

The
**LAST
GRAND
DUCHESS**



BRYN TURNBULL



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The Last Grand Duchess

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CHARACTERS



Romanov Family

Grand Duchess OLGA NIKOLAEVNA,
eldest daughter of Nicholas and Alexandra

Grand Duchess TATIANA NIKOLAEVNA,
second daughter of Nicholas and Alexandra

Grand Duchess MARIA NIKOLAEVNA,
third daughter of Nicholas and Alexandra

Grand Duchess ANASTASIA NIKOLAEVNA,
fourth daughter of Nicholas and Alexandra

Tsarevich ALEXEI NIKOLAEVICH,
fifth and youngest child of Nicholas and Alexandra,
and heir to Tsar Nicholas II's throne

Tsar NICHOLAS ALEXANDROVICH ROMANOV (NICHOLAS II),
last emperor of Russia

Tsarina ALEXANDRA FEODOROVNA,
last empress of Russia

Dowager Tsarina MARIA FEODOROVNA,
dowager empress of Russia and mother of Nicholas II

Grand Duchess OLGA ALEXANDROVNA,
sister of Nicholas II

Grand Duchess XENIA ALEXANDROVNA,
sister of Nicholas II

Grand Duke MIKHAIL ALEXANDROVICH,
youngest brother of Nicholas II and Nicholas II's chosen
successor following the abdication

Grand Duke ALEXANDER "SANDRO" MIKHAILOVICH,
husband of Grand Duchess Xenia

Grand Duke PETER ALEXANDROVICH,
husband of Grand Duchess Olga

Imperial Household

ANNA ALEXANDROVNA VYRUBOVA,
companion and confidante of Alexandra Feodorovna

GRIGORI YEFIMOVICH RASPUTIN,
Russian mystic and trusted advisor to Alexandra Feodorovna

PIERRE GILLIARD,
Swiss academic and French language tutor
to the Romanov children

SYDNEY GIBBES,
British academic and English language tutor
to the Romanov children

Doctor EUGENE BOTKIN,
court physician to Nicholas II and the imperial family

Officer NIKOLAY PAVLOVICH SABLIN,
aide-de-camp to Nicholas II

Count PAUL BECKENDORFF,
Minister of the Palace

Count WOLDEMAR FREEDERICKSZ,
Minister of the Imperial Household

JIM HERCULES,
arap to the court of Nicholas II

Imperial Russia

Colonel NIKOLAY KULIKOVSKY,
second husband of Grand Duchess Olga Alexandrovna

Grand Duke DMITRI PAVLOVICH,
first cousin of Nicholas II and friend to Olga Nikolaevna

Prince FELIX YUSUPOV,
Russian aristocrat and wealthiest man in imperial Russia

Princess IRINA ALEXANDROVNA,
niece of Nicholas II and wife of Felix Yusupov

Officer PAVEL VORONOV,
naval officer and Olga Nikolaevna's romantic interest

Officer DMITRI ARTEMEVICH SHAKH-BAGOV ("MITYA"),
ensign in the Thirteenth Yerevan Grenadier Guards and
Olga Nikolaevna's romantic interest

Officer DMITRI YAKOVLEVICH MALAMA,
officer in the Imperial Russian Cavalry and
Tatiana Nikolaevna's romantic interest

Officer VLADIMIR KIKNADZE,
Russian officer and Tatiana Nikolaevna's romantic interest

RITA KHITROVO,
Sister of Mercy and friend to Olga and Tatiana Nikolaevna

ANYA VORONOVA (née KLEINMICHEL),
Sister of Mercy and wife of Pavel Voronov

Princess VERA IGNATIEVNA GEDROITS,
senior resident physician at the Tsarskoe Selo Court Hospital
and the Annexe Hospital

Countess MARIA DMITREVNA NIROD,
Sister of Mercy and life partner of Vera Gedroits

Prince CAROL OF ROMANIA,
prospective love interest of Olga Nikolaevna

Crown Prince FERDINAND OF ROMANIA,
Carol's father and Crown Prince of Romania

Crown Princess MARIE OF ROMANIA,
Carol's mother and Crown Princess of Romania

Revolutionary Russia

ALEXANDER KERENSKY,
Minister of Justice (Provisional Government)

Colonel EUGENE KOBYLINSKY,
commander of the Special Detachment (Provisional Government)
at Tsarskoe Selo and Tobolsk

VASILI PANKRATOV,
commissioner (Provisional Government) of
Freedom House in Tobolsk

Ensign PAVEL MATVEEV,
temporary commissar (Bolshevik) at Freedom House

VASILI YAKOVLEV,
commissar (Bolshevik) tasked with
transporting Nicholas II from Tobolsk

YAKOV YUROVSKY,
commandant (Bolshevik) at the House of Special Purpose in
Ekaterinburg and lead executioner of the Romanov family

VLADIMIR LENIN,
leader of the Bolshevik Party

AUTHOR'S NOTE



The imperial family of Russia died in the early hours of the morning on July 17, 1918. Summoned from their beds by Yakov Yurovsky, the family was told that they were being moved to a more secure location following reports of Czechoslovakian forces advancing on Ekaterinburg. They were led down to the cellar of Ipatiev House (known as the House of Special Purpose), where two armchairs sat empty, brought in for the comfort of the tsarina and the tsarevich.

Flanked by a firing squad of twelve men, Yurovsky read out the order, given to him by the Ural Regional Soviet Executive Committee, that condemned Nicholas II to death. Nicholas, who had been helping Alexei into his chair, turned.

“What? What?”

Yurovsky repeated the order, and the firing squad lifted their revolvers.

Nicholas died first—shot, according to most reports, by Yurovsky himself. The rest of the firing squad aimed for the family; however, uneasy at the prospect of killing children, many closed their eyes when pulling their triggers. According to some reports, when the smoke cleared, Olga and her siblings were still alive. The jewels they’d sewn into their corsets and coats had saved their lives, leaving the executioners to finish their grisly job with bullets and bayonets. In a tragic twist of irony, Alexei was the last member of the imperial family to die—shot, like his father, by Yakov Yurovsky.

Alongside the imperial family, the slaughter in the cellar claimed six more lives: Dr. Eugene Botkin, the family’s physician; Anna Demidova, Alexandra’s maid; Ivan Kharitonov, the imperial cook; Alexei Trupp, Nicholas II’s head footman; and Ortipo and Jimmi, Tatiana’s

and Anastasia's faithful dogs, who died defending them from the onslaught of bullets.

Questions still abound as to who passed the final sentence on the Romanovs. Was it a direct order from Lenin, or had the Ural Regional Soviet Executive Committee taken the initiative to execute the family without Moscow's knowledge? Despite a lack of concrete evidence linking Lenin to the murders, current scholarship, corroborated by Leon Trotsky's diaries, suggests that Lenin at the very least sanctioned the executions, if he didn't order them outright. Whatever the case, although the revolutionary government admitted to executing Nicholas, they never confirmed what they'd done to the rest of the imperial family. Admitting to the murder of the children would spark international outrage, so they allowed rumors to flourish. Over the next several decades, many impersonators came forward, alleging that they were one of the grand duchesses. Most frequently, pretenders claimed to be Anastasia, who was the youngest at the time of the murder—impersonators could simply say that her looks had changed with age. But the sad fact of the matter is that the entire imperial family died that day, their bodies disposed of in two mine shafts in a nearby forest. The first mine shaft, exhumed in 1991, contained Nicholas, Alexandra, Olga, Tatiana, Anastasia, and the four retainers; the second, discovered in 2007, contained Alexei and Maria.

The Romanov family has captivated generations of armchair historians, the myths and mysteries surrounding them too many to list here. As history's most documented family, the last Romanovs have become symbols of a lost era, glossed to a high shine by the sensational events surrounding their lives and tragic deaths.

In writing this book, I aimed to look beyond the shine and see the Romanovs not as symbols, but as a family, flawed and fallible. In the most fundamental way, theirs is a story about people ill-equipped for the roles that fate saw fit to give them. Naive and insular, with a stubborn refusal to move with the times, Nicholas and Alexandra would have been better suited to the quiet family life they craved rather than to life at the apex of the Russian court.

In this work I chose to focus on Nicholas II as a father, but I would be

remiss if I did not mention some of the worst atrocities committed during his reign. The Romanov dynasty, and Nicholas II, were active participants in the oppression of the peasant class, not only through the lingering aftereffects of serfdom (abolished in 1860), but also through their appalling treatment of Russian Jews. Encouraged by members of his government, Nicholas II viewed revolutionary sentiment as stemming from his Jewish citizens—an entirely baseless claim, but one which led to the repression of Jewish people through violent pogroms and discriminatory legislation. Little did Nicholas realize that the revolutionary sentiment among all his people was widespread and growing.

The Russian revolution did not occur overnight. Indeed, some historians see the 1917 overthrow of Nicholas II and his imperial government as a continuation of the earlier 1905 revolution—Bloody Sunday—that resulted in the formation of the State Duma. The reasons for the revolution were wide-ranging and too numerous to mention here, but it's true that Grigori Rasputin's outsize influence at the imperial court severely eroded confidence in the tsar's and tsarina's abilities to rule, and that Nicholas II's decision to take personal leadership of Russia's armed forces, both in victory and (more frequently) defeat, was a critical body blow to his already-tarnished image.

As Father Grigori predicted, the war was a disaster in terms of casualties, logistics, and morale. With over twelve million poorly equipped troops to feed on the front, food shortages quickly swept through Russian cities, leaving a population desperate for change. Socialist groups, including the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks, saw opportunity in the unrest and toppled three hundred years of Romanov rule, replacing the autocrat with a short-lived Provisional Government that soon ushered in the advent of the Soviet Union.

The job of the historical fiction author is to tell a good story rather than provide an entirely accurate recounting of facts, and there are many moments in this book where I've had to sacrifice historical accuracy for the sake of plot. While I've done my best to address the most notable instances here, rest assured that deviations from the historical record were deliberate and done with a mind to telling a compelling story.

On the night of the abdication, Olga was in the sickroom with her siblings, suffering from the measles—it was Maria, rather than Olga, who visited the Cossacks on duty alongside her mother. I gave Maria’s role as a witness to Olga in order to contextualize the abdication from the perspective of the book’s protagonist. During the family’s imprisonments in Tobolsk and Ekaterinburg, the guards and overseers in charge of the family’s welfare changed frequently. Before the arrival of Yakov Yurovsky in July 1918, the House of Special Purpose in Ekaterinburg was overseen by Aleksander Adveev. For brevity’s sake, I chose to have Pavel Matveev accompany the imperial children to Ekaterinburg instead of introducing Adveev as a new character. Finally, though the content of Rasputin’s July 1914 warning to Nicholas II about declaring war on Germany is accurate, historically it was delivered by telegram—at the time, Grigori Rasputin was convalescing in Pokrovskoe following an assassination attempt.

Father Grigori’s first meeting with the imperial couple took place in 1905, arranged by the Montenegrin Princesses Stana and Militza (known in court circles as the Black Crows). While Rasputin didn’t seem to have made much of an impression on Nicholas and Alexandra during those first few encounters, he became indispensable to them after healing Alexei of a hemophiliac attack in 1907. Scholars still debate exactly how Rasputin managed to alleviate Alexei’s pain—several theories have been put forward, including hypnotism, the power of suggestion, prayer, and breathing exercises. Whatever the case, Rasputin’s calming influence, not only over Alexei but over the frantic empress, undoubtedly soothed the young boy and helped to facilitate conditions for recovery. According to Douglas Smith, author of *Rasputin: Faith, Power, and the Twilight of the Romanovs*, “Rasputin’s assurances calmed the anxious, fretful mother and filled her with unshakeable confidence and she, in turn, transferred this confidence to her son... He relaxed, his blood pressure most likely dropped, his pain eased, and his body mended.”

Rasputin’s influence at court soon extended beyond Alexei. As a religious, rough-spun peasant, Rasputin represented the Russia that Nicholas and Alexandra thought they ruled: humble, God-fearing, and devoted to the patriarchal image of the tsar as the “Little Father” of its people. For his part, Rasputin told Nicholas and Alexandra what they wanted to hear: he preached faith in God and in the

tsar as God's representative on Earth; and he reminded Nicholas to care for the poorest among his people.

But behind Grigori Rasputin's gentle façade lay another man entirely. Though he presented himself to the tsar and tsarina as God's intermediary, Rasputin's exploits outside the palace walls soon became the stuff of legend. Leveraging his proximity to the reclusive imperial family, Rasputin became an object of fascination to St. Petersburg's society set. Preaching sin as a pathway to redemption, Rasputin drank to excess, made obscene advances on women of the court, and boasted of his connection to the empress. While rumors that Rasputin shared Alexandra's bed—or indeed, those of her daughters—are undoubtedly false, it's very likely that he took advantage of women who sought him out for religious guidance. Rasputin himself admitted to having a “weakness” for women, twisting the teachings of the Bible to suit his purposes:

Rasputin made it easier for the ladies by preaching his personal doctrine of redemption: salvation is impossible unless one has been redeemed from sin, and true redemption cannot be achieved unless sin has been committed. In himself, Rasputin offered all three: sin, redemption, and salvation. (Robert K. Massie, *Nicholas and Alexandra*)

Though Rasputin's shortcomings were repeatedly raised to Nicholas and Alexandra—so much so that Rasputin was put under surveillance by the secret police—the imperial couple refused to see anything in their “Friend” other than his virtues. “A prophet is never acknowledged in his own country,” Alexandra wrote, staunchly defending Rasputin from his detractors. Nicholas, it seems, was less convinced, but Rasputin's results spoke for themselves: when Alexei was in peril, Rasputin alone seemed able to bring him back from the brink. What else mattered if he could cure their beloved son?

Olga and her sisters led notoriously sheltered lives, due, in large part, to Alexandra and Nicholas's fears that someone would learn about Alexei's condition. Except for official functions and tea parties thrown by their aunt Olga Alexandrovna, Olga and her sisters were kept behind the walls of Alexander Palace, relying on each other—and on the family's courtiers—for friendship and amusement. As a

result of their sheltered existence, Olga and Tatiana in particular were quite immature. Whereas other twenty-year-old women in the early 1900s were getting married and having children, Olga's and Tatiana's early romances read as schoolgirl crushes. Olga's hopeful diary entries describe the objects of her infatuation as flawless, as though she'd not yet learned that flaws are inherently human.

In the years in which this novel takes place, Olga had three, not two, romances. The first, with a soldier named Alexander Konstantinovich Shvedov (known in her diaries as AKSH), began in February 1913, when she met him at one of her aunt Olga's tea parties. The attraction faded after Olga met Pavel Voronov in June 1913 aboard the *Shtandart*, the imperial family's yacht. Dashing and discreet, Pavel became the all-encompassing object of Olga's affections as their innocent romance played out beneath starlit skies in Crimea.

As the cast of characters for this book is already quite extensive, I combined Olga's experiences with AKSH and Pavel into a single character. What is undeniable is that Olga's feelings for Pavel extended beyond infatuation. In her diaries, she calls him her "happiness," her *schaste*, and describes watching for the glint of his binoculars aboard the *Shtandart* from the balcony at Livadia Palace in the hopes that he, too, was thinking of her.

Pavel's marriage to Olga Kleinmichel (called Anya in this book to distinguish her from the other two Olgas already present) was a seminal moment in Olga Nikolaevna's life. In her diary, she recounts the day with a dignified resignation, but it's clear that her heart was breaking: "I learned that [Pavel] is to marry Olga Kleinmichel. May the Lord grant happiness to him, my beloved."

And what of Dmitri Shakh-Bagov? Dmitri, referred to as *Mitya*, "darling," in her diaries, was undoubtedly an important figure in Olga's life. Historically, we know little of Mitya himself. Born in Georgia in 1893, he was an adjutant with the Imperial Life Erevan Grenadier Regiment, and was wounded three times in service to the tsar. What else we know comes from Olga's diaries, in which she breathlessly describes his virtues: his "sweetness" and his "cheerfulness"; his bravery and his thoughtfulness. During his periods of convalescence, Olga's diaries become records of nothing but her time spent with Mitya—so much so that other nurses and doctors at the Annexe, including Dr.

Vera Gedroits, took notice. According to Valentina Chebotareva, a senior nurse at the Annexe Hospital, Olga's attachment to Shakh-Bagov, while "pure," was also "naïve and hopeless."

Given her rank and position, Olga was meant to be married off to a foreign prince—something that she resisted, even as a young girl. According to Helen Rappaort, author of *Four Sisters: The Lost Lives of the Daughters of Nicholas and Alexandra*, Olga vowed that she would never become a princess in a foreign court: "I'm Russian, and mean to remain Russian," she told her parents. To their credit, Nicholas and Alexandra told her that she would be allowed to marry for love, though it was certain that love, in their minds, did not extend to the affections of a lowly adjutant.

One particular historical note pertaining to Mitya stood out to me, and it ultimately became a seminal moment in *The Last Grand Duchess*. According to Valentina Chebotareva, Olga's love for Mitya was reciprocated, so much so that Mitya once declared, "Tell me, Olga Nikolaevna, that Grigori Rasputin is disgusting...tomorrow he will be gone, I will kill him." This, combined with Olga's statement in her diary about Rasputin after his assassination by Felix Yusupov and Dmitri Pavlovich—namely, that she understood why they did it—indicated to me that despite her sheltered upbringing, Olga was more politically aware than many gave her credit for.

The historical record is unclear about whether Shakh-Bagov survived the First World War and the Russian Civil War that followed. We do know that a Shakh-Bagov led a White Army detachment in Echmiadzin (now Vagharshapat) in 1920, narrowly defeating Red Army forces in the South Caucasus—whether it was Olga's Mitya has never been confirmed. Given Olga's clear affections for Mitya, I chose to give him the happier ending that she would have wanted.

To Nicholas and Alexandra, Prince Carol of Romania would have been a more acceptable suitor for Olga's hand, but despite multiple efforts to bring them together, Olga and Carol despised each other on sight. Conscious of Alexei's illness, Carol's parents were already wary of marrying him off to a Romanov; Carol himself, meanwhile, set his sights on a different sister. At the final meeting of the families at a state dinner in January 1917 (which takes place a year earlier in the novel in order to set up Dmitri's role in Rasputin's assassination),

Carol asked Nicholas for Maria's hand. Nicholas, however, laughed away the suggestion: at eighteen, "fat Marie"—Nicholas's favorite daughter—was too young to marry. The proposal does raise one of those unique what-if moments in history: What if Maria had married Carol and survived the revolution? Would she have become a rallying point for the monarchist White Army? Would she have been able to leverage her position in Romania to rescue the imperial family?

Grand Duke Dmitri Pavlovich had been another proposed suitor for Olga in her younger years. On paper, Dmitri appeared to be all that she could have wanted: Russian, wealthy, and titled; charming and strikingly handsome. Nicholas II seemed to have initially encouraged the match, adopting Dmitri as a sort of son from the outset. However, Dmitri's racy lifestyle may have been too fast for Olga, who disapproved of his bawdy jokes and long nights out with his closest friend, Felix Yusupov.

Felix was a handsome and magnetic individual, prone to excess and a degree of hedonism: in his memoir, he writes that he was a "most undisciplined" young man who "flung [himself] passionately into a life of pleasure." In his adolescent years, Felix borrowed his brother's mistress's dresses to perform as a woman in a cabaret, gaining such attention that his father, outraged, threatened to send him to a Siberian convict settlement. As a bachelor, he and Dmitri were playboys of St. Petersburg's high society set, known for drinking with ballerinas and gambling their vast fortunes.

Scholars are divided on whether Dmitri and Felix were lovers or whether, perhaps, Dmitri harbored unrequited feelings for Felix. Whatever the case, the two had such an intense bond that even Nicholas and Alexandra took notice and tried, unsuccessfully, to convince Dmitri to distance himself from his friend.

To all who knew them, Dmitri was entirely in Felix's thrall, willing to follow wherever he led. However, when it came to Grigori Rasputin's murder, Felix tells us in his memoirs that Dmitri had been the instigator. Felix and Dmitri both concluded that Rasputin represented an unavoidable threat to the already-tarnished monarchy. In the trenches and the streets, stories about Rasputin were viewed as solid fact rather than rumor: that Nicholas was a puppet of the Mad Monk, allowing Rasputin to take the empress and the grand duch-

esses to his bed; that Rasputin and Alexandra were German agents, deliberately destabilizing Russia through bad policies that affected troops and citizens alike.

Felix's and Dmitri's fears for the monarchy were well-founded and widely shared. Given Alexandra's unshakeable faith in Rasputin, dissuading her and Nicholas was a job for family alone. In November 1916, Grand Duke Nikolai Mikhailovich, Nicholas's second cousin, wrote to Nicholas, warning him that Alexandra was being "led astray by an evil circle," and concluding that if Nicholas was "not able to remove this influence from her, at least protect [himself]." In December of that same year, Ella, Alexandra's sister, traveled to Alexander Palace in a last-ditch effort to deliver a warning that Rasputin was "compromising the imperial family and leading the dynasty to ruin." For the sake of not overloading an already-heavy cast of characters, I gave both of these warnings to Olga Alexandrovna, Nicholas's sister, but the result of the family's efforts was the same: silence from the imperial couple.

Knowing Rasputin's weakness for beautiful women, Felix lured Father Grigori to his palace on the night of December 16, 1916, with the promise of an introduction to Irina, Felix's wife. Alongside their third conspirator—a monarchist politician named Viktor Purishkevich—Dmitri and Felix plied Rasputin with cyanide-laced cakes and poisoned wine before shooting him and dumping his body in the Neva River. Nicholas and Alexandra were horrified by Felix's and Dmitri's involvement, seeing their actions as a betrayal rather than a sign of allegiance. Their horror was twofold. First, there were the undeniably bad optics of two of the country's wealthiest men—Nicholas's own relatives, Dmitri by blood and Felix by marriage—murdering a peasant in cold blood. Second, Rasputin had recently issued a chilling warning. Sensing, no doubt, that his good fortune was turning, Rasputin had written a letter to Nicholas, warning him about his impending death. Should he be killed by Russian peasants, Rasputin wrote, the tsar would have nothing to fear. Should he be killed by nobles, however—or worse, by Nicholas's own relations—then the world would know a different future.

"If you hear the sound of the bell which will tell you that Grigori has been killed, you must know this: if it was your relations who have wrought my death then no one of your family, that is to say, none of your children or relations will remain alive for

more than two years. They will be killed by the Russian people.”
(Quoted in Robert K. Massie’s *Nicholas and Alexandra*)

In 2000, the Russian Orthodox Church canonized the last Romanovs as passion bearers: individuals who faced their deaths with Christian resignation. Their remains are now interred at the Saints Peter and Paul Cathedral in St. Petersburg.

GLOSSARY



AIGUILLETTE—Decorative braided loops on a military or naval uniform, hanging from the shoulder

ARSHIN—A Russian unit of length corresponding to approximately two feet

CHOKHA—A traditional woolen tunic worn by Georgian men

DUMA—The Russian state government, first established by Nicholas II in 1905

GYMNASTIORKA—A light jacket worn by noncommissioned members of the Imperial Russian Army

KHLYST—Member of a Russian Orthodox sect known for self-flagellation

KOPECK—A Russian monetary unit equivalent to one hundredth of a ruble

KOZACHOK—A traditional Ukrainian couples folk dance

KREMLIN—Fortified complex in the center of a Russian city

MUZJIK—Peasant

OKHRANA—The imperial secret police

PAPIROSY—An unfiltered cigarette

SANITAR/SANITARY—A medical orderly

SOVNARKOM—The Council of People's Commissars, created by Vladimir Lenin following the 1917 revolution

STARETS—A spiritual elder of an Eastern Orthodox monastery

STAVKA—High Command of the imperial Russian armed forces

TARANTASS—A low-slung horse-drawn carriage

TRISAGION—A hymn in Eastern Orthodoxy

VERONAL—Barbital

VERST—A Russian unit of length corresponding to 0.66 of a mile

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