

**A prodigal saint : Father John of Kronstadt and the Russian people,
by Nadieszda Kizenko.**

University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania University Press, 2000.

xiii, 376 pages

reviewed by Janet Ashton

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The modern psychiatrist would have had a field day on Father John of Kronstadt. Born in poverty as Ioann Sergiev in 1829, he was drawn to mysticism but decided to make a career as a parish priest in order to be better able to help others share his vision of Christian life. Since being a priest meant being married he duly found himself a bride, apparently only telling her after the wedding that he had no intention of consummating the relationship. His wife seems to have become for him a representation of all that was worst about earthly existence; a temptation to sins of the flesh that included not just sex but also excessive pleasure in food. In the notebooks he kept throughout his life, he recorded the many occasions she offended him by feeding him meals that he felt contributed to sexual arousal – or even meals that he simply liked too much. Sex and good food seem to have been inextricably linked – sins to be avoided at all costs and to be used as means of manipulating and punishing the long-suffering Elizabeth Konstantinovna. He despised her for her affection and admonished himself to bear it for the sake of moral improvement. Beyond doubt, as Sonya Tolstoy too was bitterly aware, saints are hell for a normal person to live with.

Nadieszda Kizenko's biography of Father John, one of the best-known religious figures of late Tsarist Russia, sets his personal peculiarities in their spiritual context and attempts no glib psycho-analysis. John, who died in 1908 and was canonised in 1990, was part of the popular religious revival evident in the reigns of Alexander III and Nicholas II, when Orthodoxy and national spirit were coming to be regarded as synonymous. He had an immense following, his religious disciples being drawn originally from all political and ethnic backgrounds, including the non-Orthodox. On the other hand, his later political followers tended to the extreme right of the spectrum, grossly anti-semitic (which John himself seems not to have been) and ardently in favour of autocracy. In his own lifetime, he was believed to have the ear of the Emperor, if only because he was asked to say prayers at the deathbed of Alexander III. One of the more better-known myths about him



is that he helped introduce Rasputin to the imperial court. Kizenko demonstrates that this legend is unsupported by any evidence, although she perhaps goes a little far in describing the works of Robert Massie and Robert Warth – both of whom repeat the story – as “not the most serious or scholarly”.

Father John of Kronstadt, one of the most controversial clerics of late Tsarist Russia

With some of his followers, John was not simply believed to have the ear of the Tsar. Through the renown of his charity work for the poor, he also acquired a status almost equivalent to Tsar, standing above and beyond the hierarchies of state and wielding power over both human and divine laws. People came to him seeking political favours and advancement as they later came to Rasputin. His prayers were increasingly sought when people were sick as if he were already glorified as a saint. Kizenko traces the impact of this veneration upon John as a man, and also sets it within its context in the Church and society. For years, the established church was suspicious of John's populism and informality, but his increasing identification with the monarchist cause eventually won it over. Early in his career he was apparently apolitical, declaring himself in support of monarchy only when shaken by the murder of Alexander II, whose death was presented by elements within the church as a martyrdom for tradition and stability. From there, the thinking of John and others progressed gradually to seeing every revolutionary act as a specific attack upon Holy Russia and the natural order of things. He loudly condemned Tolstoy, and allowed himself to be associated with the appalling Union of the Russian People. All this was deeply disappointing to those who had hoped that John's concern for the poor would lead him down a reformist path, and led to his vilification by the Soviet state as a symbol of all that wrong with Christianity under tsarism. His various canonisations – firstly by the Church in exile and then in 1990 by the Orthodox Church inside Russia – are tainted by the political, with some literature emphasising his "Russianness" and monarchism as much as it does his work as a priest.

John of Kronstadt idealized on a latter-day icon

Nadieszda Kizenko's book is a balanced, fascinating – and readable - academic biography of a difficult character, drawing upon numerous previously-untapped archival sources, including John's own extensive public and private writings. It paints a very sharp picture of the man, his spiritual and political era and his cult as a thoroughly modern saint whose image appeared on postcards and mugs even within his own lifetime.



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The Grand Duke Konstantin Nikolayevich

St Petersburg: Abris Art Publishers, 2002

64 pages, many black and white, sepia and colour illustrations

A review by Janet Ashton

Originally published in Atlantis magazine, vol. 5, no. 1, 2004

This book, which seems have been produced as an accompaniment to an exhibition at Peterhof marking the 175th anniversary of the Grand Duke's birth, commemorates arguably the last Romanov to play a really constructive role in government.

The Russian edition (N.B. the English version, as reviewed here, is identical except for the script)



Born in 1827, the second son of Nicholas I received a Naval education and was an active Naval reformer. He was also viceroy of Poland, and a famously strong supporter as Chairman of the State Council of his brother Alexander II's reforms. Konstantin was additionally a patron of the arts, member of various learned societies, and an organizer of the prototype Russian Red Cross. Like many Romanov men, he led a somewhat irregular private life, setting up house fairly openly with his mistress and illegitimate children when he had grown tired of his wife, and it was ostensibly this as much as his liberal politics which resulted in his eventual rift with his nephew Alexander III.

This little biography and catalogue resumes all the various facets of his life and career, including short sections on his wife and their six children. The multiple illustrations range from handsome portraits of Konstantin as a solid, blond baby to photographs of the manuscript of his unfinished memoirs, to caricatures of him as Admiral General. There are also pictures of objects associated with his life and career, right down to his monogrammed dessert knives. Produced by the Peterhof Museum Complex, the book naturally gives special emphasis to Konstantin's palace at Strelna, with many contemporary shots of the interior and the gardens. It could function on one level as a beautiful coffee table book, full of pictures never seen before in the west, and probably not well known in Russia either. Yet it also includes two scholarly essays by Olga Barkovets and Elena Chirkova of GARF. The former take an in-depth – and properly footnoted- look at Konstantin's disgrace at the hands of Alexander III, while the latter discusses the posthumous classification of his enormous private archive. Held at Oreanda, Strelna, Pavlovsk and the Marble Palace, Konstantin's private and service papers were inventoried by librarians at Pavlovsk and St Petersburg before the revolution, and the majority of them are now in the State Archive. Elena Chirkova discusses the contents of various files held there, the papers from the Marble Palace illuminating aspects of Konstantin's political and administrative career, as well as his education; while the Winter Palace manuscript collection and others include parts of his private correspondence with his siblings, tutors and children.

The infant Konstantin Nikolaevich, ca. 1829: just one of many rare illustrations in this book

I didn't learn many new facts about Konstantin's life from reading this book – although for anyone who hadn't heard much



about him before it would certainly be an excellent introduction – but I saw scores of new images, and Elena Chirkova’s essay provides a great basis for any future archival research into his life.

Abris publications are not widely available in the west. They can be found on sale in the palaces in St Petersburg, as well as the large bookshops on the Nevsky, and some volumes are more freely available than others. It is high time in my opinion that this very fine art publisher set up a website and started to do mail order, because their attractive and meticulously compiled works deserve a broader readership. In the meantime, all I can suggest is that anyone interested asks friends in or visiting Russia to pick up and pass on as many as they can – or makes the most of a personal visit to Petersburg to buy up a large stock!

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**What became of Peter’s dream? Court culture in the reign of Nicholas II,
by Anne Odom**

Middlebury, Vt.: Middlebury College Museum of Art, 2003
110 pages, colour illustrations

A review by Janet Ashton

Originally published in Atlantis magazine, vol. 5, no. 1, 2004

This book is another exhibition catalogue, accompanying the eponymous exhibition held at Middlebury College in the autumn of 2003. Anne Odom, senior curator of Hillwood Museum in Washington DC as well as being an alumna of Middlebury College and a much-published art historian of imperial Russia, provides the text that illuminates the list and photographs of the exhibits.

The exhibition and book both commemorate the tercentenary of the city of St Petersburg by jumping back one hundred years and looking at court life in the then-capital on its two-hundredth anniversary, as exemplified by the works of art with which the court surrounded itself. The objets d’art, paintings and illuminated manuscripts that make up the exhibits are examined and analysed for what they tell us about the culture of Nicholas’s reign and its relationship to Peter the Great’s original conception for his window on the west.

The first and most obvious thing to note, of course, is that Nicholas II did not like Peter, and as Anne Odom remarks, the celebration of the bicentenary of the capital was so low-key that none of the reign’s memoirists even mention it. By contrast, the glorification of Serafim of Sarov and the famous Muscovite costume Ball in the same year are given

great attention by survivors. Nicholas was attempting to immerse himself in a publicly Slavonic culture that bore little resemblance to Peter's dream for Russia, and little also to the Anglophone world of his own private life. This paradox was also present in visual arts at court: "Russian" style predominated in items made for display at public ceremonies

Slavophile display at the court ball of 1903



such as the coronation or tercentenary of the dynasty, and also in gifts offered to foreigners. However, as Odom notes, the watches and Faberge trinkets presented to Russians for their service in churches or imperial theatres continued to be made in neo-classical style. Most members of the imperial family shared the contemporary predilection for cluttered rooms, and photograph frames, ashtrays and tiny jewelled ornaments were typical of the types of presents they gave one another. The book is illustrated with many examples of such gifts, a large number being drawn from the collection of Grand Duchess Maria Georgievna and Grand Duke George Mikhailovich, whose possessions form the core of the collection at Middlebury College. Two objects in particular caught my attention: one was a tapir wearing pince-nez, produced by Faberge in response to a family joke about Maria Georgievna resembling

this animal; and the other was a tiny translucent bowl of green bowenite, with a silver snake curled around the rim. These beautiful, simple ornaments stand in contrast to some of the more elaborate Faberge productions, whose "grotesque garishness" (in the words of Vladimir Nabokov) were seen by the sophisticated as a symptom of the decline in the imperial family's aesthetic tastes.

One important aspect of Peter's dream for his showpiece city was the economic power manifest in the factories that produced luxury items to show off. By Nicholas's reign, however, the imperial glass and porcelain factories were in decline, and the tapestry factory long since closed. In their stead, independent suppliers came to prominence, mirroring the growing importance in Russia as a whole of rich industrialists as patrons of the arts and arbiters of taste. These independent suppliers exhibited at international exhibitions and influenced artists abroad. Thus Russia, Anne Odom concludes, had successfully fulfilled Peter's dream of acquiring a western veneer and becoming a part of cosmopolitan international culture. The apparent contradiction of Nicholas's obsession with a semi-mythical Slavic world also reflects the contradiction enshrined by Peter's own system of government, fiercely absolutist at a time when such government was beginning to collapse in the west.



Bowenite bowl with snake, an exquisite Fabergé piece illustrated in the book

“What became of Peter’s dream?” is an extremely interesting and thought-provoking book, which touches on many complex themes while examining a selection of art objects from Nicholas’s court. Being only 110 pages long (with page 85 onwards comprising the catalogue of the exhibition) it does not go into great depth on many of these themes, but the footnotes and bibliography provide further reading, and yield many obscure pieces of information about the imperial family and the arts, some of them never published before.

As Anne Odom notes, a full book on the role of the last generation of Romanovs as art patrons is just waiting to be written.

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The Amber Room,
by Catherine Scott-Clark and Adrian Levy.
London: Atlantic Books, 2004
xxx, 386 p, black and white ill.

A review by Janet Ashton

Originally published in Atlantis magazine, vol. 6, 2005

The publication of this book was much-heralded in the press and in shops, which had it face-out on their best-seller shelves within hours of its appearance. Written by two investigative journalists, who are well-placed to promote it and proclaim its controversy, it offers a new theory about the fate of the eponymous Amber Room.

Stolen by the Nazis from their home in the Catherine Palace at Tsarskoe Selo, the Room’s priceless golden panels disappeared completely after the end of the war, becoming a potent symbol of the losses both human and artistic sustained by Russia at the hands of Hitler’s regime. There have been numerous attempts to find them or

discover their fate, and successive Russian governments have not been slow to play on a national sense of guilt on Germany's part, recently receiving financial gifts towards the recreation of the Room from German firms.

After years of working in archives and talking to spies and architects and museum curators, Scott-Clark and Levy believe that the room was most likely destroyed by Soviet "friendly fire" not very long after arriving in Königsberg. They argue that the Soviet Union went out of its way to hide that fact, partially to hide its own guilt, but mainly to exploit the position with Germany.

As the authors relate, the Amber Room came from Germany in the first place. It was given by the cash-strapped Frederick William I of Prussia to Peter the Great as a gift during the latter's visit of 1716. Frederick William didn't want it; it was an artistic folly of his father's, and he saw the chance to off-load it. Along with the panels for the Room, Peter also received a leaky yacht, and in return he gave the King the suitably weird gift of fifty-five giants for the Prussian army, a barge and a lathe. He had an inspiration about the Amber Room: it would go up on the walls of the Kunstkammer, as a dramatic backdrop to his collection of body parts, two-headed animals and pickled foetus. Perhaps fortunately, these plans failed to be realized and the Room spent much of Peter's reign in

a box in his Summer daughter who got it up Palace before finally from the reign of tourist attraction, wonders of the world, as by the Tsarist, and encircled Leningrad, how best to protect it. curators decided hung before numerous other fatal decision: it



Palace. It was Elizabeth his on various walls in the Winter moving it out to Tsarskoe, where Catherine the Great it became a known as one of the artistic It was as prized by the Soviet state when in 1945 the Nazi Army there was much deliberation over Because the panneling was fragile, ultimately to conceal it where it evacuating themselves and treasures to Siberia. This was a apparently took the Nazis just

moments to locate and remove the Room, and devastated curators returning at the end of the war found the Catherine Palace roofless and torn apart, *as pictured above*, its doors and ceilings carried off to Germany, and numerous other fittings scattered about the Park.

Early Soviet investigations in East Prussia apparently revealed the truth, as divulged by the curator of Königsberg Castle: the Room had been totally destroyed when the castle itself was burned and flooded: only a few detached pieces remained. For whatever reasons, though, this solution was not acceptable to Stalin and the Russian authorities, who dispatched two more curators to Red Army-occupied Prussia to come up with a different answer. One of these men was Anatoly Kuchumov, perhaps better known to people with an interest in pre-revolutionary history as the curator of the Alexander Palace in its museum days and protector of various art objects and items of furniture from that palace after the Navy took it over. His involvement with the Alexander Palace has allowed an image of Kuchumov as a secret monarchist, devoted to the memory of

Nicholas and Alexandra, to build up in the west to a modest degree, but the character who emerges from this book is rather different. He was after all a man who survived the ravages of Stalin's purges when several of his colleagues went under; the recipient of Soviet awards; a dry Russian patriot who wrote reports in the language of officialdom, bemoaning the degenerate, "bourgeois" behaviour he spotted in the British sector in Berlin during his travels on the trail of the Amber Room. If this is the real Kuchumov – and I have no evidence to believe it isn't – his devotion to the Alexander Palace was more in the line of a diligent art historian's professionalism than anything more sentimental. He inspired love and hatred in equal degree amongst his colleagues: the late architect Alexander Kedrinsky lambasted him as an uneducated fake who took credit for others' work, but one lady who talked to the authors had drawn cartoons for him, and recalled touching little memories of the privations of post-war Russia: Kuchumov's embarrassment at being given, by the state, a suit identical to his colleague's, dignity still present in a situation when people counted themselves lucky to have survived at all.

This book unfolds like a novel or detective story as the authors recount how they pieced together their theory about what had happened to the Room and to those who sought it. Retired curators invite them into cluttered flats and hand over albums of photos; diaries held for decades under lock and key are placed on tables in scruffy smoke-filled reading rooms; there are weeks and months of waiting in iron-doored Petersburg flats while nothing much happens at all. At times this style reminds me of Edvard Radzinsky – but not quite - for in place of Radzinsky's phone calls from anonymous well-wishers, Scott-Clark and Levy gather information through visits to named – and sometimes familiar - individuals, and consult documents whose archival references can be traced through their footnotes. This book leaves me with no sense of unease, in spite of its evocative fiction-esque style: there is no point at which I feel that the authors' imagination might have run away with them.

Ultimately they draw no firm conclusions; they lay out the evidence they have uncovered and let it convince the reader if it can. In a sense, the thrill of the chase is more interesting than anything; the authors' uncovering of the interests vested in different conclusions – and the bickering, in-fighting and human stories involved - is the most captivating thing about this briskly readable book which casts a new light on apparently familiar stories and people.

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