day however, *The Times* own leader writer dismissed the letter as a ‘piece of gratuitous boorishness’.⁷⁸⁷

The Isle of Wight was no stranger to visits from foreign royalty. The German Kaiser came regularly to the Island for Cowes Week but this did not mean that locals or holidaymakers were blasé about Nicholas and Alexandra’s visit. The response of the members of the public to the visit was a good deal warmer than those whose views we have considered above. This was reflected in the fact that the two local newspapers the *Isle of Wight County Press* and the *Isle of Wight Herald* took an avid interest in the Russian visit.

The imperial party were met in British waters by a fleet of over 153 ships of the Royal Navy but there were also more workaday vessels eager to greet the tsar and empress.⁷⁸⁸ The *Isle of Wight Herald* recorded that as the Russian yacht passed Spithead, a pleasure steamer carrying day-trippers had passed within fifty feet of the vessel and those on board had ‘lustily hailed [the Russian party] with rousing cheers’.⁷⁸⁹ According to the *Isle of Wight County Press*, when the imperial family came ashore they received an equally warm welcome from the ‘thousands of holiday makers’ who had journeyed to Cowes especially to catch a glimpse of the tsar and empress.⁷⁹⁰ In contrast to the naysayers, such

⁷⁸⁶ *The Times*, 2 Aug. 1909, p. 6.

⁷⁸⁷ *The Times*, 2 Aug. 1909, p. 7.

⁷⁸⁸ A. Spirodovich, *Les Dernières Années de La Cour de Tsarskoe Selo* www.alexanderpalace.org accessed 4 Dec. 2012.

⁷⁸⁹ *Isle of Wight Herald*, 6 Aug. 1909, p. 3.

⁷⁹⁰ *Isle of Wight County Press*, 31 Jul. 1909, p.7.

as Keir Hardie, the public, it seems, were not to be put off by Nicholas's record in dealing with internal unrest. The streets of the island were so crowded that it was said 'all previous records of the number of Bank Holiday visitors must have gone by the board'.⁷⁹¹ There was a particular moment of excitement when the imperial children went shopping for souvenirs and 'speaking in English had overwhelmed a shopkeeper' with demands for postcards featuring the Russian and British ruling families.⁷⁹² So dense were the crowds of onlookers who followed the grand duchesses from shop to shop that the police had difficulty in carving a path through the crowd to allow them to pass.⁷⁹³

A few weeks before the visit to Cowes the *Evening News* had returned to the theme of Nicholas's reading material as evidence of his Anglophilia which had been especially popular at the time of his engagement. According to the newspaper the bookshelves of the imperial yacht's private quarters contained volumes on specifically English heroes: the *Life of Wellington* and the *Letters and Despatches of Nelson*, as well as works by the prolific Victorian novelist, Mrs Oliphant.⁷⁹⁴

These were not the only 'English' references in the press with regard to the imperial visit. As had occurred on many occasions since the imperial couple's engagement several publications focused on the kinship between the reigning families of Britain and Russia. Alexandra had spent happy summers before her marriage on the Isle of Wight in the company of her grandmother, Queen Victoria. The empress remembered them with

⁷⁹¹ Ibid.

⁷⁹² *Isle of Wight County Press* 6 Aug, p. 9.

⁷⁹³ Ibid.

⁷⁹⁴ *Evening News*, 9 Jun. 1909, p. 1.

fondness and so it would seem did the *Lady: a Journal for Gentlewomen* since an article in the magazine waxed lyrical on the subject. Thus, the magazine asserted ‘there is scarcely another place in England where [Alexandra’s] coming again could be more welcome [since it was on the Isle of Wight] that the tall, sweet faced Princess of Hesse Darmstadt, who more than any other member of the royal family, resembled in appearance their grandfather, the Prince Consort, won general admiration’.⁷⁹⁵ In keeping with this theme of shared family ties the *Isle of Wight Herald* reported the imperial couple’s visit to the room at Osborne where Queen Victoria had breathed her last. Evidently the many references over the years in the national press and elsewhere to Nicholas’s excellent command of the English language had yet to reach the Island. Since, according to the *Isle of Wight Herald*, the tsar’s fluent English ‘excited much comment’ amongst his listeners especially when he recalled ‘the many kindnesses’ he and the empress had received from the ‘beloved and venerated queen’.⁷⁹⁶

During the years of the constitutional monarchy British commentators and observers of Russian affairs employed a number of strategies in order to understand Nicholas and Alexandra. Most significantly they included reference to traditional British motifs of Russia and her rulers. Not only commentators who were sympathetic but also those who were antagonistic to them explained Nicholas and Alexandra’s motivation and response to events by means of discussion of these familiar themes. In particular they focussed on conflicting views of the ruling couple’s relationship with their people. Firstly, as we have

⁷⁹⁵ *Lady: a Journal for Gentlewomen*, 5 Aug. 1909, p. 231.

⁷⁹⁶ *Isle of Wight Herald*, 6 Aug. 1909, p. 5.

discussed there were images of antagonism, as witnessed by some accounts of the opening of the Duma. However, for some these negative images were contradicted by reports of hundreds of loyal peasants who gathered in large crowds in the hope that they might catch a glimpse of, or even exchange a few words with, the tsar and empress.

(iv) 1909-1913: Imperial Jubilees

The years between 1909 and 1913 marked a variety of anniversaries, which enabled Nicholas and Alexandra to meet their humblest subjects. They did so with memories of Bloody Sunday, the 1905 revolution and events which had led to the creation of the Duma fresh in the public mind. Perhaps of all these events the creation of the Duma was responsible for the most substantial change to the Russian political landscape and the dynamics of the tsar and empress's relationship with their subjects. However, for both Nicholas and Alexandra many of the more vocal members of the Duma represented little more than a self-serving group with aims which were totally alien to the aspirations of the mass of ordinary Russians.⁷⁹⁷ The tsar and empress's understanding of their relationship with their peasant subjects was informed by occasions such as the 1903 canonisation of St Serafim (1759-1833). A monk, Serafim lived in a hermitage for twenty-five years where in 1815, following a vision of the Virgin Mary, he began to receive pilgrims. Attracted by his reputation for healing and prophecy many thousands of ordinary Russians were drawn to his hermitage.

The decision to canonise Serafim in 1903 was controversial, forced on the Synod by

⁷⁹⁷ Wortman, *Scenarios of Power*, vol. 2, p. 343.

the tsar himself. Hélène Carrère d'Encausse has argued that Nicholas's decision to sponsor Serafim as a patron saint of his reign reveals the tsar's (fatalistic) religious outlook and his identification with a hermit who 'accepted his fate in the darkness and silence' of the forest.⁷⁹⁸ At the newly established shrine where they celebrated Serafim's rise to sainthood, Nicholas and Alexandra believed they had shared a deeply spiritual experience with the ordinary people of Russia.⁷⁹⁹ However, although both Nicholas and Alexandra were elated by their experiences at Sarov, after the revolution, the imperial couples' understanding of such encounters with their peasant subjects appeared at best, simplistic and, at worse, hopelessly naïve.⁸⁰⁰ Nicholas and Alexandra's encounters with their subjects, such as occurred at festivals, were thought to be quaintly outdated, and the response of the crowds to the sight of the tsar and empress, unrepresentative of public attitudes as a whole within late imperial Russia. For example, specifically in relation to the canonisation at Sarov, Gregory L. Freeze has concluded that, as a result of the exclusion of the people from the ceremony itself and the expensive shrine which housed the relics, the event served only to emphasise the gulf between the lives of the tsar and empress, and the mass of the people.⁸⁰¹

However, such views in regards to other opportunities for the imperial couple to meet their humblest subjects were contradicted by a number of contemporary British

⁷⁹⁸ Hélène Carrère d'Encausse, *Nicholas II: The Interrupted Transition* (New York and London, 2000), p. 73.

⁷⁹⁹ Wortman, *Scenarios of Power*, vol. 2, p. 396.

⁸⁰⁰ Orlando Figes and Boris Kolonitskii, *Interpreting the Russian Revolution: The Language and Symbols of 1917* (Yale, 1999), p. 137.

⁸⁰¹ Gregory L. Freeze, 'Subversive Piety: Religion and the Political Crisis in Late Imperial Russia', *Journal of Modern History*, vol. 68, No. 2 (Jun. 1996), pp. 308-350.

commentators. In British newspapers, journals and official correspondence, observers noted demonstrations of monarchical feelings whenever the tsar and empress appeared before their subjects. From time to time, it was said, the uneducated peasant might be persuaded by a charismatic revolutionary or a political demagogue, but that was merely an aberration. In reality, observers insisted they were loyal to the monarchical principle as defined within Russian tradition. In the light of these impressions, commentators believed that if the tsar and empress extricated themselves from the malevolent courtly cliques and showed themselves more frequently in public they could revitalise enthusiasm for the monarchy.

Whether an observer believed that Russians had been alienated from their tsar by recent events or whether they concluded that they remained loyal despite Bloody Sunday there was a contradiction in their summary. Even to the most unobservant, there existed a vast social gap between the imperial family and the mass of the peasantry particularly, in terms of education and wealth. However, this was not necessarily seen as a bar to tranquil relations between the tsar and his subjects. Rothay Reynolds argued that the distance, created by class and even hauteur, between the ruler and the ruled was necessary in Russia. Until the eve of the First World War Reynolds' had been the *Daily News* correspondent in St Petersburg and before that he had been Anglican chaplain to the British embassy in the city. In the light of his experiences he argued that Russian emperors were forced to assume an 'attitude of aloofness appropriate to godlike beings' because that was expected of them by their people who placed their portraits alongside

the icons of their favourite saints.⁸⁰²

Perceptions of Nicholas and Alexandra's relationship with their subjects were rooted in 'memories' of the founding of the Romanov dynasty. In 1613 an assembly, or *zemsky sobor*, had 'humbly entreated' Nicholas's ancestor Mikhail Fedorovich to accept the Russian throne and put an end to the so-called Time of Troubles.⁸⁰³ Before agreeing to the creation of an elected Duma, and in a reference to this founding myth of the Romanov dynasty, the tsar had mooted the idea of calling together an Assembly of the Land.⁸⁰⁴ The idea of direct interaction between the tsar and his subjects at times of crisis was entirely in keeping with Nicholas's way of thinking and it evidently appealed to E.J. Dillon. In reality the peasants had not formed part of the delegation to Mikhail Fedorovich but such was the power of this myth that Dillon seems to have ignored the historical record. His account of an imagined meeting between the tsar and his lowliest subjects depicted not only an 'archetypal Russian scene' but illustrated the endurance of British perceptions that a tsar did not yearn for power for its own sake. It also recalled rumours, current at the time of Alexander III's death, that Nicholas was reluctant to accede to the throne. The Time of Troubles had been characterised by factionalism, violence and foreign intervention when Russia seemed on the brink of disintegration.⁸⁰⁵ Bearing this in mind Dillon imagined Nicholas summoning 'the peasant elders from across the empire' who would then recall that in the sixteenth century the shared aims of the monarchy and the

⁸⁰² Reynolds, *My Year in Russia*, p. 119.

⁸⁰³ Dukes, *Russian Absolutism*, p. 5.

⁸⁰⁴ Wortman, *Scenarios of Power*, vol. 2, p. 395.

⁸⁰⁵ Geoffrey Hosking, *Russia, People and Empire 1552-1917* (London, 1997), p. 59

people had rescued Russia from the abyss.⁸⁰⁶ According to Dillon the tsar would issue a blunt ultimatum to his subjects in the following terms: ‘Your forefathers made my forefather tsar of Russia at a moment when the nation was confronted with ruin. Then the union of the monarch and people saved Russia. At present a still worse crisis threatens to annihilate the work of ages and with it the Russian race. This threat you can avert or realise according to your votes. If you like, you can send deputies to the Duma who advocate revolution. But I, who foresee dreadful consequences of such a choice, refuse to govern the country. I am however, ready to lay down the crown and retire, leaving you to work out your own fate’.⁸⁰⁷

The fact that Dillon believed Nicholas might be willing to lay down such a challenge suggests he was confident that the tsar retained the loyalty and support of most of his subjects. Such views were apparently vindicated by the cordial reception accorded the imperial couple during the Poltava anniversary in 1909.

The summer of 1909 marked the two hundredth anniversary of Peter the Great’s victory over Charles XII of Sweden at Poltava which paved the way for Russia’s rise to power in the modern era. The format of the anniversary celebrations at Poltava followed the imagery beloved of Nicholas and Alexandra: a church service, a review of an army corps and a meeting with a peasant delegation. The site of the celebrations hundreds of miles from St Petersburg necessitated a two day journey across Russia through urban areas and open countryside. Initial British impressions were wary. The British ambassador noted

⁸⁰⁶ E.J. Dillon, ‘Foreign Affairs’ *Contemporary Review*, vol. 90. (Sept. 1906), p. 294.

⁸⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

that despite the crushing of the revolution, the imperial train had been surrounded by very tight security.⁸⁰⁸ Moreover, Nicholson reported rumours that ‘suspect persons’ had been removed from the locale.⁸⁰⁹ However, at Poltava the ambassador noted that, in spite of security fears, Nicholas mingled with the crowd ‘virtually unguarded for over three hours’: far longer than had been allowed for in the official programme.⁸¹⁰ The ambassador’s interpretation of the tsar’s meeting with his subjects could equally have been written by British commentators of an earlier generation. It shows the persistence of a belief that a tsar, whose everyday experiences were far removed from the mass of his subjects, nevertheless understood their needs. These impressions had seemingly not been broken the bloodshed of 1905.

On the site of his ancestor’s great victory Nicholas gave a speech, relatively unbending in its tone, calling on his subjects to ‘show their devotion to the throne’.⁸¹¹ However, the ambassador told London that ‘the delight of the peasants at seeing their [tsar] was unbounded and [what is more] they were much impressed by the simple, unaffected manner in which he spoke to them and the knowledge he possessed of their affairs’.⁸¹² At the opening of the Duma Nicholson had worried that accounts of the tsar’s negative relationship with the deputies and his defence of his autocratic powers might spread across the countryside with possibly unfortunate consequences. In 1909, however, swayed by the persuasive ideas of naïve monarchism, the ambassador was certain that the

⁸⁰⁸ TNA, FO 881/9583, Sir Arthur Nicolson to Lord Grey, 30 Dec. 1909.

⁸⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁸¹⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹¹ Ibid.

⁸¹² Ibid.

peasants would take back to their villages' stories of their encounter with the tsar which would have a beneficial effect on the internal situation.⁸¹³ Later, reflecting more fully on the Poltava jubilee and the reaction of the peasants to the sight of their monarch, Nicolson hoped that it might be a prelude to other similar occasions. As he explained to the Foreign Secretary he was certain that by 'frequent intercourse' with their subjects Nicholas and Alexandra would surely 'revive the old loyalty to the throne'.⁸¹⁴

The most significant anniversary of Nicholas and Alexandra's reign occurred in 1913 and marked the three hundredth anniversary of Romanov rule. As R.S. Wortman explains for Nicholas and Alexandra the anniversary of the election of the first Romanov tsar evoked the seventeenth century national myth, of Russians personally devoted to their tsar.⁸¹⁵ It was an era which the imperial couple yearned to recreate. Their fondness for the time of the first Romanov tsar can be seen by their patronage of, and participation in, the founding of a number of buildings both religious and secular whose architecture reflected twentieth century interpretations of seventeenth century Russian vernacular buildings. The most striking of these was a short distance from the imperial residence at Tsarskoe Selo where Nicholas and Alexandra constructed an entire village in pastiche styles of the seventeenth century complete with a church dedicated to St Fedor, the Romanov family's patron saint.

In celebration of the Tercentenary, for the first time in many years Nicholas, Alexandra and their children spent three weeks residing in their capital. As part of the celebrations

⁸¹³ Wortman, *Scenarios of Power*, vol. 2. p. 424.

⁸¹⁴ TNA, FO 881/9583, Sir Arthur Nicolson to Lord Grey, 30 Dec. 1909.

⁸¹⁵ Wortman, *Scenarios of Power*, vol. 2, p. 443

the imperial couple went to the theatre and hosted a number of court events. The centre of St Petersburg was lit by half a million coloured light-bulbs and projectors shone pictures of Romanov rulers into the clouds.⁸¹⁶ The imperial couple also marked the jubilee by visiting many of the cities of old Russia including Suzdal, Vladimir, Nizhny Novgorod, Kostroma and Moscow. Nicholas and Alexandra viewed their dynastic pilgrimage along the Volga in May and June 1913 as an opportunity to reaffirm the bond between themselves and the Russian people. The enthusiasm of the crowds in the Romanov's traditional lands and the respectful attitude of their peasant subjects served to confirm their conviction that the mass of ordinary Russians were deeply loyal to them.⁸¹⁷

In retrospect the tercentenary divides opinion. It has popularly been perceived it as a tragic last hurrah which revealed the fragility of the public mood before the 'final storm' broke over imperial Russia.⁸¹⁸ More critical commentators such as Orlando Figes have depicted the 1913 celebrations as symptomatic of the foolishness of an outdated regime which hoped to blind Russia to its shortcomings by 'indulging in a ritual of self-congratulation' even as the regime tottered.⁸¹⁹ Other historians, such as Lindsey Hughes, have set the celebrations in the more positive context of the many achievements of Nicholas's reign which show that economically and culturally Russia was becoming a powerhouse.⁸²⁰

Despite the lack of agreement about the appropriateness of the tercentenary festivities

⁸¹⁶ *Petersburgskii Listok*, cited in M.D. Steinberg, *Petersburg Fin de Siècle* (New Haven, 2011), p. 225.

⁸¹⁷ Wortman, *Scenarios of Power*, vol. 2, p. 478.

⁸¹⁸ R.K. Massie, *Nicholas and Alexandra*, (London, 1972), p. 237.

⁸¹⁹ Figes, *A People's Tragedy*, p. 4.

⁸²⁰ Hughes, *The Romanovs*, p. 225-26.

amongst modern commentators, it would seem that it is only with the benefit of hindsight that that the celebrations of 1913 have appeared so significant, at least to British observers. At the time they took place, British commentators made relatively little comment. In part this may have been because, as *The Times* noted, unlike the coronation, ‘few foreigners were expected to attend [since] it is an eminently national [rather than international] occasion’.⁸²¹ At the coronation the Russian authorities had especially facilitated the work of foreign journalists, providing them with Kremlin passes and easy access to the telegraph system. Without this assistance foreigners may have found it difficult to obtain the necessary permissions to work and travel in the Russian provinces. Furthermore, news from Russia at this time may have been overshadowed by specifically ‘British interest’ stories. Some of the news items which captured the British imagination during 1913 included the aftermath of the discovery of R.F. Scott’s body in the Antarctic, the fiftieth anniversary of Queen Alexandra’s arrival in the country, a bomb at a house in which Lloyd George was intending to stay, the burning down of the tea pavilion at Kew by suffragettes and the arrest of an alleged German spy in Portsmouth. Amongst the few publications which marked the tercentenary the *Daily Telegraph* published a full page spread. However, the ruling tsar and empress were strikingly absent from the illustrations, which featured Tsar Michael, Peter the Great, Catherine the Great and the emperors Alexander I and II. Nor were the imperial couple mentioned in the accompanying article, the focus of which was Peter the Great’s visit to London.⁸²²

⁸²¹*The Times*, 8 Mar. 1913, p. 5.

⁸²²*Daily Telegraph*, 6 Mar. 1913, p. 4.

The *Times*, reflecting its role as a chronicler of the social, civic and religious activities of Europe's royalty, did report the Tercentenary thanksgiving service in St Petersburg, the gala opera and the memorial exhibition in Moscow. It also offered a brief survey of Russian history since the accession of the first Romanov tsar. The *Times* was fulsome in its praise of the Romanov dynasty which, the newspaper declared, had been the 'happy and fortunate choice' of the Russian people.⁸²³ In looking to the future the same article admitted that not all signs were propitious. However, describing Nicholas as 'the tsar enfranchiser' (an allusion to Alexander II, the tsar liberator) the newspaper concluded optimistically that 'no hope seems too confident or too bright' for the tsar's reign.⁸²⁴

When Nicholas and Alexandra travelled along the Volga their reception from the peasants and townspeople appeared to replicate these images of loyalty. It was a phenomenon which had been remarked upon on other occasions such as during the coronation, again in 1909 and even, at times, during the revolution of 1905. In light of their perception of the way in which the imperial family were received by some of their humblest subjects, some British commentators believed that the tsar was representative of a valid political concept even in twentieth century Russia. However, in spite of its apparent significance even *The Times* correspondent seems to have lost interest in marking the perambulations of the imperial court much beyond noting its arrival in Moscow. Even the usually vocal anti-tsarist magazine, *Anglo Russian Review*, which generally lost no opportunity to attack the Russian monarchy, failed to offer its opinion on the significance of the tercentenary. It is

⁸²³ *The Times*, 6 Mar. 1913, p. 7.

⁸²⁴ *Ibid.*

true that in July 1913 the middle-class *Illustrated London News* published ‘the latest official portraits of the imperial family’ but only as part of what it said was a wider public interest in “all things Russian”. The accompanying explanatory lines set the publication of the photographs in the context of wider interest in Russian culture and rather defensively observed that the magazine had ‘no need to offer an excuse’ for the photographs since ‘the world is so much interested in praising Russian ballet, Russian opera and Russian art’.⁸²⁵

It was not until the end of 1913, nearly seven months since Nicholas had visited his ancestral lands that the British ambassador reflected on the time they had spent away from the capital. The ambassador (by then Sir George Buchanan) was confident that the celebrations had been an unqualified success. Although a diplomat of the old school, with a natural respect for monarchy as an institution, Buchanan was not blind to the tsar and empress’s shortcomings. Yet, it was his considered opinion that the response of ordinary Russians to the tercentenary had shown that any dissatisfaction in the country was entirely directed towards the bureaucracy.

In a detailed review of 1913 Buchanan informed the Foreign Office with apparent satisfaction that: ‘The tercentenary of the Romanovs was celebrated with great ceremony [and accompanied] by a great display of loyalty to the throne on the part of the gentry, the military [...] merchants and peasantry.’⁸²⁶ Furthermore, Buchanan reported, throughout central Russia the tsar ‘received the most striking proofs of the personal devotion to him

⁸²⁵ *Illustrated London News*, 19 Jul. 1913, pp. 108-109.

⁸²⁶ TNA, FO 881/10412, Sir George Buchanan to Foreign Office, End of Year Report for 1913.

of the peasants'.⁸²⁷ Buchanan did not indicate the sources of his impressions perhaps he had gleaned them from members of the imperial family, a sympathetic British journalist, a junior member of the diplomatic corps or the Russian press. Whatever the source, Buchanan interpreted Nicholas and Alexandra's reception in the country as a sign that the divisions of the past had been healed. However, Bernard Pares, whose acquaintances included members of a wider ranging milieu than those of the ambassador, had a less positive view of 1913. From soundings taken amongst members of the political elite and the intelligentsia his conclusions were contrary to those of Buchanan. Where the ambassador perceived unity Pares believed that the celebrations had failed to repair the rupture between crown and people. In a report to the Foreign Office written in early January 1914 Pares looked back over the past twelve-months and tersely observed that the tsar is spoken of 'without any confidence'.⁸²⁸

From the outbreak of war in August 1914 until the fall of the imperial regime in March 1917 many of the themes which had been popular during the years of the Constitutional Monarchy were revisited by British commentators. Perceptions of Nicholas and Alexandra's relationship with their subjects, their ties with the British royal family and the specifically "Russian" nature of the society over which the couple presided were much discussed.

As we shall see in the following chapter, traditional images of despotism, anti-Semitism and reaction were largely absent from British discourse until the fall of the

⁸²⁷ Ibid.

⁸²⁸ TNA, FO 371/2090, Report from Sir Bernard Pares to Foreign Office, 13 Jan. 1914.

monarchy.

Chapter 6: 1914-1917: War and Abdication

*The Black shadow which for many years has hung over the Russian throne has passed away. The monk and prime favourite, Grigori Rasputin is dead. There is something of the east about someone from the farmyard who dictated the policies of the Tsar of all the Russias.*⁸²⁹

*The tsar is said to have exclaimed "Thank God" when he heard the wish of the people that he should abdicate. In all the various narratives we have read we have seen nothing to make us suppose that the tsar has not behaved as a man of honour.*⁸³⁰

War with Germany, the scandal of Rasputin and the drama of the abdication; blindly, wilfully Nicolas and Alexandra pursued a path which led to their downfall. These are the features which colour modern popular impressions of the last tsar's reign. In particular, in the years since 1917, the tsar's decision to assume command of his army has been identified as the fatal catalyst. His absence from the capital has been shown as the key factor which permitted Alexandra and Rasputin to govern Russia which in turn led to the revolution.

However, as we shall discuss, although there was concern in some quarters at

⁸²⁹ *Daily Telegraph*, 14 Jul. 1914, p. 1.

⁸³⁰ *Spectator*, 24 Mar. 1917, p. 553.

Nicholas's decision to reside at the front, many commentators greeted it with relief. A number believed it was a positive development and explained its significance in terms of British perceptions of a tsar's paternal relationship with their subjects and images of earlier Russian rulers who had commanded gone to war at the head of their armies. Similarly, although some observers reported rumours that the empress was secretly arranging a separate peace with Germany, those who met her in person were impressed by her loyalty to the allied cause. With the benefit of hindsight Nicholas's abdication may seem unexpected, but, as we shall discuss, even diplomats with long and distinguished careers in Russia and the British Foreign Office failed to foresee the outbreak of violent revolution in March 1917.

The British public had always responded with interest to the tsar and empress (as they typically did to their own royal family) at times of celebration such as their marriage, Nicholas's coronation and the birth of their son as well as during the royal and imperial visits of 1908 and 1909. More specifically 'Russian focused', concepts of despotism and democracy and the extent to which the tsar was able to act as he wanted were an important feature of articles in a variety of British publications. In addition the public followed the twists and turns in Russo-British relations in regards to India as well the Dogger Bank Incident. However, prior to 1914 the focus of British attention on the tsar and empress had come from (broadly) two groupings. One such group consisted of men and women whose employment or personal inclination offered them the opportunity to encourage political, artistic and ecclesiastical intercourse with the Orthodox Church and to travel within the Russian Empire. Another group, often those on the left of British

politics, was made up of persons who attacked the autocracy as a political concept and who publicised the tsar's failings. For most people in Britain, Russia's internal politics could seem an abstract issue with little bearing on their own lives. However, during the First World War, Nicholas and Alexandra's personal and political attributes became of much greater significance for the ordinary Briton. In order to meet the demand for information from the public several newspapers based a number of their journalists in Russia. They included Robert Wilton and Stanley Washburn who wrote for *The Times* as well as long the established Russian experts, E.J. Dillon and Bernard Pares, who were employed by the *Daily Telegraph*. In addition, Hamilton Fyffe reported for the *Daily Mail*, Arthur Ransome for the *Daily News and Leader* and Morgan Philips Price for the *Manchester Guardian*.

Reporters had to tread a careful path since there were severe penalties for those who transgressed Russian sensitivities. In Russia, British newspapers were commonly 'smeared out with the toughest of blacking' before going on sale.⁸³¹ As we have noted, even articles by journalists such as W.T. Stead who were sympathetic to the regime could be censored before it was allowed to go on sale in Russia. On occasion this censorship could be carried to ludicrous lengths as occurred when an advert in the *London Illustrated News* was covered up. Further investigation revealed it to show the tsar supposedly receiving a box of pills from a Lancashire manufacturer.⁸³² On a more serious note, in 1903, *The Times* correspondent, D.D. Braham, who gave prominence in his articles to the

⁸³¹ William Barnes Stevani, *Petrograd Past and Present* (London, 1915), pp. 8-9.

⁸³² *Ibid.*

pogroms, was expelled by the Russian authorities for ‘attacking Russia and Russian policy’.⁸³³ Harold Williams, a passionate Tolstoyan, was permitted to return to Russia as a reporter for the *Daily Chronicle* after having been expelled in 1911 for espionage while working for the *Morning Post*.⁸³⁴ Accusations of spying were not necessarily the figment of an overwrought Russian imagination. For example, in addition to his work with *The Times*, Robert Wilton also reported to the SIS in London.⁸³⁵ Indeed, it may have been that his spying activities took up a large part of his time since does not appear to have exerted himself as journalist. He had an extensive network of Russian contacts and was especially close to the foreign editor of *Novoe Vremya*. As William Harrison has noted, much of what Wilton wrote about Russia was gleaned, second-hand, from this newspaper.⁸³⁶ Wilton, who is remembered today for his claims that Nicholas and Alexandra were murdered as part of a Jewish plot, was greatly disliked by General Sir John Hanbury Williams.⁸³⁷ The attaché who had a military man’s dislike of all journalists, described his compatriots as ‘men of no brains’ but he reserved his particular ire for Wilton who, he said, was ‘the least capable of them all’.⁸³⁸

In August 1914, when Russia went to war with Germany, the tsar invoked God’s blessing in a ceremony in the Winter Palace. *The Times* correspondent boasted that he

⁸³³ *The History of The Times, The Twentieth Century Test 1884-1912* (London, 1947), p. 384.

⁸³⁴ Neilson, ‘Marionette’ p. 66.

⁸³⁵ Philip Knightley, *The Second Oldest Profession: The Spy as a Bureaucrat, Patriot and Fantasists and Whore* (London, 1986), p. 56.

⁸³⁶ W. Harrison, ‘The Times and Russia on the Eve of World War One’ in (eds.) William Harrison and Avril Pyman, *Poetry, Prose and Public Opinion 1850-1970: Aspects of Russia, essays presented in memory of Dr. N.E. Andreyev* (Avebury, 1984), pp. 133-54, p. 135.

⁸³⁷ Robert Wilton, *The Last Days of the Romanovs* (London, 1920).

⁸³⁸ TNA, PRO 30/57/67, General Sir John Hanbury Williams to Foreign Office, 7 Aug. 1915.

was the only foreign journalist allowed into the palace that day. From his apparently privileged position he reported how the tsar had vowed in front of Russia's holiest icon to 'lay down his life for Russia's sake'.⁸³⁹ Nicholas's declaration gave him a sacrificial air and conjured up images of earlier Russian rulers who had led their troops into battle. In reporting it *The Times* perpetuated British images of the exceptional nature of the relationship between a Russian tsar and their subjects, since, amongst the major European powers which went to war 1914, no other ruler made such a dramatic gesture. The Austrian Emperor was too old to personally go to war, and in response to a Berlin crowd, the German Kaiser had spoken in only general terms of the great sacrifices that would be needed by the German nation.⁸⁴⁰ In Britain, although King George V had served in the Royal Navy in his youth and his son Prince Albert (the future George VI) would see action at the Battle of Jutland in 1916, no British monarch had led his troops in battle since George II in 1743.

As the tsar took the oath to defend Russia even at great cost to himself, a large crowd assembled in the square outside the palace. The exact number of people in the crowd is unknown, but the *Evening News* asserted there were 'at least 100, 000'.⁸⁴¹ The *Daily Telegraph* which claimed a substantial, if lesser figure, of 'up to thirty thousand' recorded that many in the crowd carried portraits of Alexandra and her son which had been cut out of popular magazines and then decorated with handmade paper flowers.⁸⁴² Although the

⁸³⁹ *The Times*, 10 Aug. 1914, p. 5.

⁸⁴⁰ *The Times*, 2 Aug. 1914, p. 4.

⁸⁴¹ *Evening News*, 3 Aug. 1914, p. 1.

⁸⁴² *Daily Telegraph*, 4 Aug. 1914, p. 9.

scene was reminiscent of the workers who had carried icons and portraits of the imperial family as they had sought to petition the tsar on Bloody Sunday, the article made no mention of this dark episode in recent Russian history. The reaction of the crowd to the war echoed the first weeks of the war with Japan but memory of the later disillusion was also ignored in the drama of the moment. According to *The Times* correspondent even the Duma, with whom Nicholas had enjoyed a problematic relationship, had spontaneously sung the national anthem in an ‘outburst of love and loyalty to the throne’.⁸⁴³ Whether from genuine optimism or wishful thinking, the newspaper claimed that the enthusiasm of the people and the politicians at the sight of the tsar signalled a return to more tranquil relationship between the people and their ruler than had often been the case.⁸⁴⁴

As Britain itself teetered on the brink of war the reception given to the imperial family gave the comforting perception that the tsar, the empress and the Russian people were united in a common cause. This impression may have been given even greater credence by the reduction in the number of troops guarding Nicholas and Alexandra. On this occasion the *Telegraph* observed that, despite the presence of most of the Romanov clan, security measures were less visible than was normally the case on such occasions.⁸⁴⁵ In the light of his understanding of Russian history and traditional British perceptions of the relationship between a tsar and his subjects Stephen Graham reflected on the exuberant reception accorded Nicholas. Perhaps also bearing in mind Nicholas’s relatively recent successful receptions at Poltava and in the towns along the Volga on 1913, Graham

⁸⁴³ *The Times*, 10 Aug. 1914, p. 5.

⁸⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴⁵ *Daily Telegraph*, 4 Aug. 1914, p. 9.

concluded that it had been the very lines of soldiers supposed to protect them which had prevented the imperial couple from having meaningful contact with most of their subjects ‘with whom they had longed to be at one’.⁸⁴⁶

Britain declared war on Germany on 4 August 1914 and, only three days later, parliament passed the Defence of the Realm Act (D.O.R.A). Although there had been an attempt at press censorship during the Boer War, in general, if a newspaper, with a foreign correspondent in situ, wanted to publish it largely did so without restriction. The government established two agencies whose role it was to ensure the press complied with the act. The first, the Foreign Office News Department, ensured that newspapers exported to the United States of America, the British dominions and neutral countries presented the war news in a way that was beneficial to Britain. The second agency called the Press Bureau, restricted news of diplomatic activities, troop movements and anything which was deemed likely to cause ‘unnecessary alarm’ in the civilian population and, equally important, ‘injure the susceptibilities’ of Britain’s allies in the British press.⁸⁴⁷ The issue of press censorship, in a nation which prided itself on free speech, was a sensitive one but as one director of the Press Bureau, Sir Edward Cook, explained it was ‘deemed necessary to restrict freedom in order not to lose it’.⁸⁴⁸ Under the terms of D.O.R.A, newspapers were forbidden to indicate where cuts had been made. Because, by its very nature, censorship was carried out in secret it has not been possible to scientifically gauge the extent to which censorship may have effected what was written about the tsar and

⁸⁴⁶ *Spectator*, 28 Nov. 1914, p. 735.

⁸⁴⁷ TNA, HO 139/17/66, Home Office Memorandum, 26 Oct. 1914.

⁸⁴⁸ Sir Edward Cook, *The Press in Wartime, with some account of the official press bureau* (London, 1920), p. XII

empire. However, in order to prevent publication of certain news items, the British authorities issued a number of D (Defence) notices. In total, it has been estimated, 747 D notices were issued during the entire length of the war of which sixteen specifically referred to news from Russia.⁸⁴⁹ The relative paucity of D notices in relation to Russia may belie their importance since several were issued at especially critical moments during the war.

On 7 October 1914 a D notice was issued due to concern that Russian efforts on the eastern front were not being fully appreciated in the British press. In July 1915 a further D notice was issued requiring the press to refrain from mentioning Russian munitions shortages and, on the eve of the February Revolution, the press was banned from mentioning anything about the internal unrest in Russia.⁸⁵⁰ However, the absence of news did not always fool the reading public. As Edward Cook later recalled, despite the efforts of the censor to conceal his work, people in Britain suspected that they were not always given the entire truth about events in Russia.⁸⁵¹ Moreover, although Charles à Court Repington was fined £100 for criticising the British High Command in the columns of the *Morning Post*, censorship was not applied equally to all publications. As K.M. Wilson has explained in his study of the *Morning Post*, tensions between politicians with axes to grind conferred ‘a degree of immunity’ on some sections of the press.⁸⁵² Similarly, Sir Stanley Buckmaster recalled how, during his time at the Press Bureau, he had been

⁸⁴⁹ Tania Rose, *Aspects of Political Censorship 1914-1918* (Hull, 1995), esp. chaps. 3 and 4.

⁸⁵⁰ Rose, *Aspects of Political Censorship 1914-1918*, p. 70.

⁸⁵¹ Cook, *The Press in Wartime*, p. 34.

⁸⁵² Wilson, *Morning Post*, p. 89.

prevented from prosecuting both *The Times* and the *Daily Mail* by unnamed, but powerful, people anxious to secure the support of these newspapers.⁸⁵³

The recollections of heads of the Press Bureau show that, despite government restrictions, the press was not monolithic in its responses to the war: indeed there were pacifist journalists and writers who questioned the need for conflict in Europe.⁸⁵⁴ Nonetheless, much of the British press and public were willing supporters of the war with Germany and of Britain's Russian ally. Attitudes to Nicholas and Alexandra at this time were tempered by a number of factors; fear of government censure, patriotic jingoism, danger of a German invasion, and the urgent need to promote Russo-British friendship as part of the war effort. An article in the *Daily Mail* illustrates the lengths to which that particular paper went to uphold spirits on the Home Front and promote the concept of a strong alliance with tsarist Russia. In the early days of the war and despite the fact that it was high summer the newspaper published a 'blurrily illustrated' tale of the tsar's 'snow encrusted Russian soldiers speeding through the night the length of Britain to join their allies on the western front'.⁸⁵⁵ The story, which was described by one contemporary as utter 'bunkum', is an extreme example but it provides a flavour of the desire amongst sections of the press to reinforce notions of Russo-British unity.⁸⁵⁶

Against British perceptions of their political democracy and their constitutional monarchy Britain's alliance with an absolutist state was difficult to defend, although that

⁸⁵³ Wilson, *Morning Post*, p. 90.

⁸⁵⁴ Grace Brockington, 'Translating the Peace: Pacifist Publishing and the Transmission of Foreign Texts' in M. Hammond and S. Towheed, *Publishing in the First World War* (London, 2007), pp. 46-58.

⁸⁵⁵ Koss, *Rise and Fall*, vol., II, p. 244.

⁸⁵⁶ SSEES, Hanbury Williams' Diary, 18 Sept. 1914.

the enemy was portrayed as German militarism. In this respect support for the tsar came from a hitherto unexpected quarter. With German forces just across the Channel, such was the heightened atmosphere of enthusiasm for the war in Britain, even the anti-tsarist magazine *Free Russia* felt compelled to lay aside its antagonism towards the autocracy. Since its foundation *Free Russia* had published articles deploring the excesses of the autocratic regime, carried interviews with Russian political exiles and looked forward to the establishment of a democratic state in Russia. In the autumn of 1914 the magazine voluntarily ceased publication but before it did so it took a stance which was strikingly at odds with its previous editorial policy. For much of Nicholas's reign, *Free Russia* had campaigned vociferously against the injustices of the tsarist regime and carried articles ridiculing and belittling the emperor. However, such was the atmosphere in the early weeks of the war, that *Free Russia* not only decided to cease publication but, in its final edition, also printed an editorial which supported the tsar and gratefully associated his actions with Britain's own fate and the 'welfare and free institutions of England'.⁸⁵⁷

(i) September 1915: Nicholas Takes Command of the army

The allied war with Germany started optimistically and nowhere more so than in Russia, as witnessed by Nicholas and Alexandra's reception in St Petersburg. However, whether from incompetence, lack of materiel, superior German forces, simply bad luck or a combination of all four, by the summer and late autumn of 1915 the Russian army had suffered defeats at Warsaw and the fortress city of Lemberg and the authorities even

⁸⁵⁷ *Free Russia*, Oct. 1914, p. 8.

considered evacuating St Petersburg.⁸⁵⁸ The situation was so serious that, as early as 18 August 1915, General Sir John Hanbury Williams noted there were rumours of revolution and talk of a separate peace with Germany.⁸⁵⁹

On 5 September 1915, in response to events on the Front, the tsar assumed command of the Russian forces. In retrospect his dismissal of Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaievich as commander-in-chief and his frequent absences from the Russian capital have been seen as contributory factors in the outbreak of revolution in March 1917. Clearly, the change of command of the Russian army, in the midst of a great and terrible war, was a potentially controversial decision for Russia's allies. In Britain, *Hansard*, the record of Parliamentary proceedings, could be quoted in the press and remained outside of the remit of the censor. It was with this in mind, as well as the finer points of Commons etiquette, that the Speaker forbade Joseph King, the Liberal M.P. for North Somerset, to speak in the House on 'Russian internal affairs'.⁸⁶⁰ However, this was not before King had launched an attack on the censorship of the British press, alleging the public were being kept in the dark about the fact that Russia was passing through a revolution and that the whole government [was] being shaken'. In particular, he noted, the news which he said had come as 'a thunderclap' to the British public that the Grand Duke Nikolai, who had hitherto been held up as a 'great general of the war', had been replaced.⁸⁶¹ Nonetheless, in spite of the subject's sensitivity within Parliament, there was considerable coverage of the

⁸⁵⁸TNA, FO 800/75, Sir George Buchanan to Sir Edward Grey, 23 Aug. 1915.

⁸⁵⁹SSEES, Hanbury Williams' Diary, 18 Aug. 1915.

⁸⁶⁰J. King M.P., *Hansard*, vol. 79, p.539-40, 22 Sept. 1915.

⁸⁶¹*Ibid.*

tsar's decision in the press. It provided an opportunity for some newspapers to 'let off steam' and vent their frustration with Russia's inability to successfully prosecute the war on the eastern front. The reason why such articles were passed for publication may be because the censor was reassured by the fact that many of the same commentators praised Nicholas for taking command of his army.

As a young man, the tsar had spent five years as a subaltern officer in some of the most elite regiments of the Russian army but this was scant preparation for his role as commander in chief in wartime. However, despite his lack of practical experience, his resolve was greeted with enthusiasm, even elation in some British circles. The *Manchester Guardian*, for example, admitted that the Russian army had, as it diplomatically put it, been denied success. However, it was the perspective of the newspaper that the grand duke had, in effect, been a virtual 'dictator' who should bear responsibility for events across vast swathes of Russian territory which had affected the lives of millions.⁸⁶² The newspaper listed what it said had been the grand duke's many errors: 'failure of Russian arms, the chaos in the services of supply, the reactionary internal government, the persecution of, and wholesale expulsion of, Jews from the war zone'.⁸⁶³ Nevertheless, having reviewed events on the eastern front and found the grand duke's leadership wanting, the article concluded on a relatively optimistic note when it declared that 'before the whole world, [the tsar has] identified himself and his throne with

⁸⁶² *Manchester Guardian*, 9 Sept. 1915, p. 6.

⁸⁶³ *Ibid.*

war until the enemy is defeated'.⁸⁶⁴

The image presented by *The Times* of the Grand Duke Nikolai was somewhat more flattering than that in the *Manchester Guardian*. Rather *The Times* described him as a man of 'strong character' and 'iron will' who 'was loved by those under his command'.⁸⁶⁵ Yet, for all its praise of the former army commander, the newspaper presented a positive view of the future for Russian arms. Under a headline 'Russia's Favourable Position', which belied the situation on the eastern front, *The Times* carried two full pages of comment. The newspaper began by setting the tsar's action in the context of past Russian history and asserted that Nicholas was following the example of 'his illustrious ancestors'.⁸⁶⁶ The last time Russia had been so imperilled by a foreign army had been in 1812 when Napoleon's troops had entered the city of Moscow. However, presumably, since France was now an ally of the entente powers, *The Times* focused on a comparison between Nicholas and his grandfather Tsar Alexander II who had freed the serfs. *The Times* was confident that under Nicholas's personal leadership Germany would be beaten and future Russian generations would honour him as a 'second Tsar Liberator'.⁸⁶⁷

Given that other monarchs of allied nations were unlikely to take personal command of their armies, some commentators explained the tsar's decision by reference to images of 'traditional' Russia. Indeed these perceptions were a feature of an article in the *Illustrated London News* were echoing reports from Port Arthur during 1904 which

⁸⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁶⁵ *The Times*, 9 Sept. 1915, p. 5.

⁸⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁶⁷ Ibid.

described how the portrait of the tsar was carried under special guard by his troops during ‘an advance’ at the Front.⁸⁶⁸ If the tsar’s image was treated with such reverence, how much more so his person, at least according to an article in the *Daily Telegraph*. The newspaper explained, ‘the peasantry of Russia hold the person of their Sovereign sacred [therefore] the knowledge that he is sharing their fate and [...] their hardships will exercise a profound [and positive] effect’ on them.⁸⁶⁹ An analysis in the *Spectator* is particularly interesting since the periodical was recognised as a vehicle for ‘philosophical radicalism’ and might therefore have been expected to eschew more conservative theories of peasant devotion to their tsar and notions of “Holy Russia”. However, the *Spectator* argued that, whereas in other countries, should the monarch take command of the army it would count for very little, in Russia it held ‘vast symbolic potency’.⁸⁷⁰ The article explained that for his subjects the tsar was no ordinary monarch, no ordinary war leader but ‘ordained by God [...] Russia’s religious, political and family head’.⁸⁷¹ There was one notable exception amongst those commentators who eulogised Nicholas’s decision and who asserted that his new role dovetailed exactly with Russian history and the structure of society as a perfect example of the relationship between the tsar and his subjects. In light of the time he had spent with the Russian peasantry and his understanding of their regard for their tsar, Stephen Graham cautioned against Nicholas spending time in the trenches. He argued that the common soldier would be confused by the presence in their midst of

⁸⁶⁸ *Illustrated London News*, 1 Jul. 1916, p. 1.

⁸⁶⁹ *Daily Telegraph*, 10 Sept. 1915, p. 11.

⁸⁷⁰ *Spectator*, 11 Sept. 1915, p. 324.

⁸⁷¹ *Ibid.*

the man they regarded as 'a demi-god'.⁸⁷² There may have been many reasons for the British response to Nicholas's decision to assume command of his army. In part the positive response in the press was based on a traditional British understanding of the relationship between a tsar and the expectation that Nicholas's presence at the front would reinvigorate his troops. Given such views, it may also be public commentary was partly influenced by the fact that it took place at a critical moment for British forces. Troops on the western front were making little headway and in the spring of 1915 Germany had, for the first time, used poison gas against entente troops and launched an unrestricted U-boat campaign against allied shipping. In addition to the thousands of British troops in Belgium and France, many were now fighting in Africa, the Middle East and the Balkans. If the press had greeted Nicholas's decision with dismay, not only might they have given encouragement to the enemy, but they may well have depressed morale amongst Britain's own forces.

In public, in articles which had been passed by the censor the tsar's assumption of command was met with approval. However, in view of the fact that an M.P. had been prevented from speaking on the subject in the Commons chamber, it might be reasonable to suppose that, within some elements of the British Establishment, the tsar's decision was controversial. However, the response of the British ambassador was as hopeful and uncritical of as any journalist who wrote under the gaze of the censor. On 23 August 1915, when Buchanan first noted rumours that there might be a change of commander-in-

⁸⁷² Stephen Graham, *Russia and the World: A Study of the war and a statement of the World Problems that now confront Russia and Great Britain* (London, 1915), p. 163.

chief, the ambassador treated the idea somewhat laconically. In a report to London he noted, without offering any specific comment that the tsar ‘was thinking of taking up supreme command’.⁸⁷³ Two days later, when he heard from the Russian minister of foreign affairs that the grand duke was to be relieved of his post, he received the news with equanimity. Buchanan’s concerns about political intrigues in Tsarkoe Selo, which were a feature of the last years of the regime, were noticeably absent on this occasion, In all probability recalling images of Nicholas’s successful encounters with his subjects during recent years, the ambassador hoped that, having taken command of the army, the tsar would ‘not make the mistake of spending his time at headquarters but would show himself to his troops’.⁸⁷⁴

When Nicholas’s decision to assume command of the army was made public, Buchanan’s testimony to the Foreign Office remained unflustered. Indeed it contained a distinct element of optimism and appeared to recall the heady days of August 1914 when the Duma had pledged loyalty to the tsar and support for the war. In the twelve-months from the outbreak of war Nicholas’s relationship with the Duma had not always been so equitable. For example, in the summer of 1915, the centre parties of the Duma and the State Council had formed a so-called Progressive Bloc which demanded a government accountable to the Duma. However, over the question of the change of army command, Buchanan was hopeful of a more amicable relationship between the deputies and the tsar. Thus, he informed London that ‘the removal of the Grand Duke Nicholas Nikolaevich

⁸⁷³TNA, FO 800/75, Sir George Buchanan to Lord Grey, 23 Aug. 1915.

⁸⁷⁴TNA, WO 105582/120948, Sir George Buchanan to War Office, 25 August 1915.

will be welcomed by the Duma'.⁸⁷⁵ Buchanan brushed aside objections, insisting that: 'apprehensions expressed in certain quarters seem to me exaggerated' since there is no doubt the tsar's decision will be 'well received in the army'.⁸⁷⁶ In Britain George V seems to have been swayed by Buchanan's optimism since he telegraphed to his cousin of his delight that he had 'assumed command of [his] armies in the field'.⁸⁷⁷

In Moscow, R.H. Bruce Lockhart, having taken soundings from his contacts including the mayor of the city, was apparently resigned to the news. His report to London informed Whitehall that the 'change of command was of no great significance'.⁸⁷⁸ However, whether this was a result of confidence that Nicholas's presence at the Front would contribute to a previously elusive victory or because he despaired of the situation is not clear. Within the privacy of confidential correspondence Major General Sir Alfred Knox was more critical. In a report to London he sounded a note of caution and offered a gloomy prognosis should victory remain elusive. Knox had a number of acquaintances in the Russia army and was therefore in position to obtain the opinion of officers in the field. His findings were far from reassuring. In a report to Whitehall he claimed to have been able to find only one officer in favour of Nicholas's assumption of supreme command.⁸⁷⁹ In a derisory reference to the empress's influence over her husband, Knox described it as 'a strange decision'. He reported that the ordinary St Petersburg public believed Alexandra had encouraged the tsar to take this momentous step following a vision of the

⁸⁷⁵TNA, FO 371/2455, Sir George Buchanan to Foreign Office, 25 Aug. 1915.

⁸⁷⁶TNA, FO 371/2450, Sir George Buchanan to Lord Grey, 8 Sept. 1915.

⁸⁷⁷ *Daily Telegraph*, 15 Sept. 1915, p. 5.

⁸⁷⁸TNA, FO 371/2455, Robert Bruce Lockhart to Foreign Office, 17 Sept. 1915.

⁸⁷⁹ Lords, Lloyd George Papers D/12/13/15, General Sir Alfred Knox to Foreign Office, 19 Sept. 1915.

archangel Gabriel.⁸⁸⁰ According to Knox, popular gossip claimed that the empress had been told by the angel that Russian troops would continue to suffer defeats until the tsar stood at the head of his army. Other, more cynical citizens, he reported, insisted that her advisor had not been a heavenly messenger but the rather more diabolical Rasputin.⁸⁸¹ As an Ulsterman, he may well have had little time for tales of angelic visions, but for Knox the source of the advice was less important than the damage the change of command might do. In particular he warned that with Nicholas at the front, it opened up the distinct likelihood of an ‘increase in intrigues’ amongst pro-German elements at court.⁸⁸²

Knox was not alone in expressing his fears that Nicholas’s decision to assume supreme command was likely to have unintended but grave consequences. Even before the decision was confirmed General Sir John Hanbury Williams wrote to General Kitchener. He argued that were the tsar to take command it would be ‘a very grave error’ since his fate would be inexorably identified with the fortunes of his troops.⁸⁸³ He therefore warned that if the Russian army continued to suffer defeats then ‘heaven knows what will happen to Russia but it is infinitely certain what will happen to His Majesty’.⁸⁸⁴ As senior British military attaché Hanbury Williams was based at military headquarters where he had enjoyed frequent meetings with Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaievich whom he evidently admired. In support of his argument that it would be a mistake for the tsar to remove the grand duke from his post and to assume command of the army himself, Hanbury

⁸⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸⁸² Ibid.

⁸⁸³ TNA, PRO 30/57/67, Letter from General Sir John Hanbury Williams to General Kitchener, 30 Aug. 1915.

⁸⁸⁴ Ibid.

Williams drafted a lengthy defence of the grand duke. In particular, he described him as an honest man, well loved by the army who had not allowed personal intrigues to cloud his judgement.⁸⁸⁵ In contrast to the grand duke's excellent personal qualities, Hanbury Williams offered an acerbic assessment of the tsar's ability to successfully combine the roles of military chief and monarch. He crossed out his initial draft of a report to London in which he declared that it was extremely 'doubtful whether [the tsar] could claim any of [the grand dukes positive] qualifications'.⁸⁸⁶ However, his more circumspect, but equally depressing, conclusion that: 'it is doubtful whether one man can [efficiently] fulfil the duties of head of state and commander in chief of the army' remained in the report he sent to Lord Kitchener.⁸⁸⁷

Although initially despondent at the change of command, Hanbury Williams continued to live at imperial headquarters (*Stavka*) and despite his misgivings he was swayed by the tsar's great personal charm. Living in relatively close proximity to Nicholas the two men appear to have enjoyed an easy rapport. In their leisure time the two men discussed Hanbury Williams' ancestor who had served at the court of Empress Elizabeth, and the tsar laughed at the attaché's jokes about Russo-British rivalry in India and popular Russian allegations that Britain had 'stolen Russian munitions'.⁸⁸⁸ The tsar confided to Hanbury Williams on a wide range of subjects including his feelings of utter exhaustion on the day Russia went to war, his shyness and even the fact that the empress had once

⁸⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁸⁶ TNA, PRO 30/57/67, General Sir John Hanbury Williams to General Kitchener, 5 Oct. 1915.

⁸⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸⁸ SSEES, Diary of General Sir John Hanbury Williams, 1914-17.

been engaged to someone else.⁸⁸⁹ Imperial headquarters was some distance from any real fighting and life there could be extremely pleasant. Both the tsar and Hanbury Williams made time for long excursions into the countryside, the Englishman favourably comparing the scenery around Mogilev with the Vale of Aylesbury in Buckinghamshire. He often found himself jokingly chided when Nicholas suspected he had taken a different route in order to avoid encroaching on the imperial entourage.⁸⁹⁰

Hanbury Williams' diary shows that he was much liked by the empress who occasionally visited Mogilev with her daughters. For example, during June, July and August 1916 the empress sent Hanbury Williams several boxes of roses, lilies of the valley, sweet peas and orchids to decorate his room at the imperial *Stavka*.⁸⁹¹ As had been the case with the tsar, Hanbury Williams fell under Alexandra's spell. In June 1916 he noted in his diary that the empress was 'most charming [and] had a great love for Britain [and had sent] a most kind and sympathetic message' following the loss of General Kitchener.⁸⁹² The Secretary of State's ship was torpedoed en route to Russia. Conspiracy theorists attributed his death at this most critical juncture of the war to German fore-knowledge of the general's mission, perhaps as a result of pro-German forces in Russia.⁸⁹³

If Hanbury Williams is to be believed, not only did the empress share his loss at Kitchener's death and shower him with flowers but she also 'poured out her troubles' to

⁸⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁹⁰ SSEES, Hanbury Williams' Diary, 15 Mar. 1915,

⁸⁹¹ Ibid. 9 June-1 August 1916.

⁸⁹² Ibid. 7 Jun. 1916

⁸⁹³ See for example, *The Times*, 7 Jun. 1916, p. 10.

him.⁸⁹⁴ He must surely have been flattered by the friendship of the imperial couple and, in these convivial surroundings he became more understanding of their predicaments and blamed any shortcomings on the Russian system of government. Albeit that Nicholas was an autocrat, Hanbury Williams grasped the limited realities of ruling over a vast empire. As a result he once observed Nicholas was ‘no more an autocrat than our own king’.⁸⁹⁵ Hanbury Williams’s role at *Stavka* combined that of a soldier and courtier. In retrospect his comments about the imperial couple can sometimes give the impression that he was blind to their faults. However, when Russia, the tsar and the alliance stood on the brink of catastrophe, he used his friendship to plead for a change of course. Thus, on the eve of the revolution, with a sense of confidence engendered by his cordial relationship with the tsar, and without consulting either London or Buchanan, Hanbury Williams appealed to Nicholas to: ‘govern with the advice of good councillors [...] chosen from amongst the people themselves’.⁸⁹⁶ Whether the tsar would have taken the advice of an Englishman, even one whose company he appeared to enjoy can only be guessed at. The appeal came too late and Hanbury Williams’s letter was returned after the abdication with the seal unbroken.

(ii) Rasputin and Pro-German Plots

Nicholas was extremely conscientious and fully aware of his duties as autocrat but, as more than one historian has noted, when the tsar assumed supreme command of the army

⁸⁹⁴ SSEES, Hanbury Williams’ Diary, 27 Dec. 1916.

⁸⁹⁵ SSEES, Hanbury Williams’ Diary, 7 Jul. 1916.

⁸⁹⁶ TNA, CAB/ 24/7, General Sir John Hanbury Williams to Sir William Robertson, Mar. 1917.

he felt ‘the heavy burden of political leadership slipping from his shoulders with immense relief’.⁸⁹⁷ From headquarters he made extensive journeys, reviewing Russian troops on their way to battle and visiting others convalescing from their wounds in military hospitals. On his daily walks in the countryside the tsar engaged in animated conversation with the local peasantry.⁸⁹⁸ Nicholas recreated something of his more carefree, days as a young army subaltern and avoided giving attention to some of the mundane but vital political tasks which had previously called upon much of his time. In one telling letter, after a visit by some ministers to Mogilev, he complained to his wife that they were ‘wasting his time’.⁸⁹⁹ Nicholas’s physical distance from the capital, his preference for specifically military concerns and his frustration with the machinery of government created a political vacuum. This void was filled, with the encouragement of her husband, by the empress.⁹⁰⁰

Although the empress was of German birth Alexandra’s response to the war had been as patriotic as any native-born Russian. From the outset of hostilities she centred her concerns on the wounded and the civilians displaced by the conflict.⁹⁰¹ A number of hospitals and field evacuation trains were established under her patronage. An English nurse on the Russian Front recalled seeing Alexandra’s ‘beautifully equipped hospital

⁸⁹⁷ Richard Pearson, *The Russian Moderates and the Crisis of Tsarism 1914-1917* (London, 1977), p. 55.

⁸⁹⁸ Paul and Beatrice Grabbe (eds.), *The Private World of the Last Tsar in the Photographs and Notes of General Count Alexander Grabbe* (London, 1985), pp. 139-58.

⁸⁹⁹ Joseph T. Fuhrmann (ed.), *The Complete Wartime Correspondence of Tsar Nicholas II and Empress Alexandra Feodorovna April 1914-March 1917*, (New York and London, 2000), p. 223.

⁹⁰⁰ Fuhrmann, *Wartime Correspondence*, p. 600.

⁹⁰¹ See for example, Fuhrmann, *Wartime Correspondence*, p. 19

trains'.⁹⁰² The empress trained as a Red Cross nurse, assisted at medical operations and sat by the beds of the wounded and the dying. In September 1916 the *Daily Mirror* carried an article entitled 'The Empress of Pity' which explained that Alexandra, dressed in the uniform of a nursing sister visited Russia's wounded at a palace now turned into a hospital.⁹⁰³ As Orlando Figes and Boris Kolonitskii tell us, in Russia, for social and cultural reasons her role as a nurse became a matter of controversy.⁹⁰⁴ In contrast, in Britain, members of the upper classes worked in army hospitals where it was said they undertook 'disagreeable tasks, with no thought of fame or glory but for the sake of sharing in the huge fight' against Germany.⁹⁰⁵ In St Petersburg, in April 1916, Lady Muriel Paget established an Anglo-Russian hospital in a palace belonging to the empress's sister, Grand Duchess Elizabeth.⁹⁰⁶ It was therefore a matter of pride that the wife of an allied ruler should also bring comfort to the wounded. In addition, the empress's evident devotion to the wounded and dying such images reiterated British understanding of a Russian empress as the mother of the nation. However, as the months passed and the defeats mounted however, the positive aspects of Alexandra's wartime role were pushed to the background. In its place suspicions arose rumours which suggested the empress's loyalties lay with the land of her birth and that she was working to secure a separate peace with Germany, thus leaving the allies bereft of a vital ally in the east. For British commentators', aspects of Alexandra's character, her political

⁹⁰² Florence Farnborough, *Nurse at the Russian Front 1914-1917* (London, 1974), p. 107.

⁹⁰³ *Daily Mirror*, 6 Sept. 1915, p. 1.

⁹⁰⁴ Orlando Figes and Boris Kolonitskii, *Interpreting the Russian Revolution*, p. 24.

⁹⁰⁵ T. Bowser, *The Story of British V.A.D. work in the Great War* (London, 1917), p. 24.

⁹⁰⁶ Cross, *St Petersburg and the British*, p. 251.

influence, her dislike of court life as well as her German roots, which had once seemed such virtues later came to be seen in a more troubling light.

Between September 1915 and February 1917 Russia had four prime ministers, three ministers of transport and four ministers of agriculture. In peacetime this might have been the source of confusion. In wartime the frequent changes of government officials combined with Russia's failure on the battlefield gave rise to rumours that the country was being deliberately undermined.⁹⁰⁷ In the spring and early summer of 1915 nearly 500 shops, offices and factories owned by persons of German descent in Russia were attacked by the mob. In addition 275 apartments were looted and 700 ethnic Germans were attacked, some fatally.⁹⁰⁸ The British ambassador hypothesised that the Germans themselves had been responsible for the violence in order to disrupt the war effort.⁹⁰⁹ In such an atmosphere, where apparently sane people made such ludicrous accusations, it was easy for commentators to imagine that the empress retained the German loyalties of her youth. This was serious enough and reflected the changes in British perceptions of Alexandra since her marriage. In those days her German descent had been viewed as a factor for peace.⁹¹⁰

Rumours that Alexandra was not entirely loyal to the allied cause were partly given credibility because of the very private world inhabited by the tsar and empress. The imperial couple found immense satisfaction in encounters with their ordinary subjects but

⁹⁰⁷ William C. Fuller, *Fantasies of Treason: The Foe within* (Ithaca, NY., 2006).

⁹⁰⁸ Fuller, *Fantasies of Treason*, pp. 345-349.

⁹⁰⁹ TNA, FO 371/2452, Sir George Buchanan to Lord Grey, 12 and 14 Jun. 1915.

⁹¹⁰ See Chapter 2.

they also rejoiced in their family life and shunned the social sphere traditionally inhabited by Russia's rulers. At the time of Nicholas's accession, his dislike of the court and its inevitable cliques was interpreted by British commentators in beneficial terms.⁹¹¹ However, in later years, the fact that the tsar and empress lived within a relatively closed world gave some cause for concern. In the final years of imperial Russia the political influence of their imperial relatives, mystics and religious charlatans was a thread that ran throughout British interpretations of the imperial couple's actions. Even before the war British diplomatic and other correspondence was peppered with assertions that senior members of the imperial family were a powerful and negative influence at court. These groupings, invariably regarded as reactionary, were described in the British press and in diplomatic correspondence as 'the court party', 'court camarilla', a 'grand ducal' or 'military party', or, most damning of all, 'the German group'. W.T. Stead of the *Pall Mall Gazette* believed that a senior member of the so-called 'court party' was the dowager Empress Mariia Fedorovna. Reflecting on a discussion with the dowager empress Stead recalled that she had laughed off his suggestion of any political influence over her son. He nevertheless recorded (without dissension) that many Russians believed that 'she is an evil influence'.⁹¹²

The influence at the imperial court of two sisters (Grand Duchesses Anastasia and Militsa) was considered to be especially unfortunate. Originally from the Balkan kingdom of Montenegro the two sisters had married Russian grand dukes, Anastasia to Grand Duke

⁹¹¹ See Chapter 2.

⁹¹² Baylen, *Tsar's Lecturer General*, p 46.

Nikolai Nikolaevich and her sister, Militsa, to his younger brother Peter. In 1901 the Montenegrin sisters introduced the tsar and empress to a Frenchman, and so-called mystic, clairvoyant and faith healer, Philippe Nazier-Vachot. Monsieur Philippe, as he was known, was said by his critics to be no more than a butcher's assistant from Lyons. However, after the birth of four daughters, Alexandra was desperate to have a male heir and seems to have been swayed by his personality. In 1902 he predicted that she would soon give birth to a son but the empress appears shortly afterwards to have suffered either a false pregnancy or an early miscarriage. Philippe returned to France but the influence of Anastasia, Militsa and their circle did not diminish. It was through their auspices that, in 1905, the imperial couple met Rasputin whom the empress came to believe could prevent her son dying from the effects of haemophilia. The fact that the tsar and empress surrounded themselves with such apparently shady characters gave rise to salacious rumours of occult and, worse, goings on at Tsarskoe Selo. For some commentators, they underpinned Nicholas and Alexandra's motivation, for others, rumours of 'dark forces' at work reinforced centuries of perceptions of the Russian court as medieval, backward and distinctly un-British.

British commentators found the apparent influence of spiritualist practices at the Russian court especially fascinating. Observers of all political hues often presented an interest in spiritualism as the epitome of superstitious, dissolute and corrupt regime. Nonetheless, a belief in the supernatural was well established across Russia throughout all

sections of the populace long before Nicholas and Alexandra came to the throne.⁹¹³ This was the case even within educated and aristocratic circles: the court of Alexander II was said to have taken an enthusiastic interest in the subject.⁹¹⁴ After 1905, when censorship was relaxed, a number of “spiritualist” journals were published in Russia. These magazines enjoyed a wide readership with topics which ranged from animal magnetism to automatic writing.⁹¹⁵ However, an interest in the spirit world was also part of a wider European phenomenon which took hold amongst all classes during the second half of the nineteenth century.⁹¹⁶ In Britain, W.T. Stead and Arthur Conan Doyle were just two of its most notable adherents and there were claims that Queen Victoria also took a keen interest in the subject.⁹¹⁷ Nevertheless, despite its eminently respectable devotees, British observers continued to present spiritualism at the Russian court as peculiarly Russian, sensational, bizarre and politically dangerous.

The war years saw the height of the ‘Rasputin Affair’ but, as early as 1908, the popular *Daily Graphic* had reported the existence of unsavoury characters within the imperial court and claimed that the tsar ‘had permitted himself to succumb to the magnetism and trickery of [disreputable] advisors’.⁹¹⁸ In Russia, in 1910, as Simon Dixon tells us,

⁹¹³ Julia Mannherz, ‘Mysterious knocks, flying potatoes and rebellious servants: Spiritualism and social conflict in late imperial Russia’ in D. Brett and Claire Jarvis and Irina Marin (eds.) *Four Empires and an enlargement: States, Societies and individuals: transfiguring perspectives and images of Central and Eastern Europe*, (London, 2008), pp. 1-15.

⁹¹⁴ Maria Carlson, ‘Fashionable Occultism, Spiritualism, Theosophy, Freemasonry, and Hermeticism in Fin-de-Siècle Russia in Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal, (ed.) *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture* (London, 1997), p. 136.

⁹¹⁵ Carlson ‘Fashionable Occultism’, p. 138.

⁹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹¹⁷ Ruth Brandon, *The Spiritualists, The Passion for the Occult in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (London, 1983), p. 220.

⁹¹⁸ *Daily Graphic*, 5 Jun. 1908, p. 7.

rumours that Rasputin was an enthusiastic member of the notorious religious sect the *Khlysty* were made public.⁹¹⁹ For many British observers of Russian affairs, the friendship between an empress and Rasputin, a sort of Russian ‘mad mullah’ as Hanbury Williams described him was inexplicable.⁹²⁰ Some commentators concluded that the empress must be mentally unbalanced. In 1910, the then British ambassador, Sir Arthur Nicolson, complained that Robert Wilton had telegraphed *The Times* claiming that Alexandra was ‘the victim of a mental disease’.⁹²¹ Nonetheless, although he believed that this particular claim was an unfortunate exaggeration, Nicolson accepted that the empress was showing signs of ‘a nervous depression and lassitude’.⁹²² By May 1914 Sir George Buchanan, who had replaced Nicolson as Britain’s ambassador in St Petersburg, reported as a fact that, not only was Rasputin a member of the *Khlysty* but he had been made a priest. In addition he informed London, as a sign of imperial approval a dacha had been taken for Rasputin near the imperial retreat at Livadia.⁹²³

In the light of such stories, as the war progressed, amongst diplomats and other British officials, the empress took on the characteristics of a *bête-noire*. Together, Alexandra and Rasputin were seen to be the ‘dark forces’ which exercised an unnatural control over the tsar and were behind every military calamity, every change of minister and every rumour of a separate peace. The heart of British concerns about the empress lay in the desperate need to keep Russia in the war. Russians complained that Britain ought to

⁹¹⁹ Simon Dixon, The ‘Mad Monk’ Iliodor in Tsaritsyn, *SEER*, vol. 88, Personality and Place in Russian Culture (Jan./Apr. 2010), p. 397.

⁹²⁰ SSEES, Hanbury Williams’ Diary, 19 Aug. 1915.

⁹²¹ CUL Hardinge Papers, vol. 20, Sir Arthur Nicolson to Sir Charles Hardinge, 26 Jan. 1910.

⁹²² *Ibid.*

⁹²³ TNA, FO 371/2093, Sir George Buchanan to Lord Grey, 14 May 1914.

supply them with more arms and did not believe those who told them that the country lacked sufficient for its own use.⁹²⁴ Some British attempts to convince the Russians that she was a good ally were comically tragic and indicate a disregard for Russian sophistication. In the absence of supplies of shell and rifles the British authorities searched around for alternatives including a fleet of ambulance cars. The ambulances were transported to St Petersburg however, inspection of them *in situ* revealed them to be ‘utterly hopeless and of no practical use at all’.⁹²⁵ Unable even to provide a decent set of ambulances for the Russian Red Cross, a mixture of desperation and naïve paternalism, promoted a suggestion from Captain Alexander Proctor that ‘a cargo of sugar’ ought to be sent to Russia because ‘the childish mind of the *moujik* and his wife would be impressed by such practical sympathy’.⁹²⁶

As the situation on the eastern front deteriorated so references to Rasputin in diplomatic and other correspondence increased. In August 1915, Buchanan filed the following report in which he observed that: ‘the unpopularity of the empress is assuming serious proportions [since] it is known that she still sees the monk Rasputin whose private life is a scandal’.⁹²⁷ Two months later Buchanan’s impression was even more grave. He told London that ‘hatred is the only word to describe the feeling against the empress’.⁹²⁸ She and Rasputin are regarded as the tsar’s ‘malignant counsellors’.⁹²⁹ At the start of 1916, Bruce Lockhart added to the dismal impression, writing that knowledge of

⁹²⁴ TNA, ADM 1/8434/280, General Sir Alfred Knox to British Admiralty, 19 September 1915.

⁹²⁵ TNA, FO 371/2450, Sir George Buchanan to Foreign Office, 27 Oct. 1915.

⁹²⁶ Lords, Lloyd George Papers’, E/3/3/1, Captain Alexander Proctor, to Lloyd George, 30 Nov. 1916.

⁹²⁷ TNA, 800/75, Sir George Buchanan to Lord Grey, 23 Aug. 1915.

⁹²⁸ TNA, FO 800/75, Sir George Buchanan to Lord Grey, 13 Oct. 1915.

⁹²⁹ *Ibid.*

Rasputin's relationship with the empress was no longer confined to elite circles and, as a result, 'the tsar had lost considerable popularity with the common people'.⁹³⁰ As the war dragged on gossip circulated in all levels of society suggesting that Alexandra was Rasputin's mistress. Perhaps exhausted by his work and weary of the war Bruce Lockhart began to suspect that even these colourful stories about the empress and Rasputin were 'were not devoid of truth'.⁹³¹ By December 1916, even General Sir John Hanbury Williams, who had received many kindnesses from the empress, added his weight to the clamour against her. On 18 December 1916, in a letter to the Prime Minister, Lloyd George in which he claimed that all of Russia had 'asserted itself against the Rasputin clique [making] it seem impossible that the fate of a huge empire should remain much longer at the mercy of the plotting of a hysterical woman with [Rasputin] a depraved peasant'.⁹³² A popular film made by Gaumont and apparently shown in Russia, told the story of a French woman who discovers that her German husband is a spy and shoots him dead. The intended moral was that 'loyalty to the abstract idea of patriotism was more important than the love for a human being'.⁹³³ For its Russian audience, the film could well have seemed an analogy for the tsar, the empress and Rasputin.

A reading of Alexandra's wartime correspondence with her husband shows that she was both loyal to Russia and vehemently opposed to the Kaiser's Germany. If she did hope for an early end to 'the hideous war' it was as a result of her experiences treating the

⁹³⁰ TNA, CAB 371/142/26, R.H. Bruce Lockhart to Lord Grey, 22 Jan. 1916.

⁹³¹ TNA, FO 371/2450, R.H. Bruce Lockhart to Sir George Buchanan, 30 Oct. 1916.

⁹³² Lords, E/59/3, Major General Sir John Hanbury Williams to Lloyd George, 18 Dec. 1916.

⁹³³ Hubertus F. Jahn, *Patriotic Culture in Russia During World War One* (Ithaca, NY., 1995), p. 161.

wounded in the palace hospital rather than any sympathy with the German Kaiser.⁹³⁴ The tsarevich's English tutor, Charles Sydney Gibbes, later insisted that Alexandra had 'voluntarily refused to receive any communication from her relatives on the enemy side'.⁹³⁵ However, the empress was extremely close to her brother the Grand Duke of Hesse and, although he was a serving officer with the German army, she engaged in correspondence with him until at least December 1916.⁹³⁶ The evidence as to whether the grand duke visited Russia during the war remains inconclusive but it was certainly viewed as a distinct possibility, even as an actual fact, by some British officials. For example, in July 1915, General John Yarde Buller advised General Kitchener that he had 'private information' that the grand duke of Hesse was in Russia and was actively discussing peace terms'.⁹³⁷ Nonetheless, unaware of her private correspondence, Buchanan reassured London that the empress had 'sacrificed all family ties with Germany on account of the war'.⁹³⁸ However, a month after Buchanan's placatory report, Hanbury Williams noted that the Russian newspapers were openly stating that the German grand duke was attempting to broker a peace with the empress.⁹³⁹ In the light of such reports Francis Bertie, the British ambassador to Paris, worried that 'the empress and Rasputin might persuade the tsar to break the promises he had made to the allies'.⁹⁴⁰ In October 1916 Buchanan, hoping to discuss these stories of German sympathisers at the highest

⁹³⁴ Fuhrmann, *Wartime Correspondence*, p. 140.

⁹³⁵ 'Unpublished Article by Charles Sydney Gibbes concerning his time with the Imperial Family' Special Collections', Bodleian Library Oxford.

⁹³⁶ Petra H. Kleinpenning (ed.). *The Correspondence of the Empress Alexandra of Russia with Ernst Ludwig and Eleonore, Grand Duke and Grand Duchess of Hesse 1878-1916*, p. 370.

⁹³⁷ TNA, FO 800/75, General John Yarde Butler to General Kitchener, 20 Jul. 1915.

⁹³⁸ TNA, FO 800/75, Sir George Buchanan, to Lord Grey, 23 Jul. 1915.

⁹³⁹ SSEES, Hanbury Williams' Diary, 19 Aug. 1915.

⁹⁴⁰ Lords, E/3/14/6, Lord Francis Bertie to Sir Charles Hardinge, 24 Aug. 1915.

level of the imperial court but ignorant of the tsar's irritation with diplomats, believed that during a visit to imperial headquarters special precautions had been taken to prevent him speaking to the tsar on the subject.⁹⁴¹

In the midst of a terrible war that was consuming thousands of lives it was perhaps only to be expected that fraught nerves would imagine pro-German plots. The situation was not helped by the imperial couple themselves since they guarded their privacy and their family life from the public gaze. In these circumstances it became possible for people to believe any wild story which purported to be 'the truth' about life at Tsarskoe Selo. Not many people from Britain had the chance to meet Nicholas and even less so Alexandra and to gauge for themselves their characters, their relationship with each other and the truth about the empress's national allegiances. Rear-Admiral Sir Richard Phillimore was one of the few people who were able to meet the imperial couple in relatively informal surroundings. He is notable for the fact that he subsequently commented on his experiences in a private letter to his wife rather than in an official report as was more common with some of his colleagues at the British Embassy.

At a reception at Tsarskoe Selo Phillimore was able to observe both Nicholas and Alexandra at relatively close quarters. The tsar lacked the height of some of a number of his illustrious predecessors, a fact which was sometimes said to have detrimentally affected perceptions of him as a ruler. However, although Phillimore admitted that

⁹⁴¹ TNA, FO 371/2752, Sir George Buchanan to Foreign Office, 21 Oct. 1916.

Nicholas was not very tall, he insisted he was 'very manly'.⁹⁴² In a further observation which may well have amused the tsar, given his irritation with assertions that he resembled George V, Phillimore noted that he looked 'not at all like the king'.⁹⁴³ In regards to the empress he offered an explanation for Russian antagonism towards her. Significantly, it did not include her relationship with Rasputin although this may have been because he hesitated to discuss such an unsavoury topic in writing with even with his wife. Phillimore was sympathetic, but resigned, to Alexandra's plight. He asserted that the cause of much of her unpopularity was due to the fact that she had numerous daughters but only one son and that she spent her time nursing instead of travelling about the country to see the people. Thus, he wrote, 'she is not now beautiful but you can see that she is very womanly. Her face was sad. I thought she spoke with deep feeling about everything. It is sad to think that so good a woman should be so unpopular in Russia but so she is. The people think she ought not to nurse in hospitals herself but visit them and show herself. They are [also] very angry with her for having daughters instead of sons'.⁹⁴⁴

During early January 1917, as part of the Allied Mission to Russia, Major General Sir John Headlam was also received at Tsarskoe Selo.⁹⁴⁵ In a letter home, in which he too noted that Nicholas did not look like George V, he described the Russian court in terms which fulfilled stereotypical British expectations of it as a mixture of riches tinged with Asiatic or uncivilised aspects. It also contradicted other British impressions of the

⁹⁴² IWM, PP/MCR/C34, Rear-Admiral Richard Phillimore to his wife, 21 Oct. 1915.

⁹⁴³ Ibid.

⁹⁴⁴ IWM, PP/MCR/C34, Rear-Admiral Phillimore to his wife, 20/22 December 1915.

⁹⁴⁵ IWM 2, 05/18/3, Major General Sir John Headlam to his wife, 2 Jan. 1917.

relatively simple lifestyle led by the tsar and empress. Thus, he reported, the imperial court is ‘a magnificent sight [with] great beauty [but] with some barbaric survivals’.⁹⁴⁶ What these apparently uncultured elements were Headlam did not elaborate but his description fitted with British impressions of the Russian court which had been commonplace since the reign of Tsar Ivan IV. In the wake of the revolution, as we shall discuss in Chapter 7, rumours that the empress had kept Nicholas in a drugged induced stupor enjoyed common currency. It may be that Headlam was privée to these rumours because he contradicted these claims when he noted that far from being apathetic the tsar was ‘alert and vigorous’ and ‘looked interested’ with whoever he was talking to.⁹⁴⁷

(iii) December 1916: Murder of Rasputin

Rasputin’s death had been reported in the summer of 1914 when he was the victim of an assassination attempt in Siberia. He was seriously wounded by Khina Gusseva but he lived a further two years. On 30 December 1916 Rasputin was finally murdered at the home of Prince Yusoupov, one of the richest men in Russia.⁹⁴⁸ Nearly a century after his death, the dramatic circumstances of his murder, the poisoned cakes, the gunshots and his grave beneath the ice of the River Neva, as well as suggestions of possible British connivance in his fate, continue to fascinate.⁹⁴⁹

When news of his murder was made known to officials in London the press was

⁹⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁴⁸ For one of the assassins accounts of the murder see Felix Yusoupov, *Lost Splendour* (London, 1953).

⁹⁴⁹ See, for example, possible British participation in the murder: Andrew Cook, *To Kill Rasputin: The life and Death of Grigori Rasputin*, (London, 2005).

instructed by the government to avoid mentioning Rasputin's association with the 'highest personage in the land' but British diplomats and government ministers discussed the implications of his murder and looked back over the whole 'Rasputin affair'.⁹⁵⁰ In a report to Whitehall Francis Lindley, Senior Counsellor at the Embassy, sought to put Rasputin's murder in context. In particular he noted that 'the scandalous stories about the relations of this man with certain members of the imperial family, although possibly quite untrue, were felt by patriotic Russians to be an intolerable humiliation to their country. For my part I have never heard anyone have a good word to say about the tsar or empress and their assassination is quite openly discussed. No one is shocked by it'.⁹⁵¹ On 2 January 1917 Buchanan admitted that more assassinations were expected to follow and that a list had been drawn up of intended targets, including members of 'the empress's so-called clique'.⁹⁵²

Rasputin was buried, in the presence of Nicholas, Alexandra and their four daughters, near the imperial palace at Tsarskoe Selo. In so publicly showing their support for the dead man it seemed to the British ambassador that the imperial couple were ignoring Russian public opinion. On 13 January 1917 Buchanan exasperatedly described how Rasputin had been 'buried as if he was a sainted martyr'.⁹⁵³ The elites in particular had welcomed Rasputin's death. It now seemed to Buchanan that in their response to Rasputin's murder the imperial couple were alienating the natural supporters of the

⁹⁵⁰ TNA, HO 139/35/47, Home Office Memorandum, Jan. 1917.

⁹⁵¹ TNA, FO 371/2995, Francis Lindley to Foreign Office, 15 Jan. 1917.

⁹⁵² CUL Hardinge Papers, vol. 23, Sir George Buchanan to Sir Charles Hardinge, 2 Jan. 1917.

⁹⁵³ Lords, F/59/1/6, Sir George Buchanan to Sir Charles Hardinge, 13 Jan. 1917.

autocracy. At a loss to discover a rational explanation he concluded that they were ‘possessed of madness [and were] wantonly courting disaster’.⁹⁵⁴

Those who had plotted against Rasputin had hoped that his death would either shock the empress into withdrawing from politics or that Nicholas might send her to a convent, a traditional place of exile for bothersome consorts. On the contrary, his murder seemed only to bring the couple closer together. Moreover, a little over a fortnight after Rasputin’s death, Buchanan offered an assessment of the situation which indicated that although the assassins had succeeded in killing Rasputin they had not ended his influence in the covert goings on at the imperial court. In his missive to London the ambassador’s frustration was clear, as he declared that: ‘it was thought that Rasputin was dead: this was a mistake, Rasputin was killed and even buried after a funeral service attended by the imperial family but he is not dead. He is daily invoked in the secret councils at Tsarskoe Selo’ the tsar and empress ‘are isolated and appear like a besieged fortress’.⁹⁵⁵ The imperial couple’s reaction to Rasputin’s murder has been seen as a factor which led to the tsar’s abdication. In retrospect, it can seem inevitable. However, at the time not everyone agreed with Buchanan’s gloomy prognosis. Charles Hardinge was notably more optimistic. Perhaps he was unaware of the extent to which the divide between senior members of the imperial family and Nicholas and Alexandra had grown in the years since he had served in St Petersburg. Perhaps it was distance which caused him to fail to understand the rupture in the relationship between the tsar and many of his subjects as a

⁹⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵⁵ CUL, Hardinge Papers, vol. 23, Sir George Buchanan to Sir Charles Hardinge, 20 Jan. 1917.

result of Rasputin's alleged sway over the empress. Although he admitted that the 'whole Rasputin incident had been disgusting from the very beginning', he retained 'immense faith' in the tsar and believed that he had been afforded 'sufficient breathing space' to save his throne.⁹⁵⁶

In spite of the strictures by the Press Bureau the story of Rasputin's murder was too big for the British press to ignore. Reactions varied. For example, at the beginning of January 1917 *The Times* did not conceal from its readers Alexandra's friendship with Rasputin but the newspaper's discussion was relegated to page eight when overseas news more typically appeared on page five. The article sought to play down Rasputin's influence in political and military affairs. Ignoring the historical record, which showed that the empress had not met Rasputin until 1905, the article asserted that although the 'empress was said to have attributed the birth of her son to Rasputin there was no instance of his interference in public affairs'.⁹⁵⁷ Clearly *The Times* had no proof that Rasputin had lacked influence over events, indeed the newspaper's assertion flew in the face of a myriad rumours to the contrary. Unlike *The Times*, the *Daily Mirror* was seemingly determined not to play down the drama of Rasputin. Erroneously describing him as a man of the cloth, its front-page headline splashed sensationally: 'Mystery of the Death of the Monk Rasputin'.⁹⁵⁸ Perhaps wanting to give this 'patriotic act' a specifically British tinge and thereby to share in some of the 'glory' the article noted that Prince Yusoupov had

⁹⁵⁶ CUL, Hardinge Papers, vol. 23, Sir Charles Hardinge to Sir George Buchanan, 18 Feb. 1917.

⁹⁵⁷ *The Times*, 2 Jan. 1917, p. 8. The paper was mistaken-records indicate Nicholas and Alexandra first met Rasputin in 1905.

⁹⁵⁸ *Daily Mirror*, 4 Jan. 1917, p. 1

been a student at Oxford before the war.⁹⁵⁹

For centuries British commentators had portrayed Russia as an antique, backward nation where ‘irrational’ beliefs in household demons and evil spirits were an accepted part of life.⁹⁶⁰ In its coverage of Rasputin’s death, the *Manchester Guardian*, in keeping with its non-conformist roots which rejected such superstitions, declared that his murder had brought to an end a ‘hideous medieval nightmare’.⁹⁶¹ For its part the *Spectator* was apparently unable to fully comprehend the phenomenon of Rasputin and could only compare his death to a popular melodrama. An article in the periodical on 6 January 1917 opined: ‘Nothing has been more sensational and more reminiscent of blue lights and the accents of war and suspense from the orchestra than the murder of the monk Rasputin; the round hold cut in the ice, the footmarks on the snow, the drops of blood, the recovery of the body dented with wounds, the suspicion that the wounded man was killed at the palace of one of the most outstanding families in Russia [are] too theatrical for real life and yet, they happened.’⁹⁶²

Some commentators may really have believed that Rasputin had taken Holy Orders but for others it simply added a frisson to stories of his more notorious activities. The more lurid aspects of the ‘Rasputin story’ provided material for several novels by the thriller writer William Le Queux. Before the war Le Queux had made a name for himself writing fictional tales of a German invasion of Britain. In his novels about Rasputin

⁹⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁶⁰ Stephen Graham, *Undiscovered Russia* (London, 1914), p. 23 and p. 46.

⁹⁶¹ *Manchester Guardian*, 4 Jan. 1917, p. 5.

⁹⁶² *Spectator*, 6 Jan 1917, p. 2.

symbolised all that was fantastical, medieval, alien and distasteful about Russia. In 1916 patriotic novels, such those written by Le Queux, were amongst the most read in the British army.⁹⁶³ They seem not to have been subject to the same censorship as the press and, as a result, Le Queux seems to have been able to portray Alexandra in a detrimental light with impunity. Although the empress was the wife of an allied leader and a cousin of the king, she was depicted in his plots as a domineering, evil, and very dangerous woman.

In an attempt to give his Rasputin novels credibility to his ludicrous accounts of life in Tsarskoe Selo, Le Queux invariably prefaced them with the claim that he had been given the information by ‘patriotic Russians’ who wished to alert the British public to the nature of the empress’s relationship with Rasputin. In his first fictional account of life in the palace, Le Queux ‘revealed’ the extent of Rasputin’s power over the imperial couple. He quoted Rasputin as saying: ‘the empress does my bidding [...] Nikki [the Tsar] only smiles as an idiot therefore am I not the real emperor of Russia?’⁹⁶⁴ In another chapter Le Queux described how Alexandra greeted Rasputin when he returned to the palace after some absence. According to Le Queux in a highly emotional state ‘the hysterical woman [fell] on her knees [...] wildly kissing [Rasputin’s] dirty hands’.⁹⁶⁵ In a second novel, the title of which *Minister of Evil: The Secret History of Rasputin’s Betrayal of Russia* summarised the plot Le Queux accused the empress of worse crimes than being enthralled to a so-called monk. In a damning indictment which would have left his readers in no doubt as to the danger posed by Alexandra, Le Queux revealed that she was surrounded

⁹⁶³ Beatrice Harraden ‘What our Soldiers Read’, *Cornhill Magazine*, 61 (Jul-Dec. 1916), p. 611.

⁹⁶⁴ William Le Queux, *Rasputin, The Rascal Monk* (London, 1917), p. 69.

⁹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

‘by German servants and herself spoke with a pronounced German accent which reminded people that she was not a true born Russian’.⁹⁶⁶ Amidst all the rumours of scandalous tales of life in the imperial household, references to a medieval past, melodramas and secret plots to sign a separate peace with Germany, rational explanations for Rasputin’s influence were rare. In the press and in cheap novels at least, mundane reasons behind the empress’s relationship with Rasputin did not sell newspapers. One person who did attempt to put the friendship in context was William Birkbeck. In light of his understanding of Russia’s wandering ‘holy men’, although he agreed with more popular assertions that Rasputin had hypnotic powers, he insisted that it was Alexandra’s devotion to her religion which had been the source of his influence. In the knowledge that Rasputin had not only met with had met with, but had impressed high-ranking and influential members of the St Petersburg clergy, Birkbeck explained that Rasputin had come to the imperial court not ‘as the monster of popular imagination [but] as a *starets* or reputable spiritual adviser’.⁹⁶⁷ The *Saturday Review* magazine rejected the idea that any Russian *starets* might be a holy person, let alone Rasputin. In an article which reflected both the horror and the titillating fascination with which the British public regarded Rasputin the *Review* described him thus: ‘his manners were disgusting even for a [peasant]. In Russia these holy men [are] arrant rascals who wander up and down the land. One can only stand aghast at the power which seemed to have come over the whole

⁹⁶⁶ William Le Queux, *The Minister of Evil: The Secret History of Rasputin’s Betrayal of Russia* (London, 1917), p. 26

⁹⁶⁷ Athelstan Riley (ed.) *Birkbeck and the Russian Church* (London, 1917), p. 358.

[female] sex from princesses to peasants'.⁹⁶⁸

(iv) March 1917: Abdication

In January and February 1917 representatives of the allied powers met at Tsarskoe Selo. The atmosphere of intrigue, plots and gossip was hardly conducive to promoting inter-allied confidence. The head of the British Mission, Lord Milner, informed Lloyd George that the internal situation in Russia was on a knife-edge. Every member of the mission he said heard from all sides of 'the inevitability of something happening the only question was whether the emperor, the empress or Mr Protopopov [the Interior Minister] would be removed or perhaps all three. No one could say how the power of the empress for evil could be broken'.⁹⁶⁹ On 1 March a further confidential report on the mission was submitted by a senior clerk in the Foreign Office. He made some interesting observations about the political situation in Russia both of which turned out to be incorrect.⁹⁷⁰ Firstly, he reported that a number of Russians who opposed the current regime believed Milner had intended to offer Nicholas the post of supreme commander of the Allied Armies, thus necessitating his departure and the appointment of a liberal-minded regent'.⁹⁷¹ Secondly, despite the obvious existence of forces, within the court, which were opposed to the tsar, he concluded optimistically that 'there will not be a revolution before the war is over'.⁹⁷²

On 13 March 1917 Milner submitted a full report of his impressions of the Allied Conference to the War Cabinet in London. He complained about the superficiality of

⁹⁶⁸ *Saturday Review*, 24 Mar. 1917, p. 27.

⁹⁶⁹ Lords, DAV/58, Lord Milner to Lloyd George, February 1917.

⁹⁷⁰ The Clerk was rather aptly named George Clerk.

⁹⁷¹ TNA, CAB/24/3, G.R. Clerk to Lord Milner, 1 Mar. 1917.

⁹⁷² *Ibid.*

many of the discussions, the presence of court hangers on and persons whose loyalties were suspect as well as the frequent changes of ministers. However, his conclusion was at variance with his list of complaints. Seemingly swayed by centuries of British perceptions that 'the autocracy alone' held Russia together he expressed confidence that 'talk of [a popular] revolution was greatly exaggerated'.⁹⁷³

The day following Milner's optimistic assessment of Russia's future the tsar entered the final crisis of his reign. In Whitehall, the British government instructed the Press Bureau 'not to pass anything relating to any internal trouble in Russia'.⁹⁷⁴ On, the same day, the 14 March Buchanan reported to London that he had met with the tsar's brother, Grand Duke Mikhail, who had told him of plans by senior members of the Duma to approach the tsar directly in order to obtain his agreement to form a government which had the confidence of the nation. Buchanan noted that he had told the grand duke he would urge the tsar 'in the name of King George, who had sincere affection for him, to sign the manifesto and show himself to the people in order to effect a complete reconciliation with them'.⁹⁷⁵ The following day, March 15 1917, under considerable pressure from his generals and members of the Duma, Nicholas abdicated his throne for himself and for his son. The autocracy, which Milner had insisted was the glue which held Russia together, was swept away.

Although the press had been forbidden to refer to the political news from Russia

⁹⁷³ TNA, CAB/24/3, Lord Milner report of the Allied Conference at Petrograd, January-February 1917, 13 March 1917.

⁹⁷⁴ TNA, FO 371/2995, An Order to the Press, 14 Mar. 1917.

⁹⁷⁵ TNA, FO 371/2995, Sir George Buchanan to Foreign Office, 14 March 1917.

Nicholas's abdication was too big a story to suppress. British responses to the news were varied. Some were sympathetic to the tsar's plight while others called him a man of honour and reiterated earlier reports of his desire to pursue the war until victory. A number were delighted that the autocracy had been overthrown and revelled in the sight of the red flag flying from the imperial palace in St Petersburg. None predicted the advent of a Red Terror and the brutal murder of the tsar, empress and their children in less than eighteen months.

At the time of his abdication Nicholas had ruled Russia for twenty-three years. He had twice embarked on a costly war and the country had several times been convulsed by violence. However, Russia had endured many such crises and the Romanov dynasty were such an integral feature of British perceptions of Russia that it seemed impossible to imagine her without the crown. Therefore, a number of commentators assumed that a constitutional monarchy would be established, failing to realise the depth of feeling against the tsar as a person, the monarchy as an institution and the relative strength of the opposition. For example, the *Westminster Gazette* (a supporter of the governing Liberal party) reported the reassurances of a Russian diplomat in London that the tsar was 'in perfect safety at Tsarskoe Selo' and that the revolution was 'not a move against the dynasty'.⁹⁷⁶ The *Daily Chronicle's* front page headline, perhaps basing its account on the same sources, informed its readers that the empress was 'under guard' but indicated a smooth transition from autocracy to a democratic state was more than likely and that 'a

⁹⁷⁶ *Westminster Gazette*, 15 Mar. 1917, p. 1.

limited monarchy' would be established in Russia within days.⁹⁷⁷ In the light of its understanding of Russian history *Blackwood's Magazine* reflected on Nicholas's reign and explained his overthrow as a specifically Russian phenomenon. Thus the periodical declared: 'the sudden deposition of the tsar seems strange to us [but in] Russia it is but a common experience that a Romanov should be superseded or suppressed'.⁹⁷⁸ Having dealt with the abdication in a matter of fact way *Blackwood's* discussed the role of Rasputin and in doing so reiterated British images of as Russia a society with only the thinnest veneer of civilisation 'a land of late development' where a 'hideous creature' such as Rasputin could flourish.⁹⁷⁹

Popular expectations of a Russian tsar were rooted in an earlier era, long before the dawning of the twentieth century with its industrialisation and a world war involving thousands of civilians as well as soldiers and sailors which could be communicated in the columns of cheaply available newspapers. The tsar's political failure seemed to contrast with his apparently successful encounters with the Russian people. During the jubilee years of 1909, 1912 and 1913 as well as at the outbreak of war in 1904 and again in 1914 commentators observing persuasive scenes of loyalty suggested that Nicholas had only to show himself more frequently in order to cement a close bond with his people. Following the abdication these scenes of public enthusiasm were the focus of interest for Professor James Young Simpson. A professor of natural sciences at New College Edinburgh, he was also a member of the Political Intelligence Department at the Foreign Office and

⁹⁷⁷ *Daily Chronicle*, 16 Mar. 1917, p. 1.

⁹⁷⁸ 'Musings without Method', *Blackwood's Magazine*, (1917) vol. 201, pp. 808-820, p. 819.

⁹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

subsequently a delegate to the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, he published an article in *Nineteenth Century and After* in which he discussed the tsar's reception in Moscow during the celebrations to mark his coronation.⁹⁸⁰ The article entitled 'Russia's Self-Realisation' noted 'the wild acclamation of the multitude, but Simpson concluded that this sense of unity had been illusory because the task of ruling had been beyond Nicholas.'⁹⁸¹

Throughout Nicholas's reign, particularly at moments of crisis, a number of British commentators' had argued that the tsar had been kept in the dark about events by 'the bureaucracy' by 'a court camarilla' or, more latterly, by 'pro-German dark forces'. It was in such a vein that the *Church Times* defended the tsar. Nicholas had abdicated leaving a country divided, an army much depleted, a wife hated and despised and a once mighty dynasty in turmoil, and his capital city threatened by the mob. However, for the *Church Times* the tsar's personal culpability, his weakness or the fact that he was seemingly unable to prevent others making decisions on his behalf, mattered less than the fact that 'he had carried himself with dignity'.⁹⁸²

At this stage public accusation of the empress's betrayal of the allied cause was largely limited to the pages of fantastical novels. Therefore recollections that she and the tsar had close ties with the British royal family could still be published without seeming harm to the British monarchy. The *Daily Mirror* which was one of the first popular newspapers to

⁹⁸⁰ Charlotte Alston (2002) 'James Young Simpson and the Latvian-Lithuanian border settlement 1920–1921: The papers in the archive of the royal Scottish geographical society, *Scottish Geographical Journal*', 118:2, 87-100.

⁹⁸¹ Professor James Young Simpson, 'Russia's Self-Realisation', *Nineteenth Century and After*, vol. 131 (1917), p. 773.

⁹⁸² *Church Times*, 23 Mar. 1917, p. 257.

report the abdication chose to focus its article on Nicholas's ties with George V 'to whom he bears a striking resemblance'.⁹⁸³ In addition, the *Mirror* considered the tsar's character. Was he a man of peace or a tsar who violently suppressed opposition or had he been a reforming tsar who had sought to modernise Russia's political institutions. The *Mirror* summed up the perception of many when it asserted that the last tsar had been 'one of the most enigmatic characters in the history of modern Europe'.⁹⁸⁴ The supposed role of Rasputin in Russian affairs had, of course, been the subject of speculation. In an allusion to claims that his murder had been a patriotic act the *Mirror* asserted that 'the killing of Rasputin was the match which set fire to [a] vast heap of patriotic determination'.⁹⁸⁵

In its coverage of events from Russia the *Daily Express* showed its parochial side for which some of the British press was noted. Thus, the newspaper assured its readers that 'the British in [St Petersburg] were unhurt'.⁹⁸⁶ In respect of the tsar, the *Express's* editorial was extremely sympathetic. It reiterated positive images which had been popular since Nicholas's accession, a well meaning ruler whose efforts to change Russia for the better were thwarted by those who should have served him. In an article which challenged the official record the *Express* informed its readers that fallen monarch was an 'autocrat with good intentions who [had] openly professed democratic principles [but the reactionary] bureaucracy had ruled the tsar and not the tsar the bureaucracy'.⁹⁸⁷ In its discussion of the abdication the *Westminster Gazette* also took a kindly view of

⁹⁸³ *Daily Mirror*, 16 Mar. 1917, p. 3.

⁹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸⁶ *Daily Express*, 16 Mar. 1917, p. 1.

⁹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

Nicholas's decision to abdicate. The article spoke of the 'pathos and dignity of the final act' and, whether through choice or the necessities of political expediency, the *Gazette* did not refer to Bloody Sunday and the violent suppression of unrest which had marred the tsar's reign.⁹⁸⁸ Instead the periodical gave the impression that Nicholas's record was unblemished since it insisted that: 'from the beginning of his reign until now [Nicholas has been a] good man with honourable intentions'.⁹⁸⁹ Although telegrams from Russia gave little room for doubt as to the veracity of events in Russia there was some doubt in Britain as to whether Nicholas had really given up the throne because he did not proceed immediately to St Petersburg. An article in the *Scotsman* for example, was of the opinion that although the tsar had 'not yet abdicated' but a new government was at work which would 'shortly announce reforms'.⁹⁹⁰ Stephen Graham, writing in *The Times*, also unsure as to the nature of developments in Russia, offered the following elegiac response should the news prove to be correct: 'If the tsar has abdicated he has acted nobly, undoubtedly he could have found forces greater than those at the disposal of the Duma and fought a civil war shedding the blood of thousands and devastating his own country [but] he has been consistently a monarch of ideals'.⁹⁹¹

On 16 March the *Daily Express* had seemed to accept that Nicholas had renounced the throne and had offered a melancholic response which highlighted the tsar's positive qualities. The newspaper declared: 'no man was ever a better husband or father [who had]

⁹⁸⁸ *Westminster Gazette*, 17 Mar. 1917, p. 2.

⁹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹⁰ *Scotsman*, 17 Mar. 1917, p. 7.

⁹⁹¹ *The Times*, 17 Mar. 1917, p. 8.

always desired to be the servant of the people'.⁹⁹² The following day however, the newspaper appeared less certain its front-page headline screamed: 'Where is the tsar? The tsar is missing!' The ensuing article claimed that his train had been twice stopped by revolutionaries but that he had not been found aboard. As for Alexandra, she was said by the newspaper to be 'hysterical'.⁹⁹³

By 19 March there was no longer any doubt that the tsar had indeed abdicated. The *Daily News* reported that the total number of casualties of the revolution were no 'more than 1,000' but included one Englishman who, attempting to view events in the streets of St Petersburg, had 'slipped from the roof' and been killed.⁹⁹⁴ The *Times*, in its role as *the* serious newspaper of the establishment, might have been expected to take a more detached view of events than other publications. However, the newspaper headlined its account of the abdication in homely terms of the type more often seen in the popular press: 'The Tsar's final ordeal-I cannot part with my boy'.⁹⁹⁵ The article itself averred that Nicholas's 'private sorrows and sufferings [at this time were] calculated to soften the stoniest heart'.⁹⁹⁶ Nicholas's preferred method of government was rooted in an earlier era, a mythical period in Russian history when the tsar and the Russian people were united in a common bond of love and mutual respect, sympathy and understanding. In Nicholas's eyes it was a time when the mass of Russians had unquestioningly looked not to elected institutions for their well-being but to their tsar who understood their needs.

⁹⁹² *Daily Express*, 16 Mar. 1917, p.1.

⁹⁹³ *Daily Express*, 17 Mar. 1917, p. 1.

⁹⁹⁴ *Daily News and Leader*, 19 Mar. 1917, p. 1.

⁹⁹⁵ *The Times*, 19 Mar. 1917, p. 10.

⁹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

Nicholas had been frustrated in his desire to rule in the style of his medieval ancestors but, the *Church Times* insisted, his ‘personal integrity, love of country and affection for his people’ were never in doubt.⁹⁹⁷

Although much of the press did not dwell on the reality of the tsar’s political record inevitably, given the longevity of British opposition to the tsarist regime, not all reports of the abdication sentimentalised Nicholas’s fall from power. Indeed, the understanding given to the fallen monarch by some newspapers aroused the suspicions of the Liberal M.P. Robert Outhwaite. He complained that the many positive stories came, not from any genuine depth of feeling towards the deposed monarch, but because the government had ordered the press not to say anything negative about the former tsar.⁹⁹⁸ An official at the British Embassy was equally impatient with the British newspaper coverage. He lambasted what he called the ‘imbecile articles and crocodile tears’ of some sections of the British press and in particular he ridiculed suggestions that Nicholas had been sympathetic to the needs of his people as ‘ludicrous and absurd’.⁹⁹⁹ In keeping with such scepticism, the *Russian Co-operator* magazine was elated by the news that the tsar had abdicated. The short lived magazine, published by the Joint Committee of Russian Co-operative Organisations in London (1917-1921), declared that ‘the long nightmare of oppression is over. The red flag is flying over the Winter Palace. The brutal and short sighted stained in blood autocracy had gone forever’.¹⁰⁰⁰ The tone of the radical *Daily*

⁹⁹⁷ *Church Times*, 23 Mar. 1917, p. 257.

⁹⁹⁸ Robert Outhwaite M.P. for Hanley, in *Hansard*, vol. 92, 24 Apr. 1917.

⁹⁹⁹ TNA, FO 371/2996, M. Lawley to Foreign Office, 28 Apr. 1917.

¹⁰⁰⁰ *The Russian Co-operator*, 17 Mar. 1917, pp. 1-2.

News and Leader was equally euphoric, yet tinged with a sombre air as it reviewed Russia's recent past. There was no place in the article for the sentimentalism which characterised accounts in some other British newspapers. Pity was reserved for the thousands of Russian soldiers, which the newspaper believed had died because the autocracy had betrayed them to the enemy. According to the article, now that the autocracy was gone:

There is spring in the air and there is spring in the souls of men. Russia is free, she has broken her chains. The host of brave Russians whose bones litter the soil from the Carpathians to the Pinsk marshes have not died in vain. They were left without weapons in their hands to be slaughtered by an enemy with whom their rulers were in secret sympathy. While they were being mown down [...] one clique of pro-Germans fell to be succeeded by another yet more noxious. The empress and Rasputin always triumphed.¹⁰⁰¹

An article in the same newspaper on 20 March 1917 written by Arthur Ransome was headlined: 'Russia's Day of Joy: Men call each other Comrade'.¹⁰⁰² It was less vitriolic than that which had been published a few days earlier but it was no more sympathetic to the fallen monarch. Ransome claimed Nicholas had been kept in a state of drunkenness' by his suite which had feared to tell him the truth about the unrest in St Petersburg.¹⁰⁰³ Ransome's article managed to combine elements of traditional British perceptions of a tsar's difficult relationship with his ministers and his court, as well as giving the

¹⁰⁰¹ *Daily News and Leader*, 17 Mar. 1917, p. 2.

¹⁰⁰² *Daily News and Leader*, 20 Mar. 1917, p. 3.

¹⁰⁰³ *Ibid.*

impression that Nicholas was a drunkard, susceptible to the influence of more dominating characters.

As Nicholas's biographer, Dominic Lieven, reminds us, when the tsar signed the instrument of abdication he relinquished a burden which was far greater than that expected to be shouldered by any democratic politician.¹⁰⁰⁴ The *Daily Chronicle* understood that the tsar's military and political burdens would have been beyond even the most ruthless autocrat. The newspaper argued that Nicholas had abdicated because he was 'tired of everything'.¹⁰⁰⁵ The *Guardian* concurred with the view that the tsar had unwillingly accepted the crown but more positively noted that far from revelling in the wealth and power of a tsar, Nicholas had envied the 'simple [life] of an English country gentleman'.¹⁰⁰⁶ However, there were others who failed to understand that Nicholas had been overwhelmed by the cascade of political, economic and military issues with which he had to deal. Francis Lindley rebuked the tsar for having given precedence to his personal desires over the needs of the nation and the dynasty. In a report to Whitehall the embassy official noted the scathing impressions of those he said were 'closest' to the tsar who castigated Nicholas for having 'sacrificed the monarchy for purely egotistical reasons'.¹⁰⁰⁷

Critical and baffled reactions such as those of Francis Lindley were coloured by the fact that, in spite of his fall from power, the tsar appeared imperturbable. Commentators such as Lindley failed to accept that his outward calm was symptom of a man who was

¹⁰⁰⁴ Lieven, *Nicholas II*, p. 236.

¹⁰⁰⁵ *Daily Chronicle*, 22 Mar. 1917, p. 1.

¹⁰⁰⁶ *Guardian*, 16 Mar. 1917, p. 4.

¹⁰⁰⁷ TNA, FO 371/2996, Francis Lindley to Sir Arthur Balfour, 1 Apr. 1917.

mentally and physically exhausted. Indeed, so unexpected was the tsar's abdication in some quarters that it was said he had either been given drugs by a person of malevolent intent or he had acted as a result of an addiction to alcohol. Albert Stopford counted amongst his Russian friends Prince Felix Yusoupov and Grand Dukes Boris and Kyril Vladimirovich and he is said to have frequently dined with S.D. Sazonov, Russia's wartime foreign minister. Stopford's official role in Russo-British affairs remains somewhat mysterious. However, it may have been as a result of discussion with his highly placed friends that led him to assert that empress's influence over her husband had been helped by his tendency to 'intemperance'.¹⁰⁰⁸ Whatever his sources, Stopford was not alone in alleging that alcohol had played a significant role in recent events. For example, an article by John Pollock in the *Nineteenth Century and After* implied that under the influence of alcohol, Nicholas may have blurted out Russia's battle plans and other wartime secrets to persons outside of his military circle. According to Pollock the tsar's 'garrulousness and drunkenness had become a byword for all that was wrong in Russia'.¹⁰⁰⁹ Confirmation that the tsar enjoyed an exceptional fondness for alcohol apparently came from an impeccably placed source—the empress's controversial friend, Anna Vyubova. In an interview with the journalist Childe Dorr, Vyubova noted rumours that the empress encouraged Nicholas's weakness for drink in order to keep him in a 'muddled headed' state of mind.¹⁰¹⁰ However, although she admitted that he did 'drink too much' she insisted that Alexandra had encouraged him to fight his addiction

¹⁰⁰⁸ Bertie Stopford, *Russian Diary of An Englishman 1915-1917* (London, 1919), p.3.

¹⁰⁰⁹ John Pollock 'The Russian Revolution: A Review by an Onlooker' *The Nineteenth Century and After*, May 1917, p.1069.

¹⁰¹⁰ Rheta Childe Dorr, *From Inside the Revolution 1917* (1917), pp. 122-123.

but that members of the imperial court had played on the tsar's love of alcohol in order to advance their own interests.¹⁰¹¹

Childe Dorr's account of Vyubova's narrative of life behind the palace walls may have been accurate or it may have been influenced by the repetition of rumours then swirling around St Petersburg. However, court intimates, or those who spoke for them, were not the only ones who implied that Nicholas may not always have been fully *compos mentis* during the final months of his reign. The British ambassador suspected that there was an especially sinister cause behind the tsar's unexpected decision to abdicate. As a result of conversations with members of the aristocratic elite, Buchanan concluded that the tsar had abdicated without thought for the dynasty or the nation and he believed he knew why. At the end of April 1917 he informed London that Prince Yusoufov had come to the embassy to tell him that 'someone close' to Nicholas (the inference being that it was Alexandra) had given him drugs in order to induce an apparently supine state.¹⁰¹² The story was extraordinary but the ambassador explained that he was inclined to believe the prince since he had been told the very same story by his 'good friend' Grand Duke Nikolai Mikhailovich who had argued that drugs alone could alone explain the tsar's 'childish indifference to the loss of his crown'.¹⁰¹³

Amongst the sensational claims that Alexandra had plied her husband with drink and drugs there were few, save Vyubova, who defended the former empress. However, there was at least one British observer of Russian affairs who offered a sympathetic explanation

¹⁰¹¹ Ibid.

¹⁰¹² Lords, F/59/1/3, Sir George Buchanan to Sir Charles Hardinge, 30 Apr. 1917.

¹⁰¹³ Ibid.

of Alexandra's actions. This was Commander Oliver Locker Lampson. Head of the British Naval Car Division in Russia, Locker Lampson asserted, like so many others, (invariably men), that the empress 'was always hysterical'.¹⁰¹⁴ However, he offered a fairly rational explanation for her behaviour, blaming her poor state of mind on her son's tardy birth and the dowager empress's refusal to give up her rights of precedence.¹⁰¹⁵

The years between 1914 and 1917 were amongst the richest with regard to British perceptions of Nicholas and Alexandra. British images of the tsar and empress during these years saw a confusion of emotions. They began with the euphoria in August 1914 when it seemed that tsar and all his subjects, even the Duma, were united against Germany, to a feeling of pathos upon learning of Nicholas's abdication in March 1917. In discussing Alexandra, commentators praised her activities as a nurse and her love of Britain but they also pondered the rumours of pro-German plots and whispers that the empress was working to betray the allies as well as disquiet over the role seemingly assumed by Rasputin as a result of Nicholas's absence at imperial headquarters.

The motifs employed by British commentators during these years to explain the behaviour of the tsar his empress were based on centuries of British perceptions of Russia and her rulers. All the familiar tropes were still there: peasant loyalty, to Russian backwardness and superstition, to the tsar's desire for power, not for its own sake but for the love of his people and to the interference in political affairs by nefarious officials and members of the Romanov family. In some quarters there was delight that the autocracy

¹⁰¹⁴TNA, FO 371/2996, Commander Oliver Locker Lampson to Foreign Office, 19 Mar. 1917.

¹⁰¹⁵Ibid.

had been overthrown and there was credulity at some of the positive characteristics attributed to Nicholas. More frequently, there was admiration and respect for the tsar who had shouldered the burden of supreme power for twenty-three years.

Responses to Alexandra during these years were perhaps more complicated. They began positively enough and British commentators who spent time with her in private were often understanding of her plight. In the last months of the regime however, the simmering tensions of war facilitated a torrent of suspicion and even hatred towards the empress on account of her German birth and her relationship with Rasputin. In this respect it is noticeable that the understanding given to the tsar was absent in regards to Alexandra. Nicholas who had signed the instrument of abdication at the height of a war he was fighting with Britain met with generally laudatory remarks. The empress, who had only sought to do the best for her husband and her adopted country, was castigated privately in diplomatic correspondence and the subject of much negative speculation and accusation publicly in the press and elsewhere. In the coming months, in the press and elsewhere, the balance was partially redressed and some of the understanding given to Nicholas was also accorded the empress when her terrible fate became known.

Chapter 7: March 1917-September 1918: Imprisonment and Death

When Nicholas II began to reign in November 1894, he was only twenty-six years old.

Mild, amiable and thoughtful, he was regarded with universal hope and goodwill.

*Ardently desirous of the welfare of his people he was convinced it could not be attained except by him.*¹⁰¹⁶

*In every rank of society it was freely said that the nation and the army was sold by the empress's minions and that she aimed at obtaining a regency to replace the emperor [and] to force upon Russia a separate peace which, while ruining forever the hopes of progress might save her native Germany.*¹⁰¹⁷

For five months following his abdication Nicholas lived under arrest with his family at Tsarskoe Selo. He passed his days teaching his children Russian history, reading popular novels and Russian classics, clearing the ice from the canals and, when spring came, planting a vegetable garden.¹⁰¹⁸ Then, in August 1917, the imperial family were taken by train and paddle steamer to the small Siberian town of Tobolsk; the following spring they were transferred in still unexplained circumstances to the Ural city of Yekaterinburg.

In the immediate aftermath of the tsar's abdication Britain's public solidarity with the tsarist regime was abandoned. A majority in the House of Commons sent the Duma its

¹⁰¹⁶ *Morning Post*, Jul. 23 1918, p. 3.

¹⁰¹⁷ Pollock, 'The Russian Revolution: A Review by an onlooker', p. 1069.

¹⁰¹⁸ Maurice Baring, (ed.), *Last Days at Tsarskoe Selo: Being the Personal Notes and Memories of Count Paul Benckendorff* (London, 1927).

‘fraternal greetings’ and to the Russian people its ‘heartfelt congratulations’.¹⁰¹⁹ For political and military reasons, British criticism of the absolutist nature of the imperial regime had been held in check before 1917 for fear of alienating an important ally. After Nicholas’s overthrow this was no longer necessary. As a result of the revolution, the British government hoped that Russia and Britain might more vigorously prosecute the war against Germany, ‘the stronghold of autocratic militarism which threatens the liberty of Europe’.¹⁰²⁰ A further indication that the British establishment at least no longer needed to present an image of wholehearted support for Nicholas occurred within days of his abdication. In January 1916, in the king’s name the British government had been content to make the tsar an honorary Field Marshal of the British Army.¹⁰²¹ However, less than a week after his abdication, the War Office enquired of Buckingham Palace whether the deposed tsar should remain on the army lists. In retrospect the king’s wary attitude towards Nicholas was evident even then. Replying on behalf of George V, Sir Reginald Brade advised that the tsar’s name should remain on the lists, adding somewhat lukewarmly, ‘at least for the time being’.¹⁰²²

At first it had seemed possible that Nicholas might continue to reside in Russia after his abdication. On 17 March an enquiry from the British ambassador to the provisional government as to the tsar’s intentions had been met with the response that he proposed to go to Livadia in the Crimea.¹⁰²³ The *Daily News and Leader* reported Nicholas as saying

¹⁰¹⁹TNA, CAB/23/2, Minute of Cabinet Meeting, 21 Mar. 1917.

¹⁰²⁰Ibid.

¹⁰²¹TNA, WO 339/5136, 1 Jan. 1916.

¹⁰²²TNA, WO 339/5136, Sir Reginald Herbert. Brade, Secretary at the War Office, 27 Mar. 1917.

¹⁰²³TNA, 371/2995, Sir George Buchanan, to Foreign Office, 17 March 1917.

that he hoped to spend his time tending the palace gardens.¹⁰²⁴ However, fearing for his safety, the dowager empress and the Grand Duke Aleksandr Mikhailovich (husband of Nicholas's sister Xenia) believed that the tsar should leave Russia without delay, if necessary under British military protection.¹⁰²⁵ On 22 March 1917, the British War Cabinet noted that in the 'interests of his personal safety [...] the best plan would be to invite the tsar and empress to take up residence in this country'.¹⁰²⁶ British military personnel located in Russia were best placed to offer effective protection to the deposed tsar. General Hanbury Williams, as the self-styled 'doyen of the Allied mission', and on account of his personal sympathy for the tsar, advised London that time was 'of the essence' and offered to travel with Nicholas to the port of Murmansk.¹⁰²⁷ Perhaps sensing that his offer on behalf of the deposed sovereign might prove controversial, Hanbury Williams reminded Whitehall that the British ambassador had already offered official protection to another cousin of the king, Grand Duchess Victoria Melita. Significantly, the grand duchess was, by birth, a German princess.¹⁰²⁸ As it later transpired, time was indeed of the essence but, in the days immediately following his abdication, Nicholas returned to Mogilev where he spent time with his mother and made his farewells to the army. In the meantime, George V began to have doubts as to the suitability of England as a place of exile. At a meeting with Lloyd George, the king's private secretary Lord Stamfordham, demanded to know how the tsar planned to maintain a lifestyle suitable to

¹⁰²⁴ *Daily News and Leader*, 22 Mar. 1917, p. 3.

¹⁰²⁵ TNA, CAB/24/8, General Sir John Hanbury Williams to Foreign Office, 20 Mar. 1917.

¹⁰²⁶ TNA, CAB/23/40, Minutes of the Imperial War Cabinet, 22 Mar. 1917.

¹⁰²⁷ TNA, CAB/24/8, General Sir John Hanbury Williams to Sir William Robertson, Chief of the Imperial Staff, 20 Mar. 1917.

¹⁰²⁸ TNA, FO 371/2996, General Sir John Hanbury Williams to Foreign Office, 23 Mar. 1917.

his rank, brushed off suggestions that Nicholas might reside at Sandringham, and ruled out the possibility of Balmoral on the grounds of climate.¹⁰²⁹ He did not suggest an alternative residence within the British Isles.

While talks about the tsar's future went on behind closed doors, as early as 19 March 1917, newspapers in Britain discussed the possibility of imperial exile in England.¹⁰³⁰ At first the suggestion had seemed entirely reasonable. The tsar had been Britain's ally in the war against the Central Powers for nearly three years in addition, both he and Alexandra were cousins of the king. In the following months, as commentators mulled over the implications of the abdication, a number concluded that the need to cultivate good relations with the provisional government militated against permitting the imperial couple to be a guest of the British government and, *de facto*, the king. The many benign wartime images of Nicholas and Alexandra, with which, hitherto, the British public had largely been presented, were replaced by a succession of accusations against the empress in particular.

In the years before the war the British had lauded German society for its culture and progressive social policies. After August 1914 this was no longer deemed politic and Britain experienced waves of spy mania and anti-German hysteria. Many hundreds of men of German origin were interred, others were subject to police restrictions and a number were deported. In 1915 and again in 1916 German communities and their

¹⁰²⁹ Rose, *George V*, p. 211.

¹⁰³⁰ *Daily Chronicle*, 19 Mar. 1917, p. 1.

businesses in London and elsewhere were the victims of mob violence.¹⁰³¹ In the heightened tension caused by the war which was far from won, reports of embedded German dominance at the Russian court and claims that Alexandra had been at the centre of German talks to sign a separate peace were accepted as fact in many quarters. In an article for the colonial *Imperial and Asiatic Quarterly* Archibald Francis Stuart revealed to his readers the depth and longevity of German influence over Russia. He bemoaned what he said were the years of German suppression of Russian talents which he blamed on the generations of German princesses at court who had ‘despised and feared all native progress [and] dreaded and persecuted’ all aspects of native Russian culture.¹⁰³²

Emboldened by events in Russia, the communist trade unionist Thomas Mann called on his fellow countrymen to establish their own workers and soldiers soviets.¹⁰³³ Like their political brethren in Russia a soviet administration in Britain would have had little need of a monarch, even a constitutional one. The *Trade Union Worker* magazine, explained that since a king reigns solely because he is the son of his father a republic was the ‘only intelligent form of government’.¹⁰³⁴

By its very nature, the readership of the *Trade Union Worker* was limited to a narrow interest group. Its views could be interpreted as extreme, unrepresentative and therefore unlikely to carry weight with a majority of the populace. However, British republicanism, which had been a feature of Victoria’s widowhood, had not been entirely

¹⁰³¹ Panayi, *The Enemy in our Midst*, pp. 223-58.

¹⁰³² Stueart, *Russian Revolution*, p. 336.

¹⁰³³ Laurence Thompson, *The Enthusiasts: A Biography of John and Katherine Glasier* (London, 1971), p225.

¹⁰³⁴ *Trade Union Worker*, Apr. 1918, p. 8.

extinguished during the reigns of her successors.¹⁰³⁵ Ian Fletcher has argued that feature of this discontent manifested itself in the frequent complaints in the radical press about the cost of royal ceremonials.¹⁰³⁶ In the tinderbox atmosphere and in the light of the Russian revolution it was all too easy for the flames of republicanism to be reignited. In April 1917 William Thorne, a radical socialist politician, travelled to Russia as part of a ‘fraternal delegation’. During the visit he met the British ambassador and the two men discussed the possibility that the tsar and empress might come to Britain.¹⁰³⁷ Buchanan informed London that Thorne had threatened that should Nicholas and Alexandra come to Britain ‘the consequences might be very serious’.¹⁰³⁸ Buchanan pressed Thorne who insisted that even if the ‘Russian government were to ask us to allow the ex-tsar to come to Britain and [the British authorities] consented we must not allow him to stay in England under any circumstances’.¹⁰³⁹ On 15 April, the same day that Thorne had made spoken to Buchanan, the new Russian justice minister Alexander Kerensky hinted to the ambassador that he had papers in his possession which ‘proved’ the empress had been involved in a plot to bring about a separate peace with Germany.¹⁰⁴⁰

Although he did not refer directly to either Thorne or Kerensky, on 17 April 1917, Charles Hardinge confided to his friend Frank Lascelles that although the king ‘did not

¹⁰³⁵ Anthony Taylor, ‘The Nauseating Cult of the Crown’: Republicanism; Anti-Monarchism and Post Chartist Politics 1870-5’, in David Nash and Anthony Taylor, (eds.), *Republicanism in Victorian Society* (Stroud, 2000), p. 52.

¹⁰³⁶ Ian Christopher Fletcher, ‘Some Interesting Survivals of a Historic Past?: Republicanism, Monarchism and the Militant Edwardian Left’ in Nash and Taylor, (eds.), *Republicanism in Victorian Society* (Sutton, 2000), pp. 97-99.

¹⁰³⁷ L. Radice and G. H. Radice, *Will Thorne: Constructive Militant* (London, 1974).

¹⁰³⁸ TNA, FO 800/205, Sir George Buchanan to Foreign Office, 15 Apr. 1917.

¹⁰³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

want to give the tsar the cold shoulder and although devoted to his cousin the tsar, he is most anxious he should not come here'.¹⁰⁴¹ In the knowledge of the empress's supposed treasonable behaviour, a recognition that there was a 'strong feeling of hostility to the tsar amongst the working class', and an acceptance of the king's dogged opposition, Lloyd George now reconsidered the government's offer of refuge.¹⁰⁴² On 17 April he suggested that Spain or France might be a more suitable place of exile and Buchanan was instructed 'to make no further mention of the matter [of exile in Britain] to the Russian government'.¹⁰⁴³ In the spring of 1917, the war on the Western Front was far from won and, as a result, the British were desperate for the provisional government to bolster their fighting troops in the east. If either the king or the government had any doubts Lord Francis Bertie, Britain's ambassador to France, provided additional reasons as to why it would be unwise for the imperial family to be given exile in Britain. In the months before his death Nicholas retained a lively interest Russian affairs and the progress of the war. However, whether he would have allowed himself (even nominally) to become directly involved in Russian politics is a moot point. Nonetheless, on 22 April he warned Charles Hardinge that should the imperial couple be allowed to come to Britain they could become the focus of a counter-revolutionary movement which might well damage the country's important relationship with the new government in St Petersburg.¹⁰⁴⁴

Although by May 1917 it was unlikely that Nicholas and Alexandra would be allowed

¹⁰⁴¹ TNA, FO 800/78, Sir Charles Hardinge to Sir Francis Lascelles, 17 Apr. 1917.

¹⁰⁴² Ibid.

¹⁰⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴⁴ TNA, FO 800/78, Letter from Lord Francis Bertie to Lord Hardinge, 22 Apr. 1917.

to come to Britain, the writer and socialist H.G. Wells appeared to believe it remained a distinct possibility. As result he fired a metaphorical shot across the royal bows. On 15 May he published a polemic on the idea of asylum, which he coupled with a wider discussion of monarchy as an institution. Although the article entitled ‘The Future of the Monarchy’, was published in the populist *Penny Pictorial*, an advert in *The Times*, exhorted the public ‘to borrow a copy if you are too late to buy one-the subject matter concerns us all’.¹⁰⁴⁵ The piece was illustrated by a row of thrones which had been toppled over. Each was labelled with the name of a different country: Portugal, China, Russia and one about to be pushed over by a man in workman’s attire was labelled Germany. Several more thrones stretched into the distance awaiting their fate. Four out of five of the major European powers involved in the conflict were monarchies. The ties which had bound the royal families of Britain and Russia, and which had once seemed such an asset for peace, now seemed a distinct liability. Thus, it was Wells’ contention that the European monarchies had caused the war so, although he admitted to having ‘certain sympathy’ for the tsar, he nonetheless, struck a threatening tone towards George V.¹⁰⁴⁶ Wells declared that should the tsar and empress come to England ‘where they would have frequent access to our royal family’ it might be ‘extraordinarily unfortunate for the British monarchy’.¹⁰⁴⁷ In a further thinly veiled threat towards Wells advised: ‘The tsar is not an evil figure, he is not a strong figure but he is the sort that trails revolution in its wake. He has ended one dynasty already. Our royal family owes it to itself that he brings not the infection of his

¹⁰⁴⁵ *The Times*, 15 May 1917 p. 4.

¹⁰⁴⁶ *Penny Pictorial*, 15 May 1917, p. 310-311.

¹⁰⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

misfortunes thither'.¹⁰⁴⁸

In the summer of 1917, as Britain was in the midst of one of several wartime bouts of Germanophobia, George V was forced to renounce his German titles and to adopt Windsor as the name of the ruling house. When these factors were combined with radical calls for a British republic it became politically difficult to offer exile to the imperial couple. This atmosphere of xenophobia, an upsurge in republicanism in Britain and articles in the press which associated George V with the deposed monarch gave the king pause for thought. In April 1917 the British government instructed Sir George Buchanan to 'make no further mention of the subject to the Russian government'.¹⁰⁴⁹

While the king worried about the stability of his own throne should the imperial couple be permitted to reside in Britain, ironically in Russia itself, where a republic had been established, some commentators believed there were signs of some resurgence in favour of a crowned head. Centuries of British commentators had recorded the central role of the monarchy in Russian life. Even during the revolutionary troubles of 1905, Robert Nisbet Bain, in his survey of Russian history, declared: 'Russia owes everything to her tsars, her prosperity her greatness, her empire, her very existence'.¹⁰⁵⁰ Perhaps influenced by such stories, as well as his own experiences travelling across the Russian Empire from Finland to the Caucuses, Locker Lampson believed, that despite the revolution, the monarchical principle was so firmly rooted in Russia that 'when the time comes the

¹⁰⁴⁸ *Penny Pictorial*, 15 May 1917, p. 311.

¹⁰⁴⁹ TNA, CAB 23/40 Memorandum of a Cabinet Meeting 17 April 1917.

¹⁰⁵⁰ R. Nisbet Bain, *The First Romanovs 1613-1725: A History of Moscovite Civilisation and the Rise of Modern Russia under Peter the Great and his forerunners* (London, 1905), p. ix.

country will undoubtedly vote for a tsar'.¹⁰⁵¹ Furthermore, he reported that, although at the start of the revolution portraits of Nicholas had been removed from public places including army hospital wards, the wounded were now demanding 'their monarch's picture back'.¹⁰⁵² Even Francis Lindley, whose reaction to the abdication had been deeply unsympathetic, believed that there was a residual affection for the monarchy in Russia. In a memorandum on the subject to Whitehall he declared that although there were few people who wished 'to retain Nicholas II on the throne, few desired or expected the institution of a republic'.¹⁰⁵³ On 16 April the British ambassador added to these impressions of monarchical sentiment when he reported that the Grand Duchess Maria Pavlovna (senior) was confident that before much longer 'things will probably quieten down and the imperial family will be able resume their old position on the throne'.¹⁰⁵⁴ In retrospect the fact that members of the deposed dynasty were blind to the reality of the situation in Russia does not surprise us. They lived lives within a relatively small, like-minded, social circle whose everyday concerns were far removed from those of the mass of population. Having survived the 1905 revolution they had no reason to suppose they could not survive the upheavals of March 1917. However unrealistic this now seems, as we have seen British commentators had not been especially perceptive in predicting the revolution. As late as May 1918, Bruce Lockhart assured London that 'even the Social

¹⁰⁵¹TNA, FO 371/2996, Commander Miles Locker Lampson, British Naval Armoured Car Division to Foreign Office, 19 Mar. 1917.

¹⁰⁵²TNA, FO 371/2996, Commander Miles Locker Lampson, British Naval Armoured Car Division to Foreign Office, 19 Mar. 1917.

¹⁰⁵³TNA, FO 371/2996, Francis Lindley to Foreign Office, 1 Apr. 1917.

¹⁰⁵⁴TNA, FO 371/2996, Sir George Buchanan to Foreign Office, 16 Apr. 1917.

Revolutionaries admit that a return to some form of monarchy is now inevitable'.¹⁰⁵⁵ With the benefit of hindsight a more realistic assessment of the mood of the nation was submitted to London by Major J.F. Neilson which indicated that perceptions of the so-called monarchical instinct, which Lindley and Lampson believed was an immutable feature of Russian life, was based on a misunderstanding. Neilson had come to Russia in December 1913 and after the outbreak of war was attached to the Russian Army. In spite of his relatively short period of time in Russia in comparison to some other commentators he was apparently more perceptive, albeit that his explanation of Russian attitudes was rather unflattering.¹⁰⁵⁶ He explained that the mass of Russians had 'under-developed minds' and therefore a contradictory understanding of what a republic meant for them.¹⁰⁵⁷ Thus, he explained, they were wont to insist that a Republic was indeed 'an excellent thing' as long as it had a tsar at its head.¹⁰⁵⁸

(i) Siberian Exile and Death

The provisional government, concerned for the safety of the imperial family, and in order to frustrate the demands of the Petersburg Soviet that Nicholas be imprisoned in the Peter and Paul Fortress, determined to send them away. On 13 August 1917, earlier plans to send them into exile abroad having long since fallen through, Nicholas, Alexandra and their five children left Tsarskoe Selo for the last time. Their destination was the Siberian town of Tobolsk. By now the tsar had been off the throne for almost six months, and in

¹⁰⁵⁵TNA, FO 371/3286, R.H. Bruce Lockhart to Foreign Office, 28 May 1918.

¹⁰⁵⁶www.ukwhoswho.com 2013.

¹⁰⁵⁷TNA, CAB/24/11, Major J.F. Neilson to Imperial War Cabinet, 31 Mar. 1917.

¹⁰⁵⁸Ibid.

Britain at least, he was no longer the central political figure he had once been. Nonetheless, the British press noted the family's departure. *The Times* painted a depressing picture of the imperial family's future home. Tobolsk, it said, was a bleak, straggling village'.¹⁰⁵⁹ As for the new imperial residence, according to the same newspaper, it was 'a crude dwelling, totally devoid of elementary comforts and conveniences [with] no place for the exiles to take exercise or even a breath of fresh air'.¹⁰⁶⁰ In fact the town was a good deal more substantial than the image suggested by *The Times* and the imperial family were housed in a villa which had previously served as the governor's residence. Although their living quarters did not match the luxurious surroundings with which the imperial family were more familiar, they were waited on by a large retinue of servants and surrounded by furnishings and possessions brought from Tsarskoe Selo.

The *Spectator* speculated as to the reasons which had caused the Russian government to send them so far away. The article made mention of demands from radicals within the revolutionary movement that the tsar be imprisoned in the fortress traditionally reserved for enemies of the state. Rather, it suggested that he had been sent to the other side of the Urals to prevent him 'falling into German or counter-revolutionary hands'.¹⁰⁶¹ Siberia, of course, had for centuries been a place of imprisonment and exile for political prisoners and common criminals alike and it was with this in mind that Albert Stopford commented that the government had made a serious error in sending Nicholas to Tobolsk. Stopford's

¹⁰⁵⁹ *The Times*, 21 Aug. 1917, p. 6.

¹⁰⁶⁰ *The Times*, 4 Sept. 1917, p. 5.

¹⁰⁶¹ *Spectator*, 25 Aug. 1917, p. 178.

family and social connections place him firmly within the elites of both Britain and Russia. His father had been chaplain to Queen Victoria, Edward VII and George V and an aunt had been maid-of-honour to Queen Victoria. In light of his 'elite's view' of the Russian peasant Stopford was convinced that the decision to send 'Lord's anointed' to Siberia was bound to make a bad impression on the mass of the people.¹⁰⁶²

The train which carried the imperial family to Siberia had been adorned with flags of the Japanese Red Cross, causing *The Times* to suggest Japan would be their ultimate destination.¹⁰⁶³ However, the family remained living in the Governor's Residence until the spring of 1918. In the meantime, the provisional government was overthrown and a Bolshevik regime installed in St Petersburg. In March 1918 Lenin signed the Treaty of Brest Litovsk which ceded the Baltic provinces, Finland, much of Ukraine and parts of the Caucuses to Germany. That same month the British troops established bases in Murmansk and Archangelsk in what was the beginning of a substantial allied military intervention in Russia.

George V had played a pivotal role in ensuring Britain's offer of asylum had been withdrawn. However, whether as a result of his perception of the political situation in Russia, or latent familial feelings towards the imperial couple, the king instigated plans to rescue them from Tobolsk.¹⁰⁶⁴ One of the better documented accounts involved a Norwegian by the name of Jonas Lied.¹⁰⁶⁵ Before the war Lied had operated Siberian mineral and timber concessions and in the course of his work had become well acquainted

¹⁰⁶² Stopford, *Russian Diary*, p. 187.

¹⁰⁶³ *The Times*, 23 Aug. 1917, p. 178.

¹⁰⁶⁴ TNA, FO 371/3329, Lord Cromer to Foreign Office, 3 May 1918.

¹⁰⁶⁵ Jonas Lied, *Return to Happiness*, (London, 1943).

with the Siberian river systems. Stephen Graham later recalled having met Lied and noted the existence of plans to kidnap Nicholas and Alexandra in Tobolsk and to take them, by river to the port of Murmansk and thence to Western Europe.¹⁰⁶⁶ The extent to which Lied's plans were advanced remains largely a matter of conjecture but, in any case, before they could be implemented the couple were taken to Yekaterinburg.

In the years since, the reason for their forced departure from Tobolsk in April 1918 and the loyalties of V.V Yakovlev, the man who accompanied them, have been the subject of much speculation. Conspiracy theories abound, some being more plausible than others.¹⁰⁶⁷

Alexandra assumed that Nicholas was being taken to Moscow, to counter sign to the treaty of Brest Litovsk.¹⁰⁶⁸ Although the imperial family seem to have been taken by surprise at Yakovlev's arrival, the English tutor told an aunt in England that he had 'expected something like this to happen in the spring' and that the entire family would shortly be sent [...] to Norway.¹⁰⁶⁹ In May 1918, Sir John Oliver Wardrop the British Consul General in Moscow reported that the imperial couple had been 'taken away for their own safety' but he did not indicate the nature of the dangers which they may have faced had they remained in Tobolsk.¹⁰⁷⁰ A report in *The Times* contradicted such views and focused on the apparent monarchist loyalties of the local populace. According to the newspaper Nicholas and Alexandra had been removed from Tobolsk because of 'efforts

¹⁰⁶⁶ Stephen Graham, *Wonderful Scene*, (London, 1964) p. 161.

¹⁰⁶⁷ Steinberg and Khrustalev *The Fall of the Romanovs*, pp.183-87.

¹⁰⁶⁸ Vladimir A. Kozlov and Vladimir M. Khrustalev (eds.), *The Last Diary of Tsaritsa Alexandra* (Yale, 1997), p. 108.

¹⁰⁶⁹ Papers of Charles Sydney Gibbes, Bodleian Library Special Collections, A letter from Charles Sydney Gibbes to his aunt Kate, 26 April 1918.

¹⁰⁷⁰ TNA, FO 371/3322, Sir John Oliver Wardrop to Foreign Office, 10 May 1918.

being made by the local peasants to promote their escape'.¹⁰⁷¹ After some perambulations across the region, the tsar, the empress and their daughter Maria were taken to the Ural mining town of Yekaterinburg. The remaining imperial children who had stayed behind in Tobolsk joined them a few weeks later but most of the servants and suite who had accompanied the family to exile the previous August were now dismissed.

Since the imperial confinement in Yekaterinburg was more severe than had hitherto been the case, the tsar and empress had little meaningful contact with the outside world. As a result a number of myths and legends as to their fate were easily constructed. Even when the family were living in Tobolsk there were rumours that one daughter had escaped via Japan to San Francisco where she was reported as having 'strongly democratic sympathies' and, despite the fact that the remainder of her family were still presumably thought be imprisoned in Russia, was said to have 'no regrets for the overthrow of the Romanovs'.¹⁰⁷² In mid-June 1918, Sir John Oliver Wardrop writing from Moscow recorded other rumours which indicated that Nicholas was not dead but was with regiments of the Czech army which were then located in Siberia.¹⁰⁷³ As part of the myriad factions engaged in fighting in Siberia, the Czechoslovak Legion was made up of disaffected former combatants of the Austro-Hungarian army. They had been taken prisoner of war and subsequently, at the request of the allies, were being sent via Vladivostok to France. When the Bolsheviks demanded that they hand over their arms they resisted and seized much of the trans-Siberian railway.

¹⁰⁷¹ *The Times*, 6 May 1918, p. 7.

¹⁰⁷² *The Times*, 27 Nov. 1917, p. 8.

¹⁰⁷³ TNA, FO 371/3322, Sir John Oliver Wardrop to Foreign Office, 24 June 1918.

Alongside fanciful stories of escape, in the early summer of 1918, there were also a series of rumours that suggested Nicholas was dead. Robert Wilton filed one such account on 23 June 1918. By now Russia was in the full throes of a civil war and, presumably because of logistical difficulties in sending it to London, Wilton's article was not printed until eleven days later. He asserted that the tsar had been killed following 'a violent altercation with a soldier' on a train taking the imperial family away from Yekaterinburg to the Siberian city of Perm.¹⁰⁷⁴ The same report suggested that the tsarevich had died two weeks before the tsar's demise but that the 'ex-empress and her children had arrived safely in Perm'.¹⁰⁷⁵ On 12 July 1918 an article in the *Morning Post*, contradicted Wilton's claims that the tsar was dead although his account admitted the idea of Perm as a third place of exile. By lined 'Stockholm', the unnamed journalist reported that 'travellers recently arrived here from Perm have all expressed the firm conviction that the [tsar] has not after all been killed but that a bomb thrown into the house where the imperial family was kept imprisoned [at Yekaterinburg] has killed the tsarevich'.¹⁰⁷⁶

On 18 July 1918, nearly a month after Wilton filed his report to London suggesting that Nicholas was dead the Bolshevik authorities announced that the tsar had been executed in Yekaterinburg on the night of 16/17 July. The official acknowledgment that Nicholas had been executed put an end to the credibility of reports that claimed otherwise. It was now well over a year since Nicholas had abdicated, the entente powers were still at war but Russia had made a separate peace with Germany and was no longer Britain's ally. In

¹⁰⁷⁴ *The Times*, 3 Jul. 1918, p. 6.

¹⁰⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷⁶ *Morning Post*, 12 Jul. 1918, p. 5.

response to the tsar's death some newspapers simply re-printed the official Bolshevik communiqué. For example, the popular *Daily Graphic*, which in previous years had provided extensive coverage of the imperial couple, initially at least, simply observed that whilst Nicholas had been reported dead on a number of occasions in recent months 'this communiqué appears to be authentic'.¹⁰⁷⁷

However, there was considerable interest in reports of the tsar's death beyond the bald facts as reported in the *Daily Graphic*. The tone of articles in the press included a mixture of the 'human-angle' as well as simple prurience mixed with a newspapers' love of sensation, tragedy and pathos. The *Scotsman* for example, looked back to happier days and recalled the family ties between the Romanovs and the British royal family. A year earlier these ties had led to the withdrawal of Britain's offer of exile to the imperial couple. On this occasion the *Scotsman* reminded its readers that in 1896 Nicholas and Alexandra had visited Scotland and that the tsar had courted his bride in England. Furthermore, the article also recalled that the empress was a niece of the late king, Edward VII.¹⁰⁷⁸ At the time of his accession and during his visit to Cowes, the tsar's choice of literature had been the subject of much fascination in the British press which had allied his choice of English novels with 'a personal like of the British people'.¹⁰⁷⁹ His enjoyment of English novels had given the British public the pleasant feeling that, not only did he hold their culture in high regard but also that this reflected his personal esteem for the British people. On this occasion the *Scotsman*, which naturally gave

¹⁰⁷⁷ *Daily Graphic*, 21 Jul. 1918, p. 3.

¹⁰⁷⁸ *Scotsman*, 22 Jul. 1917, p. 4.

¹⁰⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

prominence to his choice of Scottish authors, noted that Nicholas had read the works of Robert Louis Stevenson and Sir Walter Scott.¹⁰⁸⁰ The *Times* took up this congenial Russo-British theme and recalled that the tsar had ‘been tutored by an Englishman [Charles Heath] of whom he was very fond and from whom he learnt to speak English as fluently as his mother tongue [which] he habitually used when alone with the empress’.¹⁰⁸¹

Amongst the other broadsheets which reported Nicholas’s death an article in the *Daily Telegraph* by E.J. Dillon was the most extensive. Published over a period of two days, the acknowledged expert on Russian affairs added to his ‘Russian credentials’ by claiming to have met Rasputin whom he dismissed as ‘a charlatan’.¹⁰⁸² The *Daily Telegraph’s* front page, which was surrounded by a black mourning border, was illustrated by a picture of the tsar in Cossack dress uniform. The article was headlined: ‘The ex-Tsar Nicholas II: an imperial tragedy. A tragic history of opportunities missed’.¹⁰⁸³ Interestingly, given that it written to mark the death of the tsar, it was Alexandra who was the focus of the article. A common, if sometimes publicly unspoken, presumption at this time was that had Alexandra not interfered in politics, Nicholas might still be on his throne. Whereas Nicholas was still given the benefit of the doubt for an alleged record of liberal intent, the days when Alexandra had been identified as a potentially democratising force at the Russian court were long since forgotten. Dillon accepted that the empress had been ‘an excellent wife and mother’ but he believed that her good points had been outweighed by her interference in affairs outside of the

¹⁰⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸¹ *The Times*, 22 Jul. 1918, p. 5.

¹⁰⁸² *Daily Telegraph*, 24 Jul. 1918, p. 5.

¹⁰⁸³ *Daily Telegraph*, 22 Jul. 1918, p. 3.

domestic sphere where she had been ‘a reactionary’ and ‘an evil influence on her husband’.¹⁰⁸⁴

Dillon was a harsh critic of the ex-empress but he was at least qualified to offer his opinion as a result of his long association with Russia. Other commentators may have been influenced against the imperial regime for rather more mercenary reasons as may have been the case with an article in *Russia: A Journal of Anglo Russian Trade*. Given its title which suggests it sought cordial relations with the Bolshevik regime, it is perhaps not surprising that the periodical chose to highlight the tsar’s faults rather than to dwell on the tragedy of his death. The trade magazine proffered no sympathy for Nicholas’s violent end, coldly asserting it was only that ‘which he had ordered for many of his subjects’.¹⁰⁸⁵ At the time of Nicholas’s abdication the *Church Times* had lauded the fallen monarch. For reasons which are unclear the newspaper abandoned its earlier sympathetic stance and denounced the deceased ruler in no uncertain terms as ‘unstable, superstitious and ill-informed’.¹⁰⁸⁶ In a similar vein, Aylmer Maude, who as we have discussed, was critical of the tsar at the time of his coronation, informed *The Times* that the tsar had been an obstinate ruler who had ignored numerous warnings from the Duma and the grand dukes to change direction preferring ‘to be guided by Rasputin and his associates’.¹⁰⁸⁷

W.T. Stead, who had been personally sympathetic to Nicholas, was now dead. How Stead might have reacted to the tsar’s abdication and execution can only be imagined. However, given his vigorous support for Nicholas it is ironic the *Pall Mall* gazette, a

¹⁰⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸⁵ *Russia: A Journal of Anglo-Russian Trade*, 27 Jul. 1918, p. 88.

¹⁰⁸⁶ *Church Times*, 26 Jul. 1918, p. 59.

¹⁰⁸⁷ *The Times*, 3 Aug. 1918, p. 9.

magazine which Stead had once edited was especially harsh. In a review of the tsar's reign the gazette concluded that there had been chances to save the Russian monarchy but that Nicholas had thrown them away. As a result, the article asserted, any 'pity for his unhappy fate is tinged with contempt'.¹⁰⁸⁸

It was not only Nicholas's political outlook and the significant events of his reign which proved of interest to the British public at this time. The manner of his death fascinated the populist *Morning Post* and presumably its readers. Beginning on 22 July and continuing until mid-August, the newspaper published a number of articles, which purported to be descriptions of the tsar's final days. It did not balk from including the most graphic of details, but the most poignant, almost akin to a Victorian melodrama, was published on 1 August. It recounted how Nicholas had been awoken at 5 in the morning and told by his guards that he was shortly to be executed. When the time came for him to be taken away (according to the newspaper) Nicholas 'tried to rise from his chair but was unable to do so' and had to be helped down the stairs by his soon to be executioners.¹⁰⁸⁹ In a dramatic denouement the *Morning Post* claimed the tsar had tried to speak as he stood before the firing squad but that before he could so 'the rifle shots rang out and Nicholas II was dead'.¹⁰⁹⁰ Setting the scene for future presentations of Nicholas as a martyr who went to his death for the sake of his country the news agency Reuters contradicted elements of this account of events. It claimed that before being shot the tsar had been permitted to speak and that his last thoughts were for his family and his country and that he had called

¹⁰⁸⁸ *Pall Mall Gazette*, 7 Sept. 1918, p. 4.

¹⁰⁸⁹ *Morning Post*, 1 Aug. 1918, p. 6.

¹⁰⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

out ‘spare my wife and my innocent and unhappy children! May my blood preserve Russia from ruin!’¹⁰⁹¹

Few of the commentators who offered opinions about the tsar and motivation had ever been to Russia let alone met him. In light of what he perceived to be ill-judged or naïve response to the late monarch Rear-Admiral Sir Richard Phillimore felt moved to defend him.¹⁰⁹² In a letter to *The Times* he politely, if firmly, took issue with the tsar’s armchair critics. He began his letter with a tone of ironic self-deprecation explaining that his ‘only qualification’ for speaking about the tsar was the fact that he had ‘been privileged to be much in his company for a year during the present war’.¹⁰⁹³ He went on: ‘It is surely one of the grimmest of satires, while all are rendering lip service to universal peace, that the monarch who first endeavoured to put the theory into practical form at The Hague should be allowed to depart this life almost unnoticed save by ignorant abuse. He was courteous and considerate to others, he was a great gentleman who honestly endeavoured to do his duty to his God and his people and I feel sure that history will do hers by him’.¹⁰⁹⁴ In November 1917 the provisional government led by Alexander Kerensky had been overthrown and the man who had sent Nicholas to Siberia, fled Russia aboard a ship of the Royal Navy. The irony of the two men’s fate men and the treatment each had received from Britain was not lost on Phillimore. The tsar, who had stoutly resisted the siren calls to make a separate peace, now lay dead in an unmarked grave, in contrast, Phillimore noted bitterly, Kerensky, ‘the demagogue who paved the way for Russia’s desertion of

¹⁰⁹¹ Cited in *The Times*, 6 Aug. 1918, p. 4.

¹⁰⁹² Chapter 7.

¹⁰⁹³ Rear-Admiral Sir R. F. Phillimore letter to *The Times*, 31 Jul. 1918, p. 9.

¹⁰⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

her allies', had been received in Britain as 'an honoured guest'.¹⁰⁹⁵ In another letter to *The Times*, General Sir Hanbury Williams who had also spent much time in the tsar's company defended his loyalty to the allies. The general admitted that Nicholas had shortcomings as a ruler but he rejected allegations that he had been the dupe of a pro-German clique and insisted that he had been loyal ally'. As Phillimore had done, Hanbury Williams ended his letter by identifying himself in a very personal way with the late tsar when he declared that Nicholas had been 'the kindest of friends'.¹⁰⁹⁶

An understanding response to Nicholas was to be expected from Phillimore and Hanbury Williams. Both men had been much liked by the tsar and they, in turn, had been charmed by his personal qualities. A more unexpected response came from the *Labour Leader: A Weekly Journal of Socialism, Trade Unionism and Politics*. As we have seen there was substantial opposition from the left and from republicans to the British offer of asylum to the tsar. Indeed, it had been a significant factor in George V's suggestion that Nicholas reside elsewhere, at least for the duration of the war. The *Labour Leader* was opposed to capital punishment and this may explain the sombre tone of the article. However, there was no requirement on the newspaper to acknowledge, with sympathy, as it did, the manner of the tsar's passing which it declared was 'neither necessary nor justifiable'.¹⁰⁹⁷

British understanding of Russian reaction to Nicholas's death was as mixed as it had earlier been in relation to his abdication. Opinion was divided between those

¹⁰⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹⁶ General Sir John Hanbury Williams, letter to *The Times*, 5 Nov. 1918, p. 5.

¹⁰⁹⁷ *Labour Leader*, 25 Jul. 1918, p. 1.

commentators who asserted that the mass of ordinary Russians had been deeply moved by his fate and those who claimed that it was of no consequence to his erstwhile subjects. Whether from a feeling of loyalty to the crown, a sense of the passing of an era, a yearning for a past way of life or simply pity for a human being who had met a violent death the *Morning Post* did not say. Perhaps it was a mixture of all these factors, according to the newspaper publication of the tsar's murder made a 'profound impression' on the Russian people.¹⁰⁹⁸ The newspaper explained that people had 'prayed in churches across Moscow for Nicholas' adding conspiratorially that 'everyone knew the significance of this simple Christian name'.¹⁰⁹⁹ An article in *The Times* echoed these impressions of a resilient sympathy for the deposed monarch. The newspaper insisted that for the Russian people the former tsar 'will be a saint [...] now surrounded with the halo of a martyr'.¹¹⁰⁰ However, the British were not unanimous in holding such seemingly naïve views of Russian attitudes to a fallen ruler who had brutally suppressed opposition and was believed, through weakness, to have become entangled in a web of pro-German (and therefore anti-Russian) influences. As Orlando Figes and Boris Kolonitskii remind us, in the aftermath of his overthrow: 'the burning of straw effigies of the tsar, the pornographic pictures of the empress and Rasputin, the tearing down of emblems and the cutting of eyes from tsarist portraits [were] expressions of mockery and anger' which was not confined to out and out revolutionaries.¹¹⁰¹ Therefore, in light of such accounts, the notion

¹⁰⁹⁸ *Morning Post*, 12 Aug. 1918, p. 12.

¹⁰⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰⁰ *The Times*, 6 Aug. 1918, p. 4.

¹¹⁰¹ Orlando Figes and Boris Kolonitskii, *Interpreting the Russian Revolution: The Language and Symbols of 1917* (New Haven and London, 1999), pp. 27-8.

that Nicholas might widely perceived as a saint seems unlikely, even if some Russians felt sympathy for the manner of his death.

In his account of the reception given to the news of the tsar's death, Sir John Oliver Wardrop made an oblique reference to claims that there had been strong pro-German influences at the heart of the imperial court. Thus, Wardrop insisted that with the exception of those he called the 'German aristocracy' few people in Russia had even taken much notice of the news.¹¹⁰² Stories of supposed German influence at the Russian court and rumours of talks to conclude a separate peace continued to fascinate even after the overthrow of the monarchy. In June 1918 British officials in neutral Switzerland reported that the German authorities were taking an active interest in the fate of the imperial family.¹¹⁰³ It was said that, as part of a scheme to establish pro-German states from Ukraine to the Baltic, the authorities in Berlin had offered the Russian crown to any Romanov, including the deposed tsar, who would pledge loyalty to Germany.¹¹⁰⁴ Nicholas had abdicated on behalf of his son, then twelve years old, to keep him out of politics and within the close family circle. However, Russian monarchists abroad were reported as saying that the tsarevich was the 'legitimate heir'.¹¹⁰⁵ Using phraseology which recalled both an earlier era and the recent tsarist past the monarchists declared that should the Germans place him on the throne, they would 'set about freeing him from his evil

¹¹⁰² TNA, FO 371/3322, Sir John Oliver Wardrop to Foreign Office, 8 Aug. 1918.

¹¹⁰³ TNA, FO 370/3228, Sir Hugh Rumbold, British Ambassador in Switzerland to Sir Arthur Balfour, 19 June 1918.

¹¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰⁵ TNA, FO 371/3328, Sir Hugh Rumbold to Sir Arthur Balfour, 4 Jul. 1918.

counsellors'.¹¹⁰⁶

Despite reports which suggested Nicholas was now dead and even garnering sympathy from at least one socialist publication in Britain, George V remained concerned that the public might yet perceive his relationship with the tsar in negative terms. Therefore, when the king received an invitation to a memorial service for his cousin at the Russian Orthodox Church in London's Welbeck Street, he sought the advice of his government. In a written response the Foreign Secretary advised the nervous monarch that since the tsar 'had always been loyal to the entente no criticism need attach to the king' should he attend the service.¹¹⁰⁷ George V was apparently reassured since the *Lady* magazine noted that not only the king, but Queen Mary and the tsar's aunt Queen Alexandra attended the service.¹¹⁰⁸ Furthermore, the *Lady* noted that the king had ordered the court to go into mourning in order to mark the death of the tsar. The upper class woman's magazine also used the occasion of the memorial service to offer comment on recent events in Russia. The article struck a tone of sympathy towards Nicholas and Alexandra and one of bewilderment and utter disbelief towards the wider Russian tragedy. This it set in terms of the popular view that Russia was a medieval society far removed from that which pertained in Britain. Thus, the article explained: 'The history of Russia during the last two years has been so tragic and so appalling in its far-reaching calamity that no one would believe it had one not lived through it. There is nothing modern about the disaster which swept the tsar and empress from the throne and turned the country of our ally into a

¹¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁰⁷ TNA, 800/205, Sir Arthur Balfour to Lord Stamfordham, 23 Jul. 1918.

¹¹⁰⁸ *Lady*, 1 Aug. 1918, p. 84.

nightmare of anarchy and revolution. The whole tragedy sounds more like the Middle-Ages than our twentieth century'.¹¹⁰⁹

(ii) Alexandra's Fate

Not long after the Bolsheviks' announcement that the tsar was dead anti-Bolshevik forces captured Yekaterinburg. The house in which the imperial family had been imprisoned was empty but there were signs of violence and an amount of charred Romanov ephemera was later discovered in some woods outside the city. However, in spite of this evidence which appeared to indicate the entire imperial family had been murdered, because of the chaotic situation caused by the civil war, there was still some considerable uncertainty as to their fate. An initial investigation by the White Russian authorities was sceptical that they had all perished.¹¹¹⁰ Indeed, in the years since July 1918, an entire library of books has been published which purport to show that one, or even all of the imperial family were rescued.¹¹¹¹

By August 1918, Britain was entering the fifth summer of her war with Germany as well as pursuing a military campaign against the Bolsheviks in Siberia and northern Russia.¹¹¹² In the light of these political and military concerns the focus of British attention on Russia centred on the progress of allied forces rather than the fate of an ex-empress. Nonetheless, the tragedy of her fall and her fate, as well as the death of her five innocent children, remained the subject of considerable official correspondence and some

¹¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹¹⁰ Anthony Summers and Tom Mangold, *The File on the Tsar* (London, 1987), pp. 80-9.

¹¹¹¹ See for example, Michael Occleshaw, *Romanov Conspiracies* (London, 1993).

¹¹¹² Kenneth Bourne, Donald Cameron Watt, D. Stevenson, John F.V. Keiger, *British Documents in Foreign Affairs, reports and Papers from the Foreign Office Confidential Print: Soviet Russia and her neighbours Jan. 1917-Dec. 1919* (Michigan, 1992).

press interest at least until as late as May 1919.

Although the British royal family later accepted that the entire family had been murdered in Yekaterinburg, for some while after July 1918 their fate remained uncertain. Sir Charles Eliot, the British High Commissioner in Siberia, suggested Alexandra and her children had been taken to the Bolshevik stronghold of Perm.¹¹¹³ On 6 August 1918, *The Times* reported that ‘negotiations for the transfer to Spain of the late tsar’s family are taking a favourable course’.¹¹¹⁴ However, the same edition of the newspaper recorded a contradictory Reuter’s report which asserted that although ‘the ex-empress is safe the [Bolshevik] government intends to bring her before a Revolutionary Court owing to her relations with Rasputin’.¹¹¹⁵

Based on reports that, although the tsar was dead, his wife and children remained alive, George V and Queen Mary sought help from Spain ‘to rescue the family from their pitiable position’.¹¹¹⁶ In their quest to secure Alexandra’s freedom the British royal family sought the help of Spain firstly, because that country was neutral and secondly, because the king and queen of Spain were related both to George V, to the empress and her German family in Hesse Darmstadt. Parts of Russia’s western borderlands were then under German control and it was believed that the German authorities carried influence with the Bolshevik authorities. However, the British Royal Family clearly could not correspond directly with their German counterparts. Despite the obvious humanitarian aspect to their plea’s it was notable that it was Queen Mary and Queen Alexandra rather

¹¹¹³TNA, FO 371/3977, Sir Charles Eliot to Foreign Office, 10 Oct. 1918.

¹¹¹⁴*The Times*, 6 Aug. 1918, p. 4.

¹¹¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹¹¹⁶TNA, FO 800/205, Queen Alexandra to King Alfonso XIII of Spain, 15 Aug. 1918.

than the king who corresponded with Spain on the subject of the imperial family's imprisonment. However, the king must surely have responded to Alexandra as a human being and therefore been to secure her release it is unlikely that either Mary or Alexandra would have acted without his approval. However, George's avoidance of any public association with his controversial cousin may also be taken as a sign of his continued nervousness of the outcome should he be identified in the public mind with a woman who was accused of betraying the allies. Perhaps, the king need not have worried since on 28 August 1918 however, a British official in Archangel reported news from Yekaterinburg that Alexandra and all her children had been 'shot with the tsar', presumably in July.¹¹¹⁷

With British forces involved in the Russian civil war the central focus of British interest lay elsewhere than the fate of the imperial family. However, the tragic end of once powerful family who had suffered imprisonment and humiliation and violent murder remained a source of fascination for sections of the British press. An article in the *Spectator* discussed the fate of Aleksei who, it asserted had been 'cruelly done to death'.¹¹¹⁸ The *Spectator* also focused on the reasons why Alexandra had been driven to seek help from Rasputin. The periodical did not condemn the empress but recalled the long years before the heir was born and the subsequent discovery of his terrible illness. The tone was rather elegiac as it declared that: 'All British men and women will remember the long period of patient hope and disappointment in the tsar's family which was rewarded by his birth. Love, care and anxiety were the motives which caused the

¹¹¹⁷TNA, FO 800/205, Report from FORSINT the Intelligence co-ordinator for all British forces and Missions in Russia and Siberia, 28 Aug. 1918.

¹¹¹⁸ *Spectator*, 7 Sept. 1918, p. 242.

empress to become prey to malign influences which developed into an unendurable scandal'. In a heartfelt conclusion the *Spectator* asked rhetorically 'surely no member of any civilised nation can reflect upon the obscure grave of this poor child without the profoundest of pity'.¹¹¹⁹

At the start of the war British commentators had lauded Nicholas for pledging his life in the fight against Germany and for taking command of his armies. Some of these plaudits stemmed from a perhaps rather romantic view of Russia and the tsars, others were rooted in political necessity or perhaps because people simply wanted to believe the tsar really could make a difference. In addition, much was said immediately after his abdication about his resolute support for the allied cause and his rejection of German offers of peace. More than a year after his abdication there was little requirement in the press and others to repeat such claims. Nonetheless, *Blackwood's Edinburgh Review* recalled stories of pro-German intrigues at the Russian court but affirmed that even under arrest, Nicholas had stood loyally by the entente' and that until the very end he had remained 'the foe of the Kaiser and [had done] his best to foil plots which the Huns were making on his throne and fatherland'.¹¹²⁰ In November 1918 Germany was finally defeated and the Kaiser went into exile. This might well have seen the end of any substantial discussion of Nicholas and Alexandra. The world they represented had passed into history and monarchs across Europe had lost their thrones as H.G. Wells had indicated they might. George V had retained his but only at the cost of ensuring that Britain's offer of asylum to the imperial couple was rescinded and a very public

¹¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹¹²⁰ *Blackwood's Magazine*, Sept. 1918, vol., 109, p. 409.

renunciation of his German heritage. Britain and Russia were very different countries from the ones which had gone to war in August 1914. Nonetheless, Robert Wilton of *The Times* continued to file stories about the fate of the tsar and empress. It is well known his propaganda campaign to present the imperial family as martyrs of a brutal and degrading regime was connected with his association with White Russian forces. Wilton enjoyed a close friendship with General Diterikhs whose right wing anti-Semitic philosophy fuelled these propaganda stories. When faced with reports that perhaps the imperial family had not been killed Wilton insisted that even if the tsar and his family ‘are alive it is necessary to [publicly] say they are dead’.¹¹²¹ Given Wilton’s evident determination to ignore any inconvenient facts we can be sceptical about the content of his articles. However, the fact that his reports were published must surely show the resilience of the British public’s interest in Nicholas and Alexandra’s fate. One of his most lurid accounts was published in December 1918 purporting to be based on the testimony of a servant of the Romanov family it told the grim story of the conditions in which the imperial prisoners were held. Its tone, more representative of popular newspaper or a Le Queux novel than *The Times*, the article declared that: the entire family had been ‘locked up in one room, where there was only one bed. In this the empress slept, the others being compelled to sleep on the bare floor. The family were frequently woken in the middle of the night and compelled to answer the most brutal and shameless questions. The grand duchesses were exposed to the grossest of insults’ and their death had been ‘deliverance’.¹¹²²

In Britain since the start of the First World War, representation of Nicholas and

¹¹²¹ Phillip Knightley, *The First Casualty* (London, 1975), p. 162.

¹¹²² *The Times*, 5 Dec. 1918, p. 10.

Alexandra had passed through a number of different phases. On balance, between the time of his abdication and death, British perceptions of the tsar remained (with the exceptions we have noted) rather favourable. If he was criticised it was often others--his wife, his court or his mother--who were castigated for their influence over him. In particular, in official correspondence between diplomats, civil servants and members of the government, Alexandra was berated for her influence over political affairs. The empress was perceived as being pro-German, domineering and with regard to her friendship with Rasputin, even mentally deranged. Some British commentators, who offered opinions and created negative perceptions of Alexandra, had met her and her husband. Few, if any, ever changed their minds let alone publicly admitted that their assumptions had been incorrect. Sir George Buchanan was one of a minority. In the latter half of his service in St Petersburg he had suspected the empress of pro-German leanings and became utterly exasperated with the tsar's attitude to Russia's political situation.¹¹²³ His sometimes tetchy reports to London contributed to the negative images of Nicholas but most especially of Alexandra since Buchanan suspected the empress (and Rasputin) of exerting great influence over the tsar and thereby the course of the war on the eastern front. Despite years of diplomatic service both in Russia and elsewhere, Buchanan sometimes failed to recognise the nuances of court etiquette and had begun to imagine that Alexandra and members of the tsar's entourage were plotting against him. Of the tsar Buchanan recalled his 'inbred fatalism'¹¹²⁴ but he blamed Alexandra for having been

¹¹²³ See Chapter 7.

¹¹²⁴ Buchanan, *My Mission*, p. 170.

‘instrumental in bringing about the final catastrophe’.¹¹²⁵ He described his relationship with the tsar as one of ‘of mutual sympathy’ and claimed that he ‘never once resented my outspoken language’.¹¹²⁶ Michael Hughes has concluded from Buchanan’s account that, like Hardinge, he established something of a rapport with Nicholas¹¹²⁷ However the reality may have been rather more complicated than the image which Buchanan’s recollections suggest. Because he had known Nicholas and Alexandra in their youth, on account of his ease of entrée into St Petersburg society, or simply because the tsar disliked unpleasantness, Buchanan may have mistaken politeness and reserve for amicability. In his memoirs Buchanan had claimed that he rarely hesitated to be ‘outspoken’ at his audiences with the tsar.¹¹²⁸ However, as the son of the tsar’s doctor recalled in exile, imperial etiquette dictated that no one ever contradicted a member of the imperial family.¹¹²⁹

Given the quantity of his reports and his memoirs which still contribute to modern images of Nicholas and Alexandra it is fitting that we conclude this chapter with an observation Buchanan offered to the Russo-Scottish Society. In a lecture reported in the *Fortnightly Review* on 24 October 1918 the former ambassador attempted to explain the context against which the tsar and empress had lived during the final years of imperial Russia. In particular he recalled the first days of the 1914 war and the scenes of jubilation in Palace Square and claimed that he had felt an uneasy presentiment that the loyalty of

¹¹²⁵ Buchanan, *My Mission*, p. X.

¹¹²⁶ Buchanan, *My Mission*, p. 170.

¹¹²⁷ Hughes, *Diplomacy before the Revolution*, p. 70.

¹¹²⁸ Buchanan, *My Mission*, p. 170.

¹¹²⁹ Gleb Botkin, *The Real Romanovs* (London, 1932), p. 31.

‘the huge crowd [which had] prostrated itself before the tsar might be short lived.’¹¹³⁰ If this was indeed the case, he does not appear to have committed his forebodings to writing at the time.

As a result of the perception amongst in some quarters of the press about Alexandra’s relationship with Rasputin, Buchanan’s audience would have been intrigued to hear the ambassador’s interpretation of her friendship. However, if they were hoping for some title-tattle along the lines of a Le Queux novel, they were to be disappointed since Buchanan vehemently dismissed the authenticity of ‘the scandalous stories’ which had circulated about the nature of the empress’s friendship with Rasputin.¹¹³¹ He still blamed her for influencing her husband in policies which he said had proved ‘so disastrous’ to the regime. However, having had the opportunity to reflect on events away from the hothouse of gossip and intrigue in St Petersburg, the former ambassador now felt pity for Alexandra, a characteristic which had previously been absent from his ambassadorial reports. Contrary to allegations made during the war, he now insisted, that empress had not been ‘working in Germany’s interests nor [had] she contemplated] a separate peace with Germany’.¹¹³² Although did not elaborate on the source of his information, which contradicted the tone, if not the content, of reports which had emanated from his own embassy, he did insist that the empress ‘had a strong personal dislike’ of the Kaiser.¹¹³³

During the months between March 1917 and when Sir George Buchanan gave his

¹¹³⁰ Sir George Buchanan, ‘The Russian Revolution: Its Genesis and Aftermath’, *Fortnightly Review*, 45, Oct. 1918, p. 822.

¹¹³¹ Buchanan, ‘The Russian Revolution’, p. 825.

¹¹³² Buchanan, ‘The Russian Revolution’, p. 824.

¹¹³³ *Ibid.*

lecture in and October 1918, British perceptions of Nicholas and Alexandra passed through a number of phases. British responses to the imperial couple included sympathy, fear of upsetting the new regime in Russia, anger that the Russian army had been 'betrayed' by pro-German forces at court and concern that their presence in Britain might fuel republican sentiments. Pity and scorn were the extremes of reactions to the tsar and empress during this time. In the end however, as Sir George Buchanan's softened approach to Alexandra indicates, the overriding British perception was one of pity for a couple, who only twenty-four years earlier, had seemed to promise so much and who had met with a violent and tragic death.

Conclusion

*People often ask, what is the true character of the potentate who is obliged to posture before his people and move in melancholy pageantry? That he is a good father and a faithful husband I have never found any Russian to doubt.*¹¹³⁴

*Such a transformation as was brought about by [Alexandra's] marriage has seldom been heard of outside of a fairy-tale.*¹¹³⁵

Twenty-four years passed between the engagement of Nicholas and Alexandra in April 1894 and their murder in July 1918. In commenting on the imperial couple during these years British commentators considered a variety of topics and events which they approached from a range of perspectives. For example, in response to the Khodynka Field disaster some commentators discussed what they perceived to be evidence of Nicolas's

¹¹³⁴ Reynolds, *My Year in Russia*, p. 12

¹¹³⁵ Beavan, *Popular Royalty*, p. 58.

inability to stamp his authority on those at court who had organised the festival. Others examined the tsar and empress's response to the tragedy in the light of their understanding of the relationship between Russia's rulers and their subjects. In 1904, on the eve of the war with Japan, British observers of Russian affairs compared the apparent contradiction of the tsar's seeming belligerence on this occasion with his calls for arms reduction at the start of his reign. Commentators considered the extent to which Nicholas's claims of peaceful intent were simply a charade by a tsar who was not only a warmonger but who was seemingly willing to sacrifice the lives of his subjects in defence of his personal wealth. During times of internal unrest, such as the 1905 revolution, commentators discussed to what degree Nicholas's subjects revered him or whether he was an unpopular monarch and victim of plots against the throne, emanating perhaps, even from within his own family. In 1905, when his troops fired on unarmed civilians on Bloody Sunday commentators reviewing the massacre questioned whether the tsar was really an uncaring tyrant or a paternalistic ruler in the 'typical Russian' mould whose subjects had been led astray by political radicals. These conflicting impressions of Nicolas were also present in discussion of his motivation during 1906, when the tsar instituted the Duma. For example, some observers of Russian affairs pondered whether the fledgling parliament signalled a genuine commitment to constitutional reform or whether it simply represented a sop to the Russian people and an opportunity for the regime to bide its time before reasserting its authority. In 1909 and in 1913 some commentators who discussed the tsar's apparently successful interactions with his humblest subjects concluded that the revolutionary years were behind him and that he had

regained the people's utter loyalty to the throne and devotion to his person. In 1917, when the tsar was overthrown, the image presented in the popular press and in the broadsheets was of an honourable man who had sought to act for the best. Thus, at different times, and by different people, Nicholas was perceived as an uncaring tyrant, an ardent lover of peace, as a tsar whose own family was plotting to overthrow him and as a ruler who was adored by the mass of ordinary Russians, as a gentleman and, as tragic victim of events.

Although not a reigning sovereign, Alexandra too was subject to a variety of, sometimes conflicting, British perceptions of her personality, her motivation, her role as a mother and her role in Russian politics which, in the last years of the regime, included particularly perceptions of her relationship with Rasputin. At the start of her life in Russia she was seen as a conduit for peace in Europe on the grounds of her familial ties with the German and British ruling houses. At the time of her engagement and marriage she was the focus of British hope for the influence she might have for the good over her husband. During the early years of her married life and, by a minority, during the First World War, the empress was perceived as a loyal supporter of Britain. At other times between 1894 and 1918 she was viewed as unhinged, as meddling and as pro-German. By the time the regime collapsed perceptions of Alexandra were much more negative and her sway over Nicholas was seen as a key factor in the fall of imperial Russia.

In order to examine a wide range of opinion about Nicholas and Alexandra we have looked at a variety of sources including royal correspondence, official and unofficial correspondence by members of the diplomatic corps, broadsheets and popular

newspapers, serious periodicals and family magazines. In addition we have analysed travelogues, biographies and memoirs with which British commentators constructed images of Russia which, in turn, influenced British perceptions of Nicholas and Alexandra. We have identified three key features which help to colour British commentators understanding of the tsar and empress. Firstly, no commentator, whether a member of the royal family, a diplomat, a journalist, an expatriate or a traveller to Russia, whether sympathetic to the imperial couple or actively opposed to the tsarist regime, could escape the influence of his or her own background and life experiences. Thus, a commentator's sense of national superiority, his education, his employment, his snobbery, his disdain for the 'lower orders' were all features which coloured their perceptions of the imperial couple. Conversely, a commentator's desire for social change in Britain and, or, political reform in Russia could affect the way in which they perceived the tsar and empress.

Secondly, commentators were persuaded in their views of Nicholas and Alexandra as a result of impressions of Russia and of Russian history which had been formulated in the years since Britain first 'discovered' Muscovy in the sixteenth century. By the start of Nicholas's reign in 1894, concepts of Russian barbarism were outdated. The publication in English of Russian authors and the well-received performances in London by the Ballets Russe acknowledged that some Russians were now capable of producing high art. Nonetheless, British commentators continued to perceive the mass of the Russian people in less complimentary terms and to understand Russia in terms of 'the other'; the oriental, the despotic, the superstitious, and the backward. So enduring were the myths about

Russia and the tsars, that people in Britain interpreted events during the last reign in terms which sometimes implied that Russian society had retained all the characteristics of tyranny, despotism and cowed servility which had been characteristic of Russia under the tsar's of the sixteenth century. Fragmentary, romantic or outdated British views of earlier Russian rulers and their relationship with their people contributed to their perceptions of Nicholas and Alexandra. A number of commentators reasoned that, although the tsar and empress were members of a network of European royalty, their subjects expected them, for example, in the aftermath of the Khodynka Field disaster, to react in very different ways than might have been required of a British monarch. On this occasion it was said that the imperial couple had had to continue with the coronation festivities in spite of the deaths of many of their subjects in order to meet the expectations of those who had survived.

British understanding of Russian society also affected attitudes towards the Duma. In the light of their perception of the political naivety of the mass of Russians, some commentators viewed the Duma as an institution whose members' radical rhetoric was ill-matched to serving the needs of the nation. Taking their understanding from centuries of impressions of Russia compiled by writers and travellers and Russian specialists, many British commentators perceived that peasant discontent was directed, not at the tsar, but at the local landowner or town functionary. During the 1905 revolution such commentators did not necessarily feel that their convictions were challenged when the peasants rioted, burned or looted aristocratic estates which were blamed on alcoholic inebriation or the malign influence of charismatic demagogues. The sight of Nicholas, virtually unguarded,

in amiable and knowledgeable conversation with his awestruck peasant subjects, at events such as the anniversary of the Battle of Poltava, only reinforced their positive perceptions of the relationship between the tsar and his people.

A third factor which influenced a British commentator's perception of Nicholas and Alexandra was the concept of monarchy. When considering the tsar and empress British commentators would naturally contrast it with the familiar the role of the crown in British life as representative of the nation, as a unifying force and focus for national pride the monarch was also perceived as a person whose joys and sorrows were the same as their poorest subjects. In addition, king or queen might also be presented as a 'celebrity' whose private life as well as their public role was a source of fascination to readers of the popular press. Thus, when they looked at Nicholas, they saw a human being who, as a young man, had been called by God to assume the heavy burden of monarchy. A British commentator's perception of Russian society as relatively backward gave weight to the view that the tsar's task in ruling Russia was even more onerous than that expected of a British monarch. Thus, for many observers of Russian affairs, the last tsar was simply a man who in other circumstances might have lived quietly on a country estate but whose destiny and sense of duty and service to his country had resulted in him having to assume a heavy burden of responsibility from which only death or overthrow could release him.

There were other aspects of royalty which influenced British attitudes towards Nicholas, not least his family ties to the British royal family. This connection was sometimes a source of controversy especially in the wake of the 1905 revolution and

again in 1917, more frequently they were presented in a positive light as a conduit for improved Russo-British relations as was the case in 1908 and 1909. In addition, the tsar could be seen as representing a new generation of rulers. Until 1910, when his near contemporary George V, came to the throne, the tsar's fellow monarchs on the thrones of Britain and Austria: Queen Victoria, Edward VII and Emperor Franz Joseph- were all elderly. For British commentators Nicholas provided a particularly strikingly different comparison with Edward VII. In contrast, the tsar was a man who was clearly much in love with his wife and who preferred to spend his free time within the family circle. Where Edward VII was pleasure loving and dissolute, the tsar appeared less worldly with the glamour and aura with which youthful royalty is imbued. His good manners, his fluent English and his modesty charmed people who spent time in his company. The fact that he had come to the throne shortly after his engagement, when it had been assumed he and Alexandra would enjoy many years of married life before having to assume the responsibilities of the crown only added to the poignancy of British perceptions.

Nicholas, of course, was not without his critics but the most persistent were, in the main, left-wing politicians and anti-tsarist activists, for whom all aspects of the tsarist regime were abhorrent. Amongst other commentators, such as diplomats and journalists employed in the mainstream press, if the tsar was criticised then the tone was often more in sorrow than in anger. Notwithstanding that both Nicholas and Alexandra were subject to criticism, a perhaps unexpected feature of British perceptions of the last years of years of the regime, was the durability of the many sympathetic responses. Thus, a majority of British commentators separated their generally positive perception of Nicholas and

Alexandra as human beings, from their sometimes more negative opinions which they focused on the Russian state rather than the tsar and empress.

British perceptions of the imperial couple were partly based on a melange of a sort of ‘folk memory’ of Russia and a caricature of Russian history. In terms, which repeated images of earlier tsars, commentators explained that the imperial couple acted as they did in order to meet the expectations and traditions of the Russian people, or that Nicholas sought to act for the best but was surrounded by officials, whose self-serving interests were very different to his own. Even some of Nicholas’s most persistent critics, who depicted him as a weak ruler, a physical coward and an incompetent fool, laid some of the blame for actually carrying out the worst excesses of the regime at the door of those who advised him. Although diplomats, journalists and government officials could not ignore the less admirable aspects of the last tsar’s reign, understanding voices outnumbered those of the critics, right up to the end of the old regime. Thus, when sympathetic British commentators considered Nicholas, they did not see an autocrat whose court had been unable to safely organise a festival for his humblest subjects, but as tsar whose own sorrow had to be set aside in order to meet the hopes of his ‘simple’ peasants who expected the festivities to continue.

In 1904, when the British press whipped public opinion into a rage over the Dogger Bank Incident, commentators blamed the tsar’s officials and not Nicholas himself for Russia’s intransigence in admitting fault and agreeing to pay compensation to the families of the victims. During the First World War, when the tsar pledged to defend his country

and assumed command of the army, most commentators did not see a ruler ill-equipped to deal with strategic military matters, or a tsar whose decision to reside hundreds of miles from his capital meant he avoided dealing with important political questions. Even those who had initially been wary of his decision were swayed by his charm and, like many of their compatriots they saw an allied leader who had assumed the mantle of his ancestors in order to personally lead Russia to a great victory. Similarly, when Nicholas abdicated, the immediate response of most commentators was not the tsar's failure as a political and military leader or his weakness in dealing with the scandal of Rasputin, but as a family man and as dutiful ruler who loved his country and who had always aspired to do his best for his people.

Although often perceived to be a more controversial figure than her husband, Alexandra was also given a substantial amount of understanding by a variety of British commentators. In the press, for example, the empress's early years of her life in Russia were met with optimism and, in the following years, commentators sympathised with her long unfulfilled desire for a son. In the last years of the imperial regime, negative British attitudes towards the empress centred on her relationship with Rasputin and his nefarious activities. In part, reaction to this friendship was based on British attitudes towards the Russian Orthodox Church. Although, as we have discussed, some members of the Church of England sought closer relations with the Russian Church, for many people in Britain, Orthodoxy conjured up negative images of superstition, relics of doubtful authenticity, the worship of icons and the use of incense to dull the faculties of the congregation. Queen Victoria's relationship with her highland servant, John Brown, and her Indian

munshi, Abdul Karim, had also provoked controversy, even within the queen's own family. However, in spite of Victoria's reliance on people who were from outside her social circle, and that of the class which more normally advised a monarch the notion that an empress might rely upon an immoral peasant for advice was unthinkable.

Although Rasputin was undoubtedly a feature of British discussion of Alexandra, for many Britons the empress was foremost a granddaughter of a British queen, a niece of Edward VII and a cousin of George V. As a child she had played on the beach at Osborne in the Isle of Wight and as a young woman she had graced the drawing rooms of Windsor and Balmoral. She had four attractive daughters and, after many years of marriage, gave birth to a son only to discover that he was stricken with a terrible illness. On account of her motherhood, her English ancestry, and as a woman whose formative years had been spent in Britain, Alexandra was given a great deal of sympathy and understanding. Her foolish reliance on, and defence of, Rasputin was bitterly criticised in diplomatic correspondence and ridiculed in popular novels. However after her violent death, following months of incarceration in surroundings which were far from luxurious, such negative perceptions of the empress were pushed to the background. Even Sir George Buchanan, whose reports during the First World War had done much to give the authorities in London the impression that Alexandra posed a danger to the Russo-British alliance, defended her and reflected on her humanity.

No British commentator really knew the source of the imperial couple's motivation, the opportunity to meet Nicholas and Alexandra was limited and moreover, the tsar and

empress were extremely reserved and did not freely divulge their opinions, especially to foreigners. Even W.T. Stead and Sir John Hanbury Williams, although they spoke to both the tsar and empress in relatively informal circumstances, could not be fully cognisant of their innermost thoughts. The imperial couple's critics and their admirers constructed their own views of Nicholas and Alexandra many of which were contradictory. For example, some perceptions were based on a commentator's abhorrence of the autocracy while others defended the tsarist regime through fear of the outcome should power be given to ill-educated peasants. At other times British perceptions of the imperial couple were influenced by less politically driven factors including a sense of deference and a popular fascination with the lives of royalty.

The British came to view the imperial couple with a contradictory mixture of admiration and pity, with hatred and disdain, as reactionaries and as reformers, both pro-German and as staunch defenders of the allied cause, as monarchs who enjoyed a close rapport with their peasant subjects and as blood thirsty tyrants who fired on their innocent subjects and as a couple who plotted to sign a separate peace with Germany even as they sent their ill-equipped armies into battle. There was no one consistent image of the imperial couple: British perceptions of Tsar Nicholas II and Empress Alexandra Fedorovna were multifaceted, even contradictory. However, the overwhelmingly most persistent response to the imperial couple was one of understanding for a tsar and empress who had met with a terrible fate. In regards to Nicholas in particular there was a consistent feeling of sorrow for the tsar, who for all his faults, has never sought supreme power and, when asked to do so, had laid it aside for the good of his people. Perceptions

of Alexandra could, as we have noted be less understanding, but after her death even her controversial relationship with Rasputin was explained as a result of a mother's love for her child.

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