

The old Russia and the new: Yeltsin buries the tsar

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In a ceremony at Saint Peter and Paul Cathedral in St. Petersburg the Russian government buried the remains of Tsar Nicholas II and his family July 17, 80 years to the day after their execution by revolutionary forces in the midst of the civil war that followed the Russian Revolution of 1917.

In a speech at the funeral Russia's President Boris Yeltsin declared, 'The burial is an act of humane justice, a symbol of unification in Russia and redemption of common guilt.' He called for atonement for 'one of the most shameful pages of our history.'

The Russian population has been inundated in recent weeks with accounts of the glories of tsardom. According to an Associated Press reporter, 'It has been difficult to turn on a television in Russia this week without seeing programs about the royal family, with archival footage of Nicholas, his wife, Alexandra, and their children.' Another journalist reports that despite the buildup, including unprecedented live television and Internet coverage of the funeral, the public response 'so far has been muted.... Economic problems mean many Russians are more worried about wage delays.'

Byzantine disputes between politicians, Russian Orthodox Church leaders and Romanov family members, political cynicism and financial calculations dominated the run-up to the funeral. There was such a controversy surrounding the event that Yeltsin only announced his intention to attend July 16.

The Russian president spoke in quite florid terms at the ceremony about the tsar and his family. From the point of view of evoking sympathy for the dead ruler it was just as well he did not go into details.

Nicholas II, who reigned from 1894 to 1917, presided in luxurious fashion over a semifeastal regime that oppressed the masses of ordinary Russian people. The

wealth of the aristocracy and the royal family depended on the dire misery of tens of millions of peasants and several million urban workers. Tsarist Russia was synonymous throughout the civilized world with backwardness, repression and ignorance. Nicholas maintained his power through the mobilization of a vast army of policemen and police spies. Every progressive political movement and idea was banned. The regime exiled thousands of political opponents to Siberia; thousands more died in medieval prisons.

In his July 17 speech Yeltsin, the man who ordered his own parliament building bombed and prosecuted a brutal war against Chechen nationalist forces, hypocritically condemned violence in all its forms as 'doomed' and raised the spiritual importance of the end of the millennium.

The history of Nicholas's regime is instructive on this point, as the tyranny of his regime helped usher in the twentieth century. When thousands of workers marched on the Winter Palace on January 9, 1905 to submit a petition to the tsar calling for reforms, Nicholas ordered his troops to open fire on the unarmed workers, their wives and children. Over 1,000 were killed and 5,000 wounded.

The tsar and his regime responded to the 1905 Revolution by unleashing a reign of terror, particularly directed against Jews. In the two weeks after the issuing of the tsar's manifesto in October 1905, promising the establishment of democratic institutions, 690 pogroms occurred. Three thousand Jews were murdered during this period. A pogrom in Odessa resulted in the deaths of 800 Jews. Five hundred were wounded and more than one hundred thousand made homeless. The pogroms were organized with direct government assistance.

Nicholas personally encouraged the establishment of

the Black Hundreds, the paramilitary squads let loose on Jews and other minorities. As Leon Trotsky noted in his *History of the Russian Revolution*: 'At the very dawn of his reign Nicholas praised the Phanagoritsy regiment as 'fine fellows' for shooting down workers. He always 'read with satisfaction' how they flogged with whips the bob-haired girl-students, or cracked the heads of defenseless people during Jewish pogroms.... Witte, who stood at the head of the government during the putting down of the first revolution, has written in his memoirs: 'When news of the useless cruel antics of the chiefs of these detachments reached the sovereign, they met with his approval, or in any case his defense.' ... This 'charmer,' without will, without aim, without imagination, was more awful than all the tyrants of ancient and modern history.'

Nicholas also led his country into the slaughterhouse of World War I, during which Russian forces were grievously mismatched against the better-trained and -equipped German army. An estimated 1.7 million Russian soldiers died in the conflict, more than 4 million were wounded and 2.5 million taken prisoner.

The revolutions of 1905 and 1917 took place, after all, for a reason. By October 1917 the overwhelming majority of the Russian population, groaning under the oppression of the autocracy, had grown to despise the tsar and his entourage, including the mad monk Rasputin.

In August 1917, months after his abdication, but prior to the workers' and peasants' revolution, Nicholas and his family were taken to Tobolsk in Siberia and put up at the governor's house. After the Bolsheviks took power, their conditions became harsher; i.e., they were no longer granted any privileges and had no more to eat than average soldiers. In April 1918 the family was moved to Yekaterinburg in the Ural mountains.

The fate of the tsar and tsarina was sealed by the outbreak and course of the civil war. Trotsky proposed at a meeting of the Bolsheviks' Politburo that Nicholas be placed on trial and that a full portrait of his rule be painted in open court. He suggested that the trial be broadcast on radio. There was some sympathy for the proposal, but the invasion of the Soviet workers state by 14 foreign armies, led by Britain and France, aimed at the crushing of the revolution, made it impracticable.

By July 1918 the military situation for the Red forces in Yekaterinburg had become increasingly precarious.

White armies were advancing and the Bolsheviks feared that if the royal family fell into the hands of the counterrevolution they might become a living symbol to the wavering and more backward layers of the rural population. So on July 17, 1918, the tsar and his family were executed, sharing the fate of Charles I of England, Louis XVI of France and other victims of the tide of human progress.

Hundreds of thousands died in the fierce three-year civil war as the result of the attack on the Soviet government organized by the Russian capitalists and landlords, with the backing of the great powers, including the United States. Within this framework Trotsky later spelled out the revolutionary regime's reasoning quite forthrightly: 'The severity of the summary justice showed the world that we would continue to fight on mercilessly, stopping at nothing. The execution of the Tsar's family was needed not only in order to frighten, horrify and dishearten the enemy, but also in order to shake up our own ranks, to show them that there was no turning back, that ahead lay either complete victory or complete ruin. In the intellectual circles of the Party there probably were misgivings and shakings of heads. But the masses of workers and soldiers had not a minute's doubt. They would not have understood and would not have accepted any other decision' (*Trotsky's Diary in Exile--1935*).

See Also:

An exchange on Lenin and the Russian Revolution
[6 March 1998]



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