

THE MULTI-MILLION-COPY BESTSELLER



# NICHOLAS and ALEXANDRA

*The story of the love that ended an empire*

Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Peter the Great*

**ROBERT K. MASSIE**

*With a new introduction by the author*

NICHOLAS  
AND  
ALEXANDRA

*An Intimate Account of the Last of the Romanovs  
and the Fall of Imperial Russia*



ROBERT K. MASSIE

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*Robert K. Massie*

**NICHOLAS**

**AND**

**ALEXANDRA**

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*To Suzanne*

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"I have a firm, an absolute conviction that the fate of Russia—that my own fate and that of my family—is in the hands of God who has placed me where I am. Whatever may happen to me, I shall bow to His will with the consciousness of never having had any thought other than that of serving the country which He has entrusted to me."

NICHOLAS II

"After all, the nursery was the center of all Russia's troubles."

SIR BERNARD PARES

"The Empress refused to surrender to fate. She talked incessantly of the ignorance of the physicians. . . . She turned towards religion, and her prayers were tainted with a certain hysteria. The stage was ready for the appearance of a miracle worker. . . ."

GRAND DUKE ALEXANDER

"The illness of the Tsarevich cast its shadow over the whole of the concluding period of Tsar Nicholas II's reign and alone can explain it. Without appearing to be, it was one of the main causes of his fall, for it made possible the phenomenon of Rasputin and resulted in the fatal isolation of the sovereigns who lived in a world apart, wholly absorbed in a tragic anxiety which had to be concealed from all eyes."

PIERRE GILLIARD, *Tutor of Tsarevich Alexis*

"Without Rasputin, there could have been no Lenin."

ALEXANDER KERENSKY

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## ***Introduction***

The writing of this book is the result, like most things in life, of a circumstance of Fate. Since the day, now over ten years ago, that my wife and I discovered that our son had hemophilia, I have tried to learn how other families dealt with the problems raised by this unique disease. In time, this led to curiosity about the response of the parents of the boy who was the most famous hemophiliac of all, the Tsarevich Alexis, the only son and heir of Nicholas II, last Tsar of all the Russias.

What I discovered was both fascinating and frustrating. There was general agreement that the child's hemophilia had been a significant factor in the lives of the parents, Tsar Nicholas and Empress Alexandra, and thereby in the fall of Imperial Russia. Thus, in the most comprehensive political study of the period, *The Fall of the Russian Monarchy*, Sir Bernard Pares declares categorically: "On August 12, 1904 . . . took place the event which more than anything else determined the whole later course of Russian history. On that day was at last born the heir to the throne, long expected and fervently prayed for." What Pares is saying, and what is scarcely disputed by anyone, is that in an effort to deal with the agonies hemophilia inflicted on her son, the distraught mother turned to Gregory Rasputin, the remarkable Siberian

mystagogue. Thereafter, Rasputin's presence near the throne —his influence on the Empress and, through her, on the government of Russia—brought about or at least helped to speed the fall of the dynasty.

This was fascinating. But it was frustrating to discover that even those who attached the greatest significance to the effect of the disease on events did not explain, either in human or in medical terms, exactly what happened. This seemed a serious gap affecting larger areas than the one which first attracted my interest. If the illness of

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this boy and the aid given him by Rasputin had, in fact, brought down the ancient Romanov dynasty and led to the Russian Revolution with all its awesome consequences, why had there never been an attempt to decipher and interpret these episodes of grim suffering and dramatic healing? As for Rasputin, who has not heard something of this extraordinary man and his garish murder? But who knows precisely what he did to help the Tsarevich? In both historical and human terms, this seemed to me enormously important, for only by understanding the basis of this relationship does the rest of the story become coherent.

I have read the diaries, letters and memoirs left by the men and women who were intimately involved in this great drama. In the letters from Nicholas and Alexandra to each other and from the Tsar to his mother, scattered through the books by Imperial relatives, intimate friends of the Empress, ladies-in-waiting, court officials, government ministers and foreign ambassadors, there is a wealth of fragmented information. But it has never been collected and assembled. In this book, my purpose has been to weave together from all the threads, and interpret in the light of modern medicine and psychiatry and of the common experience which all families affected by hemophilia necessarily share, an account of one family whose struggle with the disease was to have momentous consequences for the entire world.

If at first my interest was primarily in tracing the role of hemophilia, I soon found it expanding to include the rich panorama of the reign of Nicholas II, his role as tsar, his place in history, and the glittering epoch over which he presided. In reading and conversation, I discovered that, despite the passage

of fifty years, people still react strongly to Nicholas. A few, mostly Russian émigrés who see in him the symbol of an age now fading beyond recall, revere and even idolize him; by some members of the Russian Orthodox Church, he and all his martyred family are regarded as un-canonized saints.

On the opposite side, there still are those who for political or other reasons continue to insist that Nicholas was "Bloody Nicholas." Most commonly, he is described as shallow, weak, stupid—a one-dimensional figure presiding feebly over the last days of a corrupt and crumbling system. This, certainly, is the prevailing public image of the last Tsar.

Historians admit that Nicholas was a "good man"—the historical evidence of personal charm, gentleness, love of family, deep religious faith and strong Russian patriotism is too overwhelming to be denied—but they argue that personal factors are irrelevant; what matters is that Nicholas was a bad tsar. The virtues which we admire in private life and profess in our religion become secondary qualities in our

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rulers. The test of greatness in tsars or presidents is not in their private lives or even in their good intentions, but in their deeds.

By this standard, one has to agree: Nicholas was not a great tsar. Historically, the great leaders of the Russian people—Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great, Lenin and Stalin—have been those who by sheer force and terror have thrust the backward nation forward. Until perhaps the present day, Russians have stood in awe of the ruthless man who wielded the whip and drove them forward. Peter, who broke his enemies on the rack and hanged them in Red Square, who had his son tortured to death, is Peter the Great. But Nicholas, whose hand was lighter than that of any tsar before him, is "Bloody Nicholas." In human terms, this is irony rich and dramatic, the more so because Nicholas knew what he was called.

In terms of accomplishment, it may be unfair to compare Nicholas II with his towering ancestors. No one can say how well they would have managed under the cascade of disasters which broke upon Nicholas. Perhaps a more equitable and revealing comparison might be made between Nicholas II and

his contemporaries on the thrones of Europe: King Edward VII and King George V, Kaiser William II and Emperor Franz Joseph. Was there among this group one who could better have ridden the storm which Nicholas had to face? History itself provided part of the answer: the same catastrophic war which helped drive Nicholas off his throne also toppled the emperors of Germany and Austria-Hungary.

A comparison with the two kings of England, Edward VII and George V, Nicholas's uncle and first cousin, only deepens the irony. For if Nicholas had not been instructed from childhood that constitutions were anathema, he would have made an excellent constitutional monarch. He was at least as intelligent as any European monarch in his day or ours: his qualities and tastes were surprisingly similar to those of King George V, whom physically he so much resembled. In England, where a sovereign needed only to be a good man in order to be a good king, Nicholas II would have made an admirable monarch.

But Fate did not intend for the last Romanov Tsar so serene an existence or so comfortable a niche in history. He was Russian, not English, and he became, not a constitutional monarch, but Emperor-Tsar-Autocrat over millions of people and a vast region of the earth. Once on the throne, he faced simultaneously two wholly extraordinary disasters: a son with hemophilia and the imminent disintegration of his great empire. From the moment his son was born, the two disasters were intertwined. Although he stood at the highest pinnacle of political power in a system which had clearly lived beyond its time,

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Imperial Russia was not necessarily marked for total destruction. There were chances to adapt the autocracy to the modern world. But then, as if to ensure the implacable ending, Fate introduced hemophilia and Rasputin. It was the blow from which Nicholas and Imperial Russia could not recover.

Essentially, the tragedy of Nicholas II was that he appeared in the wrong place in history. Equipped by education to rule in the nine-tenth century, equipped by temperament to reign in England, he lived and reigned in Russia in the twentieth century. There, the world he understood was

breaking up around him. Events were moving too swiftly, ideas were changing too radically. In the gigantic storm which swept over Russia, he and all he loved were carried away. To the end, he did his best, and for his wife and family that was a very great deal. For Russia, it was not enough.

The man who, sensing only imperfectly the dimensions of the storm which beats against him, still tries with courage to do his duty is a particularly recognizable twentieth-century figure. Perhaps for this reason we today are better equipped to understand the ordeal and the qualities of Nicholas II. In an earlier era when the world seemed ordered and disorder the result primarily of human weakness or folly, then wars or revolutions could be blamed on a single leader. Since then, two world wars, the Great Depression and twenty years of the Nuclear Age have taught us, among other things, tolerance. We have come to accept the fact that there are forces beyond the control of any single man, be he tsar or president. We have also adjusted our measure of human achievement. Facing together things which we only dimly see, uncertain which course to follow, we place a higher value on intentions and effort. We may lose—more often than not we will lose— but we must try: this is the essence of a rational twentieth-century morality.

Caught in a web he could not break, Nicholas paid for his mistakes —he died as a martyr with his wife and his five children. But Fate had not taken everything from them. The old values by which they had lived, the very faith for which they were derided, gave them the courage and dignity that over the years have redeemed everything else. These human qualities are eternal and will survive and transcend the rise and fall of every empire. It is for these qualities that Nicholas II was an exceptional man. For, in the end, he did succeed.

R.K.M.

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