

**The reign of the Empress? – a re-evaluation of the war-time political role of
Alexandra Feodorovna**

By Janet Ashton

Originally published in Atlantis magazine, vol. 4, issue 2, 2003

World War One began in Russia on a note of overwhelming national unity. Political differences laid aside, Duma, ministers and population rallied around the Emperor and pledged to see the thing through to a successful conclusion. The Central Powers were the enemy and Germany the chief brunt of public displays of hatred.

And yet just two and a half years later the abdication of Nicholas II was achieved by effective coup d’etat, with Duma members seizing the opportunity afforded by rioting in the capital to isolate their Sovereign and brow-beat him until he gave in and gave up. The Imperial Family – particularly the Empress – featured on posters and in scurrilous popular song as enemies of the nation and it had become amply clear to everyone that Russia was no longer prepared to fight a war for Nicholas II.

There can be little doubt as to how this terrible change had come about. Between 1915 and 1917, the government of the Russian Empire had descended into chaos. Ministers replaced one another with bewildering speed, there were military defeats, rumours abounded, and Tsar and Duma glared at one another across a massive gulf of incomprehension and suspicion. Early historians of the collapse had little doubt what was causing all of this: “After the middle of 1915, the fairly honorable and efficient group who formed the top of the bureaucratic pyramid degenerated into a rapidly changing succession of the appointees of Rasputin,” wrote Michael Florinsky. “It was an amazing, extravagant and pitiful spectacle, one without parallel in the history of civilized nations.” [1]. This was the public’s perception of the situation: the Tsar and Empress as the mindless puppets of a debauched “Holy Man” who selected his own friends for office and was working actively or passively for German victory.



The wartime cabinet as cartoonists saw it: Nicholas, Alexandra, Anna Vyrubova and several venal politicians hang sycophantically onto the Holy Man’s words of wisdom

Recently, of course, revisionist historians – defenders of either Nicholas, or Alexandra, or even of the Holy Man himself – have done much to demonstrate that Rasputin exercised little or no influence over the question of who Nicholas appointed to office. Of the twenty-six men who played musical chairs around seven ministerial posts in these years, only four appear to have changed office for reasons that owed anything at all to his opinions. [2] Members of the imperial family, who may have been motivated more by snobbery than by family loyalty, also denied that Nicholas and Alexandra were quite stupid enough to hand over power to an illiterate peasant. But if it wasn't Rasputin, then someone else must be responsible for the disastrous collapse, and they were in no doubt as to who this was. In 1932 Nicholas and Alexandra's brother-in-law, Grand Duke Alexander Mikhailovich, noted sorrowfully, "It is a simple matter of record that in the crucial days of his life, facing the certainty of a revolution in the rear of his armies and the danger of a defeat at the front, Nicholas II chose to ignore the warnings of his advisers and followed the hysterical promptings of his wife until the very end....Hers was a case for Sigmund Freud, and while no-one has the right to throw stones at a woman who had lost her mind because of the illness of her son, historians will deal harshly with my late brother-in-law." [3] So that was it: the disintegration of the government was all due to the passivity of the Emperor in the face of his wife's disastrous decisions. And yet – with Alexandra as with Rasputin – careful analysis shows that she was responsible for few of the ministerial changes. Greg King has calculated that only seven were her doing.[4]

What, then, is going on here? Is Alexandra just a victim of prejudice because she was a foreigner? A natural target of suspicion because of her German birth? Or, worse still, did people dislike her and blame her for everything just because she was noisy and aggressive and they preferred women to keep their mouths shut?

Without doubt, there is something in both these accusations.

Beyond that, perhaps Alexandra was a convenient person to blame because she could be said – as Sandro argued – to have "lost her mind" over her son? That way, the imperial regime could be said to have fallen not because it was rotten to the core but because at its pinnacle stood two tragically haunted people, terrified of losing their child and willing to do everything for the man who could save him, including dismiss competent ministers? – It's a convenient monarchist notion which ignores the fact that absolute monarchies are inherently susceptible to this sort of corruption, and that in itself is the problem.

Some of the most recent historians of late Tsarist Russia, acknowledging that it was the regime and not its personnel per se that were the issue, have argued logically that the harm done by Alexandra was not in persuading her husband to make particular decisions over ministerial posts, but in encouraging him in his anti-democratic inclinations. "Alexandra's instincts conveyed a specific political message," write Mark Steinberg and Vladimir Khrustalev in their marvelous essay on the intellectual life of the Emperor and Empress. "Constitutional reform was unnecessary and dangerous. This political certainty was moralistic and absolutist in tone and logic...and it was politically aggressive." [5] Dominic Lieven persuasively argues that the men Nicholas and Alexandra selected for

office were far less of a collection of incompetents than their enemies insisted; it was their image as appointees of the regime which did the harm. [6]

But is even this the whole truth?

A slow, careful look at war-time events, at Alexandra's war-time activities, at her political attitudes and at the men she selected for office is what is in order here.

One thing needs stating right away: the Empress was not stupid. Her chief apologists as much as her enemies strove to present a picture of her as a lost soul who knew not what she did. In the words of Baroness Buxhoeveden, her lady-in-waiting and "official" biographer, "She groped blindly about, unable to verify the information she got, for she did not know the people herself and had met them only cursorily. Her one criterion was: Were the people strictly faithful to the Emperor? Were they loyal?" [7] Buxhoeveden's considered view was that the Empress, although intelligent, acted entirely upon "impulse" without rational thought. [8] But had Alexandra actually discussed her criteria for selecting ministers with this much younger lady-in-waiting? This is the problem; few were actually close to Alexandra, and those who were can all too readily be dismissed for arguing too loudly in her defense. The classic example is of course Anna Vyubova, the Empress's bosom friend and fellow-accused when it comes to selecting unsuitable people for office. For Buxhoeveden, Vyubova was the person chiefly responsible for bringing unsuitable candidates to Alexandra's notice. "Unfortunately, Mme. Vyubova, although she collected many stories from various sources, was not a very reliable or discriminating informant, and found it almost impossible to separate idle gossip and rumour from sound information. Many who knew that she was the Empress's friend flattered her, and she was apt to be deceived. Anyone who expressed the slightest criticism of the Government was put down as "bad." Mme. Vyubova always identified the Government with the person of the Emperor. Any censure of the Government was considered by her as disloyalty to the Crown. The Empress tried to sift out her friend's reports, but they always left an impression, for Her Majesty knew the absolute and wholehearted devotion of her friend "Ania" to the Imperial Family. She knew, too, that the things "Ania" repeated were probably the talk of the town, although, unfortunately, she did not know of how small a section of it." [9] Other contemporary sources were equally condemning of Ania, famously describing her as "the ideal gramophone disc" and claiming that "she understood nothing." So when Ania declared in her memoirs that the Empress had a rational basis for any particular opinion, this defense rang hollow.

Perhaps Alexandra is her own best defender.

Her war-time letters are littered with evidence of her opinions – not merely on the controversial ministerial appointments, but indeed upon all issues pertaining to the conduct of the war and the government of Russia. Again and again there is evidence of her concern to get supplies to civilians and troops; to stop unsuccessful military campaigns before it was too late; to silence public opinion; to see Russia self-sufficient in essentials ("It always grieves me, seeing how badly one makes things here, all comes from abroad, the very simplest things, nails for instance, wool for knitting....such an

immense country, dependent on others” [10]. On 2 September 1915 she writes “Another thing to think seriously about is the question of wood – there won’t be any fuel and little meat & in consequence we’ll have stories and riots. Mekk’s [Vladimir von Meck, head of the Russian Red Cross] railway gives heaps of wood to the town of Moscow, but it’s not enough & one does not think seriously enough about this”. Then again: “400 wagons ought to come a day with flour, but only 200 do – one must set about things quicker and more energetically.” [11] And then again on June 22nd and 25th in the same year she is concerned about the Duma and public opinion: “[With] very great freedom of the press...the result is one speaks and gets too excited about the Duma, which is not a good thing.” “Rodzianko and others beg the Duma to be called at once together – please don’t, it’s not their business, they want to discuss things not concerning them and bring more discontent.”

What is this?

- Some have argued that the concern for the troops arose from Rasputin’s humanitarian pleadings on their behalf [12]. Buxhoeveden even claims that the Empress had no comprehension of how central the issue of supplies was to the internal political situation of the country. [13]. And then of course the Duma was the bugbear of the autocracy, the insidious thief of imperial prestige which must be prevented from claiming any credit for the war lest this strengthen its own standing in the eyes of the Russian people – of course Alexandra would want it shut up and sent away.

And yet there is a different way to view all of this.

In 1914, before war began, Peter Durnovo the conservative politician had argued that a lengthy conflict would be disastrous for the country, for reasons which included, “far too great a dependence, generally speaking, upon foreign industry. The closing of the Baltic as well as the Black Sea will prevent the importation from abroad of the defense materials which we lack. The railways possess a rolling stock sufficient for normal traffic, but not commensurate with the colossal demands which will be made upon them in the event of a European war and both military disasters – partial ones we hope – and all sorts of shortcomings in our supply are inevitable. In the excessive nervousness and spirit of opposition of our society, these events will be given an exaggerated importance, and all blame will be laid on the government. In the legislative institutions a bitter campaign against the government will begin, the country will resound with socialist slogans, capable of arousing and rallying the masses, beginning with the division of the land...the army, carried away by a primitive desire for land, will find itself too demoralized to serve as a bulwark of law and order, and the legislative institutions and intellectual opposition parties, lacking real authority in the eyes of the people, will be powerless to stem the popular tide, aroused by themselves, and Russia will fall into hopeless anarchy.” [14]

Durnovo’s arguments were extraordinarily prescient – and isn’t this what Alexandra is saying too? That the army and the country could not be run mercilessly into the ground on inadequate supplies – that to do this was political lunacy as much as inhumanity?

That the Duma and political parties could not be permitted to exploit the situation for their own ends, since they would unleash a fury greater than anything they anticipated?

The main question that remains is of course – why on earth did Durnovo and Alexandra not advocate compromise with the “legislative institutions”, above all with the Duma, in order to neutralise the threat? Surely this was the common-sense thing to do?

Early in the war, when they rallied firmly behind the government, the Empress had little or nothing to say about the Duma and its deputies. She did not clamour for it to be silenced in case it tried to seize her husband’s glory. Instead, as is always noted in her favour, she spent her time training as a nurse and participating in care for the wounded to a degree that far surpassed her contemporaries on the thrones of Europe. This is sometimes seen as a waste of effort for someone in her exalted position; and yet Alexandra did not neglect the larger national projects either. A Supreme Council to Aid the Families of those serving in the War was established under her presidency (Duma President Rodzianko carped, albeit in retrospect, that its sole purpose was “to give the young Empress a prominent position in the public war work”[15]). She also took 85 hospitals in the Petersburg area alone under her direct control, and traveled about the country visiting others and making checks on their administrative arrangements. In October and November 1914, for example, she visited hospitals, hospital trains and Red Cross stations in Pskov, Dvinsk, Vilno and Kovno. Some of her visits were unannounced, including one that she made at 2 in the morning to a train standing in an unnamed station between Rovno and Tsarskoe. “Out we flew, and climbed into the boxcars” she wrote cheerfully to her husband. “[We found] 12 men lying comfortably, drinking tea, by the light of a candle...I begged pardon for waking them up and they thanked us for coming, were delighted, cheery, smiling, and eager faces.” The unplanned halt made Alexandra’s own train an hour late. “We...caught it up in the night, so that I was rocked to & fro, and feared that we should capsize!” [16] The following month, she went to Moscow to visit her sister Ella and see the hospitals there.

Alexandra, of course, was not the only member of the imperial family heavily involved in the war effort. Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaievich, her late father-in-law’s first cousin, was appointed Commander-in-Chief; Sergei Mikhailovich, another cousin of Alexander III, was head of the Artillery Council. “Sandro”, Sergei’s brother, took on the nascent Russian Air Force, working closely with Igor Sikorsky the future helicopter magnate. The younger Grand Dukes all put aside their parties and travels and ailments for a while and went to the front or to their ships or at worst to staff jobs at Headquarters. Several of the Grand Duchesses were as active in the hospitals as Alexandra was. One thing didn’t change; members of the family continued to bitch and snipe about one another from behind their patriotic masks. The only equivalent to this shameful spectacle was the infighting that went on between the Ministers of the Imperial government, between members of the Duma, and in the military high command.

During this time, the questions which excited Alexandra’s indignation were almost entirely medical or humanitarian ones. When foreign observers were refused permission to see prisoners of war, she was concerned for Russia’s image: “I want to find out why

Maklakov [Minister of Internal Affairs] won't allow Americans to see how our prisoners are kept – they have been sent to Germany to see, and to France and England & I find it wrong that one doesn't show ours.”[17] She was furious at the petty xenophobia of the Synod's attempt to ban Christmas trees. “I am going to find out the truth about it, and then make a row, it's no concern of theirs, nor the church's; why take away the pleasure from the wounded and the children just because it comes originally from Germany – the narrow-mindedness is too colossal.”[18] In these days, she even had kind thoughts to spare for the Duma President, Mikhail Rodzianko. “One says Rodzianko's speech was splendid; I haven't had time to read it yet,” [19]

Alexandra (seated right) and her daughter Olga as nurses, 1914 or 1915. Tatiana and Anna Vyrubova are in the background



There was plenty to worry about on the medical front in those early months. Trains bearing the wounded arrived in Moscow where they simply stood for days, no nurses being permitted on board. [20] Duma deputies laid the blame at the door of M. Evdokimov, head of the Army Medical Department, who they claimed was refusing among other things to allow volunteers to the front. Alexandra too was keen to investigate the problems, and wrote to tell her husband what her sister had found out: “Ella wrote in despair, trying to get to the bottom of the things about trains and hospitals – she believes the orders came from Petrograd [i.e. from the Medical Department]. Often the orders from there are very cruel towards the wounded.” [21] Eventually Evdokimov was dismissed and Prince Alexander of Oldenburg, another member of the imperial family, appointed Supreme Head of the Medical and Evacuation Department, with dictatorial powers over matters of medical supply. The Commander-in-Chief Nikolai Nikolaievich promptly wrote to tell Rodzianko that Evdokimov had remained in office as long as he had only as a result of patronage by the Empress and by the War Minister Sukhomlinov. [22] And yet Evdokimov merits not one mention in the Empress's letters to her husband. With its origins in personal spite and animosity, a perception was

developing among those able to influence Russian public opinion that not only were all of the nation's problems due to people appointed by the Imperial Government, but that those people were themselves fiercely protected by the throne. The throne in turn, far more open-minded about the people concerned than it was given credit for, and far more concerned to see flaws in the system than in individuals anyway, would gradually come to see the interference of public opinion formers as simple perverse opposition to everything it did.

Alexandra's one piece of obvious political interference during the early months was her successful attempt to have the governor of the Crimea, N.N. Lavrinovsky, removed for insensitivity towards the native Tartar population. "Lavrinovsky is ruining everything, sending off good Tartars to Turkey and most unjust to all" she told Nicholas "...they [the Crimean Tartars] are most devoted subjects, and would like Knyazevich to replace Lavr....So I shall send for him, pardon my mixing in what does not concern me, but it's for the good of the Crimea...he[Lavrinovsky] seems to be most brutal to the Tartars and its certainly not the moment when we have war with Turkey to behave like that. Please don't be angry with me, give me some sort of answer by wire – that you "approve" or "regret" my mixing in - & whether you think Kn. a good candidate..." [23]. This is Alexandra showing justifiable concern that heavy-handed government by Russia might drive minorities to rebellion and into the arms of the enemy. Nicholas acceded to her wishes.

Early in 1915 she began to agitate against the Commander-in-Chief. Russian troops had been advancing across the Carpathians and into the Austro-Hungarian empire throughout the winter, driving the Austrian Army before them and laying claim to the province of Galicia. This was achieved in spite of the appalling failures in the military and medical supply system, and at terrible cost in human misery. Many of Russia's soldiers fought in the snow without boots. [24] The Emperor, isolated at Headquarters with the High Command, was persuaded to make a triumphal progress across the conquered territory. This worried his wife terribly. "Is it not too soon?" [25]. As always when trying to persuade her husband, she enlisted the help of the Man of God, who could be relied upon to back her up. "He curiously enough said the same as me," she wrote without irony, "It is too early to go now; it is better after the war'." These paragraphs speak volumes about the relationship between the Empress and Rasputin; but whether the Holy Man's fears were sincere or not, he and Alexandra were right – and they were broadly in agreement with elements in the Duma too, since even Rodzianko commented that he could not understand why the C.-in-C. had permitted the Emperor to travel to territory that was almost certain to be taken back by the Central Powers due the Russian shortage of ammunition.[26] In May a major German offensive began and the land was duly taken back. Nicholas's premature triumphalism came back to haunt him as public opinion lurched in all directions in its search for a scapegoat for the retreat. Press and Duma alike laid the blame at the doors of the government rather than of the military, and Headquarters swiftly joined them, driving an open wedge between the civil and military branches of the war effort. Grand Duke Nikolai, appreciating the work of the Duma in helping to organise the movement of military supplies, corresponded freely with the Duma President, giving voice to his concerns about the Ministers involved. At a time

when even Duma deputies were eager to work with the War Ministry to ameliorate the situation, this created an extraordinary impression in the country at large. The Commander-in-Chief – the Emperor’s own uncle - complaining about his nephew’s ministers.

Alexandra began in turn to complain about the C.-in-C. Her comments were few and far between to start with, the first being in February and the second not until April. “N. [Nikolasha, the Grand Duke] words his telegrams, answers to governors, etc. in your style.” She wrote to her husband on April 4th. “His ought to be more simple and humble...they must remember who you are and that first they must turn to you.” The usual interpretation of this paragraph is that Alexandra thought that the Grand Duke was trying to steal her husband’s position and set himself up as an alternative Emperor. Sophisticated political operators already understood the appeal of the hard man of the military as a national leader, and the loud-voiced, six foot six inch Grand Duke seemed to fit the bill. That he was excitable to the point of hysteria and dabbled in the occult were facts unknown to his admirers in the country at large. [27] The whole of the Imperial Family knew how popular Nikolasha was, and another Grand Duke Nicholas – the historian and inveterate trouble-maker Nikolai Mikhailovich – sent the Emperor a malicious letter about him. “This popularity was carefully manufactured...by spreading among the people brochures, popular prints, portraits, calendars, etc...I dare to say to you that his popularity alarms me in a dynastic sense, especially in view of the excited state of our public opinion.” [28]

Most contemporaries and subsequent commentators have tended to agree that aspersions on the Grand Duke’s loyalty are grossly unfair. He had not the slightest intention of trying to dethrone his nephew, and neither was he in any sense an opponent of imperial government. Nevertheless, he was a problem for that government in that he enjoyed good relations with the Duma and press, while tending to despise and ignore those members of the Council of Ministers most closely involved in the war effort – and in particular the War Minister, Sukhomlinov. His antipathy to Evdokimov and accusations against Alexandra have already been noted above. By virtue of the power vested in him as Commander-in-Chief, he had the literal right to ignore the civil government, and there were politicians on the left who perceived this as a threat as much as his enemies in the imperial family did.



Alexander Kerensky, the future leader of the Provisional government, whose cynical assessment of some Tsarist ministers is surprisingly close to Alexandra's.

Alexander Kerensky for one was at a loss to understand the Grand Duke's popularity, and complained bitterly that in spite of having no understanding of the economic or political situation of the country, he was wont to issue orders to provincial governors without bothering to tell their superiors in the capital. Thus he cut across the prerogatives of the Minister of Internal Affairs and possibly the Communications Minister too. [29] This he had the right to do, but his lack of courtesy in failing to inform them seems to have created a poor impression and given fuel to those like Alexandra who accused him of being a pawn in some left-wing game to use his personal popularity to undermine the government. By virtue of his position, any complaint he made against a minister was seen as an attack on the government, and there were plenty who were willing to interpret it accordingly and make use of it. When Russia's military fortunes turned in the spring of 1915 and she began to suffer defeat, Headquarters arrested a friend of Sukhomlinov and hanged him for treason, accusing him of passing military secrets to Germany. To his discredit, the President of the Duma added his own voice to the allegations, pointing to the Sukhomlinov's association with "a certain Altshuller" as evidence of treachery, as if a German name alone were enough to indict the man mentioned of being a spy. [30] The press proceeded to whip up a frenzy of hatred against Sukhomlinov, bringing charges of corruption and of disloyalty rather than look to the system itself and to Headquarters and the military high command for at least half the reasons behind Russia's weapons shortages and defeats.

No-one today seriously suggests that Sukhomlinov was a spy, but scholarly opinion is still divided as to whether the charge of incompetence was just or not. [31] The simple truth could be that no-one was in a position to be able to anticipate the demands exerted by the war since no-one expected it to go on as long as it did. That Headquarters itself had no idea of the true causes of the military failures was demonstrated by what happened next. In their spy mania they settled upon imperial Russia's traditional scapegoat, the Jews, who were brutally herded out of the border lands and forced to flee into Russia's interior lest they "collaborate" with the advancing Austrians. [32]

Alexandra was nervous about all of this, urging her husband to keep a check on the press lest pogroms be provoked by allegations against these populations: “See that the story about the Jews is carefully done, so as not to provoke disturbances over the country.” And she was moved to see them arriving as refugees in Petrograd, “Painful sight with all their packages and wee children.” [33]

It is this climate of defeat, spy mania and hysteria which lies behind Alexandra’s first shots across the bows of the Duma. On June 25th she pleaded with Nicholas not to have them brought into session just to create more trouble. Later, she was to have serious second thoughts about the appointment of A.N. Khvostov as Minister for Internal Affairs when reminded of his anti-Sukhomlinov, anti-German speeches in the weeks that followed. It is possible to say then that although Alexandra dislike of the Commander-in-Chief was due to her belief that he was trying to steal her husband’s prestige, she was not merely jealous for her beloved’s personal glory as autocrat. What was on her mind too was the stability of the country in wartime, which the Grand Duke’s actions tended to undermine. “People cannot understand his position,” she wrote, “a sort of second Emperor, mixing into everything....and interior mistakes will be told home upon you.” [i.e. the mistakes he makes in his dealings with the civil government will be laid at the Emperor’s door.] [34] Like the Grand Duke, she worried over the question of supplies. Unlike the Grand Duke, she did not scapegoat the ministers, but looked instead for solutions to the flaws in the system, suggesting that the Tsar should follow the French example and simply order the largest factories to make munitions and to send people to the smaller factories to teach them to do the same. [35]. In other words, the state should commandeer the means of production. Russia’s problem with supplies lay partially in the necessity *per se* for the government to bargain with private industrialists, and not necessarily in anything any Minister had or had not personally done. [36] This situation was leading to accusations of bribe-taking against all kinds of people, including not only Sukhomlinov and his wife but also Countess Brassova, the wife of Grand Duke Mikhail, and Grand Duke Sergei Mikhailovich and his mistress Matilda Kschessinskaia. [37] Alexandra was happy to believe the charges against the latter, perhaps motivated by a spark of jealousy for the affair her own husband had had with the ballerina before his engagement. “She behaved like Mme. Sukhomlinov it seems with bribes and the Artillery orders” she wrote to Nicholas. [38] Perhaps too Alexandra was simply right about this. Kschessinskaia had sent her own emissary to France to negotiate with armourers there. [39]



Rasputin, 1914

On June 18th Nicholas surrendered to public opinion and opinion of the military high command and dismissed the four ministers most odious to the nation. Immediately before the war, Duma members had been agitating for the removal of a number of the ministers, most notably Maklakov the Minister of Internal Affairs and Sabler, Procurator of the Synod. The munitions crisis swelled the ranks of

those deemed unacceptable, and by mid 1915 the remainder of the Council of Ministers was refusing to work with the four. Their action had enormous political significance because, technically, they did not have the right to do this. Each minister was individually responsible to the Emperor; the Council of Ministers could not act collectively. [40] It is hardly surprising that this came as a terrible psychological shock to Nicholas, who gave in with a very poor grace. His message to the Council made it plain how displeased he was about it. “He was educated in military discipline and was accustomed to a military atmosphere. He considered unthinkable in a regiment a situation where one section of the officers asked the regimental commander to dismiss some of their colleagues who had committed no offence” recalled Peter Bark [41]. In the light of Florinsky’s comments about the “honorable” men who made up the government being replaced after mid 1915 by the disastrous appointees of Rasputin, it is worth noting that it was actually the insistence of fellow ministers which sent away the first of these men and started this ministerial leapfrog. Sukhomlinov, naturally, was among those who departed. Alexandra agreed that it was probably best if he went, since “his adventurer wife has completely ruined his reputation, with her bribes and so on.” [42] Later she complained that he had lied at the outset of war over the availability of munitions to last the course [43], and she worried when he apparently showed his dismissal letter from the Emperor to everyone he knew, since Nicholas had used the letter to reiterate his personal faith in the former minister.

Within the imperial household, however, the idea gained ground that these ministers had been sent away in defiance of Alexandra’s wishes. “There are going on around me fantastic domestic dramas,” wrote Paul Benckendorff with an element of spiteful pleasure. [44] Elizabeth Naryshkin-Kurakin, the Empress’s Mistress of the Robes, wrote later in her memoirs that Mme. Sukhomlinov, being a friend of Anna Vyubova’s, had “access to the Empress” – although as we have seen, Alexandra actually blamed this woman for most of the War Minister’s problems.[45] Pierre Gilliard, tutor to the imperial children, counted the changes of 1915 as evidence that the Emperor “could resist his wife” when he had the will. [46] Gilliard is not talking about disagreements Nicholas and Alexandra might have had over individual ministerial appointments; instead, he cites the Emperor’s actions of 1915 as evidence of resistance to Alexandra’s autocratic tendencies and his desire to adopt a more democratic style. This is nothing but wishful thinking on Gilliard’s part, because he, like many around the Emperor, was misreading the signals. Nicholas cleared out the four ministers not because the Duma members opposed them, but because he reluctantly accepted that their unpopularity with fellow ministers was a liability to the war effort, which was what mattered to him at that moment more than anything else in the government of Russia. Similarly, when the Duma came into session that June, it was meeting as a “reward” for its good behaviour in the first year of the war and more importantly to better allow it to do its war work helping organize the movement of supplies. Nicholas’s reaction to it when it then proceeded to discuss spies and military issues – he shut it down - shows that he was not in anyway interested in its opinions. Duma members in turn were baffled by the conflicting signals he apparently sent them, and this gulf of mutual misunderstanding over the rights and purposes of the nation’s elected representatives is the real key to what happened in the eighteen months that followed.

On the individual level, one appointment certainly upset Alexandra: for religious reasons that included his enmity for Rasputin, she disliked the new Procurator of the Synod, Alexander Samarin, and had plenty to say about him from the beginning. He was “a real Moscow type – head without a soul.” [47]. She had vague misgivings about Polivanov, the new War Minister too, although at the beginning that was the extent of it. The prime minister, whose opinions she valued, thought highly of Polivanov. The new Minister of Internal Affairs, Nicholas Shcherbatov, she met up with and initially liked (“he made a pleasant impression” [48]). Like her husband, Alexandra balked at the notion that ministers be dismissed simply because public opinion demanded they go, (“Now others can think that public opinion is enough,” she wrote on June 24th 1915) but like Nicholas she had bowed to the inevitable over at least two of them and seems to have been prepared to try to work with most of those who succeeded. There is no evidence for the oft-repeated assertion that she set out from the start to get rid of those responsible for the ministerial coups that summer.

The loss of the four ministers seems however to have crystallized Alexandra’s opposition to Nikolasha, whose open contempt for the civil arm of the war government had from her perspective been partially responsible for all of this. Of the men dismissed, the Minister of Internal Affairs (as noted by Kerensky) and the War Minister (as noted by everyone) had both enjoyed remits which had brought them into conflict with the Grand Duke over the movement of troops and supplies. The remaining two, in Justice and at the Synod, were simply odious to much of the Duma for their conservative opinions. The Procurator of the Synod, in particular, enjoyed an unenviable and underserved reputation as a toady of Rasputin’s.

For several weeks Alexandra bombarded her husband with complaints about Nikolasha’s high-handed behaviour; but Nicholas needed no real persuasion. His own instinct at the outset of the war had been to place himself at the head of the Army; now he had literally no choice. The Commander-in-Chief, increasingly overwrought, had apparently become a liability to the war effort because the ministerial changes had had no effect on Russia’s military fortunes and the German army was advancing still. If the civil government had not been issue, it could be argued, responsibility had to rest with the military. In August the Kaiser’s troops took Warsaw. Someone had to replace Nikolasha, but who apart from the Emperor could command similar symbolic prestige? It was at this point that Nicholas assumed Supreme Command himself. There were sound practical as well as symbolic reasons for this decision: Russia could not successfully prosecute a war when the civil and military leaders refused to work together. By reuniting the two branches of the government under his own leadership, and placing actual responsibility for strategy in the hands of his Chief of Staff, General Alexeiev, he hoped to bring an end to the in-fighting.

The decision has been almost universally condemned by historians since it placed the Emperor in a position where he came to be personally associated with defeats, in addition to leaving a power vacuum in the capital into which Alexandra stepped. Dominic Lieven though sees it rather differently, appreciating that Nicholas was signaling his unequivocal commitment to the war effort and arguing that if a strong man had been appointed prime minister or Minister of the Interior to act as his deputy in the capital, just as Alexeiev did

at Headquarters, uniting the Ministers and even the Duma behind him, all would have gone differently. This is exactly what Nicholas and Alexandra planned; her letters of August 1915 make this unambiguously clear. She thinks the government is on the right track and public opinion will come to appreciate this. “The Germans and the Austrians have to occupy our minds and nothing else – and a good minister of the interior will keep order...I begged him [the Prime Minister, Goremykin] not to worry about it [the Duma], that I am convinced it’s not serious and more talking than anything else.” [49]

Ivan Goremykin, the rather decrepit politician whom Nicholas and Alexandra kept as Prime Minister as long as he himself could bear it



Nicholas and Alexandra failed to get their strong man. The blame for the non-appointment of anyone competent Lieven places firmly at the door of the ministers themselves. They protested Nicholas’s decision to take the supreme command, and wrote him a collective letter telling him so. They also refused to work with the devoted and (at that stage) competent prime minister, Ivan Goremykin, and this fact appears to have enraged Alexandra even more than their attitude to her husband. To Nicholas and Alexandra, Goremykin was an object of real personal affection, the “dear old man”. “How awfully difficult it is for him to preside, knowing they are all against him” she raged “Poor man, it hurt him, reading all those heresies against him.” [50]. Alexander Krivoshein, the Minister of Agriculture, personally popular with both the Emperor and Empress and additionally associated with Peter Stolypin’s successful reforms and management of the Third Duma, was the outstanding candidate for Minister of the Interior; yet he was among those who signed the letter. “What has happened to my friend Krivoshein!” Alexandra sighed. “I am bitterly disappointed in him.” [51]. She was putting a great deal of effort into persuading people that her husband had made the right decision in taking command and in fact having a great deal of success as far as she could see; it puzzled her that the ministers seemed to be acting in panic, like a bunch of “wet hens”. “I long to thrash nearly all the ministers,” she told Nicholas in her typically rather school-girlish hyperbolic style on August 29th. Even the notoriously quarrelsome Imperial Family had rallied behind the Emperor on this occasion, and not simply because it added fuel to the fuel of their own arguments with Nikolasha and his wife. Marie Pavlovna, the Emperor’s aunt, the Empress’s long-term enemy, and the leader of smart Petersburg society, convinced Alexandra that she too had been angry at the disorganization of the Army and nation when Nikolasha was C.-in-C. “[she is] angry at the fright and cowardice and that none will take any responsibility upon themselves.” [52] For Alexandra and “Miechen” to agree upon anything was progress indeed. Andrei, Miechen’s son, recorded their conversation in his diary, with some astonishment. “Alix looked upon things exactly as we do! This episode in our family life is important, in that it gave us the possibility of understanding Alix. Almost the whole of her life in our country has been veiled in a shadowy incomprehensible aura. Nobody really knew her, in fact, or understood her, and the guesses and suppositions that were made became in time an array of the most varied legends...We saw her in a new light, and realized that many of the legends are false, and that she is on the right path.”[53] Alexandra complained to her new sympathizers – with some justification - that absolutely everything she did was criticized. Andrei’s diary entry

is important because it demonstrates how true this was : Miechen's family had also set themselves against her without really knowing her views.

Nicholas, away at Headquarters with his "new heavy responsibility upon his shoulders", much appreciated his wife's activities. He wrote her a famous letter thanking her for reassuring Goremykin and informing her that in view of its continuing obstreperousness he wanted the Duma closed. "Fancy, my Wify, helping Huzy when he is away! What a pity that you did not perform that duty long ago, or at least now during the war!" [54] Goremykin, appreciating her ferocity, looked upon the Empress with a sort of paternal smile, and called her "*l'energie*" [55]. The main task for "*l'energie*" was to be finding a new interior

Nicholas (facing camera, left), Alexandra and Alexei at Headquarters, 1916



minister from among those men still prepared to serve. As Lieven comments, the ministers' unwillingness to do this, combined with the necessity not to choose anyone totally odious to public opinion, tended to limit the field from the start, and helps explain some of the more obviously peculiar decisions the Emperor and Empress took.

Shcherbatov, Minister of the Interior since June, had blotted his copy book quite early on. There had been a tremendous press scandal involving Rasputin that summer, with newspapers openly campaigning to be rid of him. Shcherbatov's inability to stop this was his political death warrant: not simply, as everyone immediately assumed, because he had failed to protect the Emperor and Empress's "Friend", but because Alexandra and the Prime Minister Goremykin both concluded that his inability to control the press was a bad sign. "That he took no hold on the press is a sign of what an incapable person he is for that place," the Empress wrote. [56]. Those who actively opposed Rasputin were undeniably showing poor judgment that "could not be blessed"; but they were also siding with public opinion which was engaged in a campaign to dictate who the Emperor would and would not receive as a friend in his own home. This is an important point, of course, because it underlines Nicholas's and Alexandra's psychology. Not only did they have the right to a private life, but he was Emperor by hereditary right and not by grace of public opinion and did not feel that he should be dictated to by the whims of the press. The battle over the press treatment of Rasputin was in fact symptomatic of something rather larger going on. There were few contemporary leaders who had to live with press attacks – albeit indirect – on their private lives to quite the extent that Nicholas did. David Lloyd George, who sold honours for money and

entertained a string of mistresses in No. 10 – including his own daughter’s governess – pretty much got away with it – and he was an elected politician. From Nicholas and Alexandra’s perspective, their anger at the way the newspapers behaved was entirely reasonable, all the more so because there was a war on and attacks on the government undermined the war effort. None of the belligerent nations permitted their newspapers free reign during these years, and so Shcherbatov fell, partly for his perceived disloyalty to the imperial family, but also for his weakness as a national leader.

Alexandra briefly considered replacing him with the Minister of War Polivanov – another man she is often accused of holding in irrational contempt from the start – so as to “punish” the other ministers. Although she felt “he understands nothing of interior questions”, his status as War and Interior Minister simultaneously “will look like a dictatorship.” [57]. Nicholas did nothing on this occasion, but many months later he was to give Boris Sturmer two jobs at once and for precisely that reason.

Fairly quickly, Alexandra decided that Alexei Khvostov was the man for the post. On the surface, he was a curious choice, and public opinion immediately attributed his appointment to the fact that he had been hanging around Rasputin. Like many others, Khvostov was aware that Rasputin’s approval was fairly important if he was to succeed in political office. The Emperor and particularly the Empress had no doubt that the peasant was “a man of God, sent to help us”, and for that reason his stamp of approval was usually – though not always - sought for those they considered appointing. They were not however in the business of asking him to produce candidates on the basis of his own assessment, and when he did so they tended to ignore him. Public opinion was unaware of the distinction, and so were many of the opportunists who flocked to Rasputin’s door in the hope of a job and so added to the unsavoury aura surrounding him.

Alexei Nikolaievich Khvostov was forty-three years old – a full generation younger than most of the people the autocracy relied upon for support - and a right-wing member of the Duma who had had plenty to say about alien influences commanding the war effort in the weeks immediately before his appointment. This however he was glibly able to explain to Alexandra: “he took the question about German overpowering influence and dearth of meat so that the leftist ones wouldn’t take it; now that the rightist ones have this question it is safe.” [58] Goremykin was opposed to his appointment, but Alexandra felt that this might be just because the old man hated anyone from the Duma because its very existence was offensive to his monarchist sensibilities. [59] She was making the mistake of taking Khvostov’s “right” politics for old-fashioned monarchist ones. In reality he was closer to a rabble-rousing demagogue of the proto-fascist variety, and he had a dangerously unstable character. Four years earlier his own uncle – himself a minister – had declared Alexei unsuitable for high office because although able he was greedy and corrupt [60]. Alexandra however was hearing from a number of other people that Khvostov the younger would be a good candidate, and when she met him herself – feeling “honestly, rather anxious” because of all the negative reports - she was impressed. “He talks well and doesn’t hide the fact, which is a plus....The Government he finds must look ahead and prepare for after the war...all those 1000s of men working for the Army [in factories] will sit without work...that must all be thought of...doesn’t matter if he is a

bit self-sure, it's not offensively noticed...then the preparations beforehand for the elections into the Duma – the bad prepare and so must the good canvas, as one says in England.” [61] In other words, Alexandra was impressed by the fact that he was planning ahead to after the war, including thinking of means to ensure that the Duma was manageably composited. Khvostov's only real possible rival for the post, A.B. Neidhart, she had quickly written off as a “snob” and a “pedant”. One final thing decided the issue: Shcherbatov and the rest were still refusing to work with Goremykin, and therefore, wrote Nicholas, “some changes must take place” [62]. He would not allow himself to be swayed a second time by a ministerial strike; he had tried to compromise with them over the first four ministers and yet they were apparently refusing to meet him half way. He had fewer misgivings about Khvostov than Alexandra had: “I just got your last letter in which you wrote about the good impression that young Khvostov made upon you. I was sure of that, knowing him from former times when he was governor of Vologda. So as not to lose time I shall see him at once the day I come home.” [63]

The other minister due to bite the dust was of course Samarin the Procurator of the Synod. He had upset both the Emperor and Empress with his opposition to the canonisation of John Maximovich of Tobolsk, and with his overbearing manner with the Bishop involved. Alexandra called him “hideously unpatriotic and narrow-minded” [64]: she had her heart set on John Maximovich as a truly national saint, whose popular appeal was more important than whether or not he fulfilled the strict criteria for canonisation. Samarin of course was completely within his rights to take issue with Bishops: since the era of Peter the Great the church had been sublimated to the state; but Nicholas and Alexandra had a different conception of how the relationship should work, Nicholas having even contemplated restoring the Patriarchate and with it the independence of the Church. Thus Samarin was doomed.

Khvostov was appointed Minister of Internal Affairs on September 29th. Very shortly afterwards, Alexander Krivoshein and the Minister of Finance both resigned, although not in protest against his appointment. Rather, they had apparently decided that as opponents of Nicholas becoming Commander-in-Chief they were doomed anyway, although neither nor Alexandra have left any evidence that they were thinking along precisely those lines. Their main desire was to get the ministers acting in unison and with energy in support of the war effort. To replace Krivoshein, Alexandra put forward Alexander Naumov, and when Nicholas offered him the post she wrote happily, “I am so glad, he always pleased me, I like his frank eyes and he always spoke enthusiastically about all the work to be done and went into all the details, so it is knowledge he has gained personally by work.” [65] It should be noted at this point that Alexander Naumov was a friend of Samarin and a fierce opponent of Rasputin's. He was also as a matter of principle opposed to the autocracy, but all this Alexandra was happy to overlook for the sake of getting a competent man in position. Once in office, Naumov pleased her with his work – alongside Khvostov and Trepov the Minister of Communications - on sorting out the supply problems. [66] He collaborated closely with both Duma and city zemstvos, to the point of falling out with the Prime Minister. [67] Thus he resigned the following summer because he “felt tired and ill”, and yet he was still prepared to defend the competence of the government against attacks in the State Council. [68]

Khvostov proved to be the antithesis of this steady, hard-working man. As far as his actual job went, he did in fact repay some of the confidence the monarchs placed in him. Russia's renewed victories in 1916 owed something at least to the improved condition of the military supply system, for which he was partially responsible. [69] It was his character which came to be the worst public relations disaster of the lot as far as the regime was concerned. He had quickly decided that Rasputin was harming the image of throne, and attempted to bribe the peasant not to take bribes from other politicians. In any case, he wanted to be Chairman of the Council of Ministers – in other words, Prime Minister – and he was hoping that Rasputin's influence would help him achieve this. [70] This of course was a pipe dream; unless Nicholas and Alexandra were already considering someone, nothing Rasputin might say would make a difference. The Tsar and Empress had now realised that the "old Gentleman" Goremykin would have to go; and ironically it was the Duma's antipathy which was driving this. He had reached the point where he dreaded walking into a session because of its hissing him; and yet as Alexandra argued, "what can one do; one cannot send it away for such a reason." [71] Goremykin himself, aware that he had passed the point of being able forcefully to support the throne, was asking to be permitted to resign.

Nicholas considered replacing him with Boris Sturmer, a competent provincial governor who had impressed him with the forceful way he had acted in putting down some of the 1905 rebellions, but Khvostov had his doubts about this. "He praised him, but thinks he is too old and his head is not as clear as once," Nicholas reported to his wife after consulting the Minister. [72] Alexandra laughed at this objection. "Khvostov a tiny bit hopes to get that place – but he is too young – Sturmer would do for a while." [73]. Sturmer it was, so Khvostov decided to have Rasputin murdered.

Working alongside his deputy, Stephen Beletsky, and a thoroughly corrupt police colonel named Kommissarov, he succeeded only in poisoning the Holy Man's cats. In the process fell out with both his accomplices, [74] and their relationship developed into an open battle in the press. It was an important moment. Russia had previously had ministers who were old or even incompetent; she had never had ones who behaved like the mafia.

Alexandra was full of contrition over Khvostov. "Am so wretched that we [herself and Ania Vyubova] through Gregory recommended his appointment to you," she wrote to Nicholas. "It leaves me no peace...you were against it and I let myself be imposed upon." [75]. She duly held back from involving herself in choosing a successor. Nicholas gave the post to Sturmer, who now held both that and the premiership (as Chairman of the Council of Ministers). As a matter of fact, the Tsar was now considering appointing Sturmer military dictator and sending the Duma away for the duration of the war [76]; quite the reverse of the way Alexandra was thinking.

Two more ministers whom the Empress disliked were to be dismissed by her husband in 1916. The first was the War Minister Alexei Polivanov. He had been amongst those who protested the Emperor's decision to assume the Supreme Command in 1915, and in fact had attempted to resign. Nicholas kept him to the post for the time being, but in March 1916 he was dismissed.

His is an interesting test case of the Emperor and Empress's attitudes, because he sympathised with the *Progressive bloc* within the Duma. Formed in September 1915 after the dismissal of Sukhomlinov et al., the *bloc* formalized the demands implied by the Ministers' desire to get rid of their unpopular colleagues. It had a programme in places confused and mutually contradictory, but asked for a ministry "endowed with firm authority and enjoying the country's confidence"[77] – in other words, it wanted much the same as the Emperor and Empress did, differing from them only in defining "public confidence" as "acceptable to the Duma." As far as Nicholas and Alexandra were concerned, public confidence would proceed automatically from firmness; and yet after June 1915 they too were trying to avoid appointing anyone overtly unpopular. The majority of the ministers sympathized with the *bloc*, and as her attitude to Naumov revealed, Alexandra was not inherently hostile to people of this persuasion so long as she was convinced that they were prepared to serve the country and the Emperor too. What is rarely noted is that by the early months of 1916, Alexandra herself accepted that such a programme made a certain sense. One influence on her, ironically, seems to have been Khvostov, who reasoned that cooperation of a sort was necessary, since "the Duma exists, there is nothing to be done." [78]. Late in 1915 and early in 1916, she was urging a Duma visit on her husband, apparently believing that his appearance would rally the members behind him. "Of course, if you could turn up for a few words, quite unexpected, at the Duma that might change everything and be a splendid deed." [79] When Nicholas went, of course, Rodzianko averred that his actions were "heartily protested" by his wife. [80] Gilliard and others within the household also noted this as another example of Nicholas's ability to "resist his wife" and to attempt compromise with the nation's representatives [81]. As a matter of fact it was quite the reverse since Nicholas's own thinking at this stage was along the lines of appointing Sturmer military dictator.

There is no reason to think that any this marked a change of policy on Alexandra's part. Before the war, the aim of the imperial government had been to tamper with the electorate to the point where the Duma would be packed with loyal peasants who would back the government; each of the first three Dumas was less radical than the last. In other words, the regime was even then seeking a way to avoid overt collision with the nation's elected representatives. Her desire to keep it away and see it silenced in mid-1915 has to be seen in the context of the terribly disordered internal situation which she felt it was inclined to make worse; crisis over, policy returned to normal. Alexandra seems to have had slightly more awareness than her husband of public relations issues in general. Not only did she advise him to show himself to the Duma, but she was also always keen for him to be seen by the Army, and in particular for the soldiers to be able to see their young son.

By the early part of 1916, however, the Progressive bloc had stepped up its demands. Alexandra became aware that Polivanov was in sympathy with those demanding a government not only acceptable but in fact responsible to the Duma – in other words, a parliamentary cabinet. [82] This was not a demand that even the Duma President backed. Polivanov, furthermore, was thought to be discussing the proceedings of confidential ministerial meetings with others, and to losing control of the various war committees.

Nicholas dismissed him, and he promptly told his Duma allies that he had been thrown out at the Empress's demand for taking away Rasputin's armoured car. [83] It is extraordinary to note how often supposedly intelligent men, who were having fundamental differences of political opinion with their sovereign, were apt to attribute their own fall to the silliest most personal motives.

The other minister with how Alexandra had her issues was Sazonov, the Foreign Minister. He had been in post since before the war, and although he annoyed the Empress on a deeply personal level for apparently backing the press campaign against her in the summer of 1915, he remained in office for another year. When he fell it was over the issue of Polish autonomy, which he had promised the nation in the hope of rallying its spirit against the German invaders. As Germany was promising the same thing, this made sense, and Nicholas backed Sazonov. The vast majority of the cabinet however had a different view; as did Alexandra. [84] On July 7th 1916 the Emperor dismissed the Foreign Minister, apparently because Boris Sturmer wanted the job instead and Nicholas wished to see him continue in a dual role (he was currently both prime minister and Minister of Internal Affairs). [85] Alexandra knew that the changes would be put down to the Polish question and she would be blamed for them. "I myself happen to have witnessed an incident that proves that the dismissal of Sazonov, which has always been attributed to the Empress's influence and most bitterly commented upon, was not brought about by Her Majesty" recalled Sophie Buxhoeveden. "I was with the Empress in her coupé in the train at Headquarters, when a note from the Emperor was brought in. The Empress read it with signs of the greatest surprise, and, on the spur of the moment, told me its contents. The Emperor wrote that he had decided to dismiss Sazonov. This was news for the Empress, who seemed dubious, and expressed the opinion that she feared the moment was inopportune". [86] Alexandra actually opposed the change, not least because Internal Affairs went to Khvostov the elder (the disastrous Alexei's uncle) leaving the Minister of Justice post he had previously held to someone she disliked. "Alas that Makarov has been chosen!" she wrote to her husband on July 16th. Rodzianko, in blaming the Empress for these latest leapfrogs, completely fails to appreciate this latter point, and actually avers that Alexandra engineered the change precisely to get the said Makarov into office. [87]

Old Khvostov didn't last long. He was too elderly and in any case could not get along with Sturmer; he asked to be relieved of his post. [88] It goes without saying that public opinion, as epitomized by Rodzianko, blamed Alexandra. The Empress's choice of a successor was to be her most infamous political decision. She selected Alexander Protopopov, Vice-President of the Duma. His parliamentary role was a major consideration ("he will know how to be with them" she said on Sept. 7th) and he had previously been proposed by his colleague Rodzianko as Communications minister [89] He was an industrialist and a skilful orator, he was a member of the Progressive *bloc* and as popular with the Duma left-wingers like Kerensky as he was with the basically monarchist Rodzianko. When he had traveled to western Europe with other Duma members earlier in the war he made an excellent impression. [90] He lacked any administrative experience and in his hands the Ministry descended into bureaucratic chaos. In short, he was exactly the sort of man who might have been appointed to office

if the Emperor had acceded to the demands of the Progressive *bloc* and appointed a parliamentary cabinet. Peter Bark the Finance Minister, a traditional Tsarist bureaucrat, described him as “a dreamer, filled with good intentions” and a prototype of the people who came to power with the Provisional Government a few months later. [91] Rumours immediately began to circulate of the radical policies he had in mind, none of which helped the Emperor and Empress in the eyes of their own relatives, already convinced that they were heading for destruction. “I touched on two matters which have been raised by Protopopov, the expropriation of landowners’ land in favour of the peasants, and civil rights for the Jews. It’s typical that Alix didn’t voice any protest on these questions...I protested as strongly as I could, saying that we could not afford to be merciful to a race which the Russian people hate even more now because of their negative attitude towards the war,” wrote Alexander Mikhailovich to his brother Nikolai [92]. Land hunger was of course one of the eternal problems of the Russian peasantry, and one of the issues which Durnovo had predicted would overturn the regime in wartime unless addressed. Protopopov got as far as drafting a bill to set before the Duma in early 1917. [93]

The gossip about the minister caused even more damage than his policies. No sooner was he in office that there began to be rumours that he was going mad as a result of tertiary syphilis. [94] Perhaps this was true; but perhaps it was simply because he was out of depth in his job that he became paralysed with inaction. The stories got sillier. He was rumoured to be a necrophiliac [95] and – following Rasputin’s murder by a group of panic-stricken aristocrats and a right-wing extremist from the Duma – to be taking counsel from the Holy man’s spirit. [96]



Alexander Protopopov, who, along with Khvostov, did much to undermine the credibility of the imperial government

Alexandra was furious. She had selected a popular parliamentarian who she thought would acceptable to public opinion, and public opinion – in particular the Minister’s colleagues in the Duma – had turned on him instead. From her perspective, it must have indeed have seemed that there was a conspiracy afoot to drive the government out, the more so as she herself had just come under violent verbal attack in the Duma by deputies accusing her of being a German spy. Nicholas briefly considered getting rid of Protopopov; but his wife wrote him her most infamous letter, which is often cited as evidence of her intransigently autocratic views.

“Darling, remember that it does not lie with the man Protopopov or with x.y.z but it’s a question of your prestige which must not be shattered in the time of the Duma. Remember that they will not stop at him; they’ll make all leave and then ourselves.....” [97]. Inevitably this can – and has - been seen as evidence of Alexandra forcing her husband to pursue anti-democratic policies that he might otherwise have been persuaded to abandon. But it needs to be kept firmly in its context. Nicholas wanted Alexander Trepov as premier to replace the aging Sturmer, who had disappointed his hopes for a

strong man. Trepov refused to serve with Protopopov as Minister of Internal Affairs and Nicholas considered accepting this condition. Under Alexandra's influence he changed his mind and ordered Trepov to work with the colleagues that his Emperor gave him. Trepov resigned a couple of months later and was replaced by another well-meaning ancient man in the Goremykin mould – Nicholas Golitsyn.

Trepov as premier without Protopopov might conceivably have saved the situation; this is apparently what historians assume in condemning Alexandra for her influence at that moment. And yet Trepov himself had already been the object of negative comment by Duma deputies; Rodzianko wrote that as Communications Minister he had “only increased the muddle” in the supply system. [98] Neither Nicholas nor Alexandra nor anyone else had any reason to think that he'd have proven any more popular with public opinion than Protopopov was, even if he had been better at his job.

Protopopov remained in office, and three months later the monarchy collapsed.

The story of Russia's war-time government is a tragedy of epic proportions. Two camps which had the huge majority of their interests in common – the monarchy and the liberal monarchists within the Duma – between them drove the country into a revolution they were completely unable to control. Both sides had the overwhelming aim of winning the war against Germany, and yet neither side trusted the other to be able to prosecute the war successfully. Rodzianko and colleagues were all too inclined to turn set-backs into a matter of personalities, blaming the Empress in particular for events and decisions that had nothing to do with her. Her consequent suspicion of their motives is all too easy to understand. The government in any case regarded the Duma as a threat in making rather incoherent demands for actual changes to the system of government that in Nicholas and Alexandra's opinion could only destabilize the country while a war was on. This explains their total opposition to responsible government at that time, although both were also undeniably of the view that the Duma was unrepresentative of a country consisting mainly of loyal monarchists. In June 1915 Nicholas went a limited way towards attempting to compromise by dismissing unpopular ministers. The Duma, encouraged, simply stepped up its demands, and Nicholas and Alexandra, feeling threatened, responded by retreating – he first by contemplating dictatorship; she – contrary to what is often said – a little later with now-infamous hysterical outbursts about her husband remaining autocrat and acting like Ivan the Terrible towards his ministers.

The infamous “ministerial leapfrog”, brought about by a combination of resignations, reshuffles and dismissals, very few of which had anything particular to do with Alexandra, were the product of the stresses of the war years. There were ministers who felt that they lacked public confidence and could not serve without it; ministers who felt that they did not enjoy the Emperor's confidence and would not serve without *that*; ministers who were simply too old or too inexperienced to be able to do the job properly, and the context of all of this was the mistrust between the executive and legislature.

Nicholas and Alexandra cannot ever really be excused for the policy they pursued. In the war it may have made sense not to make changes to the government, but more could

certainly have been done before the war to reach some sort of *modus vivendi* with the parliament they had themselves convened. Then, perhaps, the collision of early 1917 might have been avoided. But understanding of this situation is ill served by representation of either the Emperor or the Empress as irrational beings who took only foolish decisions. Their policy might be inexcusable, but the individual decisions that contributed to the final tragedy made perfect sense from a perspective that was not simply one of blind reaction.

References

1. cited in Massie, p. 330
2. King, p. 245
3. Alexander Mikhailovich, p. 10
4. King, p. 245
5. Steinberg and Khrustalev, p. 35
6. Lieven, p. 204-233
7. Buxhoeveden, p. 231
8. *ibid.*, p. 233
9. *ibid.*, p. 213
10. AF to N, 2nd September 1915
11. *ibid.*, 1st November 1915
12. See for example, Massie, p. 324
13. Buxhoeveden, p. 212
14. cited in Lieven, p. 205
15. Rodzianko, p. 114
16. AF to N, 23 November 1914
17. *ibid.*, 1st December 1914
18. *ibid.*, 14th December 1914
19. *ibid.*, January 28th 1915
20. Rodzianko, p. 112-3
21. AF to N, December 15th 1914
22. Rodzianko, p. 114
23. AF to N, 25th October 1914
24. Perry and Pleshakov, p. 113
25. AF to N, 6th April 1915
26. Rodzianko, p. 126
27. Perry and Pleshakov, p. 111-2
28. cited in Lieven, p. 212
29. Kerensky, p. 138
30. Rodzianko, p. 124
31. See for example, Fuhrmann in *Wartime correspondence*, p. 133 v. Lieven, p. 209
32. Lieven, p. 209; Fuhrmann in *Wartime correspondence*, p. 129
33. AF to N, 4th May 1915
34. *ibid.*, 25th June 1915
35. *ibid.*, 10th June 1915

36. Lieven, p. 207
37. Kerensky, p. 138
38. AF to N, 25th June 1915
39. Perry and Pleshakov, p. 124
40. Fuhrmann in *Wartime correspondence*, p. 178
41. cited in Lieven, p. 210
42. AF to N, 12th June 1915
43. AF to N, 24th June 1915
44. cited in Lieven, p. 209
45. Naryshkin-Kurakin, p. 112
46. Gilliard, p. 180
47. AF to N, 15th June 1915
48. *ibid.*, 17th June 1915
49. *ibid.*, 25th August 1915
50. *ibid.*, 24th August 1915
51. *ibid.*, 20th September 1915
52. *ibid.*, 3rd September 1915
53. Andrei Vladimirovich, 6th September 1915 in *Lifelong passion*
54. N to AF, 25th August 1915
55. AF to N, 7th September 1915
56. AF to N, 24th August 1915
57. *ibid.*, 23rd August 1915
58. *ibid.*, August 29th 1915
59. *ibid.*
60. Fuhrmann in *Wartime correspondence*, p. 173
61. AF to N, 17th September 1915
62. N to AF, 17th September 1915
63. *ibid.*, 18th September 1915
64. AF to N, 29th August 1915
65. *ibid.*, 14th November 1915
66. *ibid.*, 22nd December 1915
67. Rodzianko, p. 201
68. AF to N, 23rd July 1916
69. Lieven, p. 217
70. Fuhrmann, *Rasputin*, p. 165
71. AF to N, 7th November 1915
72. N to AF, 5th January 1916
73. AF to N, 7th January 1916
74. Fuhrmann, *Rasputin*, p. 166
75. AF to N, 2nd March 1916
76. Fuhrmann, in *Wartime correspondence*, p. 403
77. Rodzianko, p. 156
78. AF to N, 17th September 1915
79. *ibid.*, November 13th 1915
80. Rodzianko, p. 179
81. Gilliard, p. 180

82. AF to N, 6th March 1916
83. Rodzianko, p. 183
84. Fuhrmann, in *Wartime correspondence*, p. 575
85. *ibid.*, p. 536
86. Buxhoeveden, p. 223
87. Rodzianko, p. 200
88. Fuhrmann, in *Wartime correspondence*, p. 578
89. N to AF, 9th September 1916
90. Lieven, p. 224
91. *ibid.*, p. 225
92. Alexander Mikhailovich to Nikolai Mikhailovich, 14th February 1917,
in *Lifelong passion*
93. Rodzianko, p. 256
94. Lieven, p. 224
95. King, p. 254
96. Massie, p. 367
97. cited in Lieven, p. 225
98. Rodzianko, p. 159

Bibliography

- Alexander Mikhailovich, Grand Duke. *Twilight of royalty*. New York: R. Long & R. Smith, 1932
- Buxhoeveden, Sophie. *The life and tragedy of Alexandra Feodorovna, Empress of Russia*
- Fuhrmann, Joseph. *Rasputin: a life*. New York: Praeger, 1990
- Gilliard, Pierre. *Thirteen years at the Russian court*. London: Hutchinson, 1921
- Kerensky, Alexander. *Russia and history's turning point*. London: Cassell, 1966
- King, Greg. *The last Empress*. London: Aurum, 1994
- A lifelong passion: Nicholas and Alexandra, their own story*, edited by Andrei Maylunas and Sergei Mironenko. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1996
- Lieven, Dominic. *Nicholas II, emperor of all the Russias*. London: John Murray, 1993
- Massie, Robert K. *Nicholas and Alexandra*. London: Gollancz, 1967
- Naryshkin-Kurakin, Elizabeth. *Under three Tsars*. New York: Dutton, 1931
- Nicholas II and Alexandra Feodorovna. *The complete wartime correspondence*, edited by Joseph T. Fuhrmann. London: Greenwood Press, 1999
- Perry, John Curtis, and Pleshakov, Constantine. *The flight of the Romanovs*. New York: Basic Books, 1999
- Rodzianko, Mikhail. *The reign of Rasputin*. London: Philpot, 1927
- Steinberg, Mark D. and Khrustalev, Vladimir M. *The fall of the Romanovs*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995