

Introduction: The Holy Devil?

On a bright spring day in 1912 Sergei Prokudin-Gorsky carried his large tripod camera down to the banks of the Tura River in the remote Siberian village of Pokrovskoe. One of the great photographic innovators of the age, Prokudin-Gorsky had developed a technique for taking vivid color photographs, images that so impressed Emperor Nicholas II of Russia, he commissioned the photographer to record his empire in all its diverse splendor.

His camera captured a typical rural scene that day. The white village church, bleached in the sun, rises above the simple houses and barns, crude log structures, brown and gray, gathered around it. On one of the houses a window box cradles a plant with red flowers, geraniums perhaps, highlighted against the dark panes. A pair of cows graze casually on the green shoots released from the earth after another long Siberian winter. At the water's edge, two women in colored dresses have been caught in their daily chores. A solitary boat rests in the mud, ready for the next fishing trip out into the Tura. The image recalls so many similar anonymous villages that Prokudin-Gorsky photographed in the final years of tsarist Russia.

Yet this village was different from all the others, and Prokudin-Gorsky knew that the emperor and empress would expect him to include Pokrovskoe in his great survey. Pokrovskoe was the home of the most notorious Russian of the day, a man who in the spring of 1912 became the focus of a scandal that shook Nicholas's reign like nothing before. Rumors had been circulating about him for years, but it was then that the tsar's ministers and the politicians of the State Duma, Russia's legislative assembly, first dared to call him out by name and demand that the palace tell the country who precisely this man was and clarify his relationship to the throne. It was said that this man belonged to a bizarre religious sect that embraced the most wicked forms of sexual perversion, that he was a phony holy man who had duped the emperor and empress into embracing him as their spiritual leader, that

he had taken over the Russian Orthodox Church and was bending it to his own immoral designs, that he was a filthy peasant who managed not only to worm his way into the palace, but through deceit and cunning was quickly becoming the true power behind the throne. This man, many were beginning to believe, presented a real danger to the church, to the monarchy, and even to Russia itself. This man was Grigory Yefimovich Rasputin.

All of this must have been on the mind of Prokudin-Gorsky that day. This was not just any village he was photographing, it was the home of Rasputin. Prokudin-Gorsky captured Pokrovskoe for the tsar, but, curiously, he was careful not to include in his image the house of its most infamous son, which he left outside the frame. Perhaps this was the great photographer's way of registering his own comment on the man Russia could not stop talking about.

The life of Rasputin is one of the most remarkable in modern history. It reads like a dark fairy tale. An obscure, uneducated peasant from the wilds of Siberia receives a calling from God and sets out in search of the true faith, a journey that leads him across the vast expanses of Russia for many years before finally bringing him to the palace of the tsar. The royal family takes him in and is bewitched by his piety, his unerring insights into the human soul, and his simple peasant ways. Miraculously, he saves the life of the heir to the throne, but the presence of this outsider, and the influence he wields with the tsar and tsaritsa, angers the great men of the realm and they lure him into a trap and kill him. Many believed that the holy peasant had foreseen his death and prophesied that should anything happen to him, the tsar would lose his throne. And so he does, and the kingdom he once ruled is plunged into unspeakable bloodletting and misery for years.

Even before his gruesome murder in a Petrograd cellar in the final days of 1916, Rasputin had become in the eyes of much of the world the personification of evil. His wickedness was said to recognize no bounds, just like his sexual drive that could never be sated no matter how many women he took to his bed. A brutish, drunken satyr with the manners of a barnyard animal, Rasputin had the inborn cunning of the Russian peasant and knew how to play the simple man of God when in front of the tsar and tsaritsa. He tricked them into believing he could save their son, the tsarevich Alexei, and with him the dynasty itself. They placed themselves, and the empire, in his hands, and he, through his greed and

corruption, betrayed their trust, destroying the monarchy and bringing ruin to Russia.

Rasputin is possibly the most recognized name in Russian history. He has been the subject of dozens of biographies and novels, movies and documentaries, theatrical works, operas, and musicals. His exploits have been extolled in song, from The Three Keys' jazzy 1933 "Rasputin (The Highfalutin' Lovin' Man)" to Boney M's 1978 Euro-disco hit: "Ra Ra Rasputin, lover of the Russian queen . . . Ra Ra Rasputin, Russia's greatest love machine." There are countless Rasputin bars, restaurants, and nightclubs, there is Rasputin computer software (an acronym for **Real-Time Acquisition System Programs for Unit Timing in Neuroscience**), a comic book series, an action figure. He is the star of at least two video games (*Hot Rasputin* and *Shadow Hearts 2*) and features in Japanese manga and anime. There is an "Old Rasputin Russian Imperial Stout" and, not surprisingly, a Rasputin vodka. The life of Rasputin was even the basis for a 1991 ice-dancing performance by the Russian skaters Natalya Bestemyanova and Andrei Bukin. Popular culture is littered with Rasputin.

A century after his death, Rasputin remains fixed in the public imagination as "the mad monk" or "the holy devil," the oxymoronic yet evocative formulation created by the Russian priest Iliodor, one of his closest friends and, later, greatest enemies. With all that has been said about Rasputin over the past hundred years, it would seem there is nothing more to add. Or is there?

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 accompanied an intense and at times tortured reexamination of Russia's past. The heroes of the old regime became villains, and the villains, heroes in one of the wild pendulum swings for which Russia is known. Nothing demonstrates the change better than the status of Tsar Nicholas II and his wife, Alexandra: despised as class enemies under the Soviets, they, along with their five children, were canonized as saints by the Russian Orthodox Church in 2000, their remains having already been interred with great ceremony alongside Russia's earlier tsarist rulers in St. Petersburg's Peter and Paul Cathedral.*

Rasputin has not been forgotten in this wholesale transvaluation of

* Except, that is, the remains of the tsarevich Alexei and his sister Grand Duchess Maria, still kept in a Russian archive at the insistence of the Russian Orthodox Church, which remains unconvinced of their authenticity.

Russian history. A new generation of historians has been at work reclaiming what they insist is the true Rasputin.¹ The stories told about him for the past century, they write, are nothing but a sea of lies, half-truths, and distortions constructed by his enemies. Rasputin, they contend, has been the object of the greatest calumny in history. He was a devoted husband and father, an honest man of God, a devout Orthodox Christian, a humble Russian peasant inspired by divine visions who placed his special gifts in the service of the royal family and his beloved Russia. The tales of his debauchery, his drinking, his corruption, and his interference in the affairs of state are nothing more than hearsay.

The campaign against Rasputin was part of a larger war against the monarchy waged by hostile forces intent on destroying not only the Romanov dynasty, but Holy Russia herself. The false image of Rasputin the devil was created to undermine the legitimacy and sacred aura of the throne and so foment a revolution that would bring to power a fanatical band of atheistic communists bent on wiping out Russian Orthodoxy and the country's sacred traditions. Rasputin, according to this interpretation, was the personification of true popular faith, a simple devout peasant who paid for his convictions with his life. The influential Orthodox priest Dmitry Dudko, harassed and imprisoned under the Soviets, said, "In the person of Rasputin I see the entire Russian people—beaten and executed, yet still preserving their faith, even when it means death. And with this faith they shall be victorious." The popular singer Zhanna Bichevskaya has gone further, calling Rasputin a great Russian martyr. In recent years icons bearing Rasputin's likeness, often depicted alongside members of the royal family, have appeared, and groups within the Russian Orthodox Church have demanded his canonization. The matter became serious enough to warrant convening a special synodical commission that after several years of investigation and debate eventually ruled in 2004 against conferring sainthood upon Rasputin. According to the opinion of Metropolitan Juvenaly on behalf of the commission, there was still too much doubt about Rasputin's possible connections to mystical sects, as well as his reputation for drunkenness and immoral conduct. A branch of the church, however, the Russian True Orthodox Church, self-proclaimed successor of the so-called Catacomb Church that broke off from the official Russian Orthodox Church in the 1920s, did recognize Rasputin as a saint in

1991. Russians, it seems, remain divided on the question of Rasputin's holiness.²

Along with an ugly anti-Semitism and paranoid xenophobia that pervades this new nationalist depiction of Rasputin is the larger problem of replacing one myth with another: Rasputin the devil becomes Rasputin the saint. The pendulum swings once more. Neither image is persuasive, and one is left with the question: Who, then, really was Rasputin?

I came to Rasputin while writing an earlier book on the fate of the nobility following the Russian revolutions of 1917. In researching the final years of the old regime I was repeatedly struck by Rasputin's omnipresence. No matter what sources I happened to be reading, whether personal correspondence, diaries, newspapers, memoirs, or political tracts, there was Rasputin. He was inescapable. As the Symbolist poet Alexander Blok remarked of the age, without exaggeration: "Rasputin is everything, Rasputin is everywhere."³ Nothing in my decades of study and research of Russian history had prepared me for this. To a large degree this was due to the biases of the academic world in which I had been trained: to scholars of Russia, Rasputin did not exist as a worthy subject of study. He was simply too popular, too well known outside the university to be taken seriously. He had the whiff of the carnival about him, a figure better left to writers of fiction or pop history. It was a prejudice I too had come to share without realizing it. Nevertheless, I found I could not shake my growing curiosity about the man, and the more I read the more I realized just how important he had been to the history of the last Romanovs and the collapse of Imperial Russia. Once he had crawled inside my head, Rasputin refused to leave me alone.

After the fall of the Romanovs, on 11 March 1917 the Provisional Government established the Extraordinary Commission of Inquiry for the Investigation of Malfeasance in Office of Former Ministers, Chief Administrators, and other Persons in High Office of both the Civil, as well as Military and Naval Services.* Part of the Commission's remit was uncovering Rasputin's presumed nefarious influence on state affairs. Dozens of ministers, officials, courtiers, and friends of Rasputin, many of whom were being held prisoner by the new government, were

* Referred to hereafter as the Commission.

brought before the Commission for questioning. In an atmosphere of contemptuous hatred for the old regime, many witnesses tried to save themselves by depicting Rasputin in the worst possible light, arguing they had always been opposed to his influence and that he was chiefly responsible for the rot at the core of the tsar's reign that brought down the monarchy. Desperate to shift any blame from themselves onto Rasputin, they made him the scapegoat for Russia's misery. This strategy became the dominant trope for much of the literature on Rasputin, perhaps best exemplified by Prince Felix Yusupov's *Lost Splendor*, the memoir of Rasputin's murderer, in which his victim becomes Satan himself.

A century after his death Rasputin remains shrouded in myth, practically invisible underneath all the gossip, slander, and innuendo heaped upon him. Reading his biographies I could not shake the sense I was not seeing the man as he was, but others' projections, two-dimensional caricatures devoid of any depth, complexity, or beating heart. Part of the problem lay in the fact that for most of the twentieth century Rasputin's archives in the Soviet Union were closed to researchers, and this led to a situation in which the same limited number of published sources, with the same anecdotes and stories, were repeated again and again. This situation has changed only in recent years: Russia's archives have finally begun to give up their secrets.

I knew from the beginning that the only chance I had to get closer to the true Rasputin was to go back to the archives, to seek out the documents created during his lifetime before the myth of Rasputin had fully taken shape. It proved an unusually arduous undertaking. The trail led me to seven countries, from Siberia and Russia, across Europe, to Britain, and finally the United States. The first obligation of every biographer is to establish the objective, external facts of a life, something that has been lacking in our knowledge of Rasputin. And so I sought every bit of information that could place Rasputin squarely in his world: where he was on any given day, what he was doing, whom he met, what they discussed. I wanted to track Rasputin through time, to drag him out of the ether of myth and down into the banalities of daily life. This, it seemed to me, was the only way to extricate Rasputin the man from Rasputin the legend.

A curious thing happened, however, as I was following the footsteps of this elusive, real Rasputin. The deeper I went into my research, the more convinced I became that one of the most important *facts* about

Rasputin, the thing that made him such an extraordinary and powerful figure, was less *what* he was doing and more what everyone *thought* he was doing. No one could be certain about Rasputin's origins, about his sexual habits, about his possible connection to underground religious sects, and, most importantly, about the extent of his power at court and the nature of his relationship with the emperor and empress. The most important truth about Rasputin was the one Russians carried around in their heads.

Lev Tikhomirov, a radical revolutionary turned conservative monarchist in the final years of the nineteenth century, noted this crucial fact in his diary in early 1916:

People say that the Emperor has been warned to his face that Rasputin is destroying the Dynasty. He replies: "Oh, that's silly nonsense; his importance is greatly exaggerated." An utterly incomprehensible point of view. For this is in fact where the destruction comes from, the wild exaggerations. What really matters is not what sort of influence Grishka has on the Emperor, but what sort of influence the people think he has. This is precisely what is undermining the authority of the Tsar and the Dynasty.⁴

To separate Rasputin from his mythology, I came to realize, was to completely misunderstand him. There is no Rasputin without the stories about Rasputin. And so I have been diligent in searching out all these stories, be it those whispered among the courtiers in the Romanovs' palaces, the salacious chatter wafting through the aristocratic salons of St. Petersburg, the titillating reports from the boulevard press, or the pornographic jokes exchanged among Russian merchants and soldiers. By following the talk about Rasputin I have been able to reconstruct how the myth of Rasputin was created, by whom, and why.

Rasputin's story is a tragedy, and not just that of one man but of an entire nation, for in his life—with its complicated struggles about faith and morality, about pleasure and sin, about tradition and change, about duty and power, and their limits—and in his bloody, violent end, we can discern the story of Russia itself in the early twentieth century. Rasputin was neither a devil nor a saint, but this made him no less remarkable and his life no less important to the twilight of tsarist Russia.