Part One



PERSONAGES

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THE LAST TSAR

ON OCTOBER 20, 1894, AT HALF-PAST TWO in the afternoon, Alexander III of Russia died of nephritis at his Livadia Palace in the Crimea. The once powerful emperor lay in agony, his massive frame wasted. His last hours were passed with his family until, with a dying breath, he uttered a short prayer and kissed his wife. Alexander was only forty-nine. Although he had been unwell for months, his premature death came as a shock, both to his family and to his empire.

"Sandro, what am I going to do?" the new emperor, Nicholas II, tearfully asked his cousin and brother-in-law, Grand Duke Alexander Mikhailovich. "What is going to happen to me, to you . . . to all of Russia? I am not prepared to be a Tsar. I never wanted to become one. I know nothing of the business of ruling. I have no idea of even how to talk to the ministers."[1]

The twenty-six-year-old man who stood weeping on his cousin's shoulder in the dim light of an October sunset was the eighteenth sovereign of the Romanov Dynasty to accede to the Russian throne. By blood and marriage, he was related to the royal houses of Great Britain, Spain,



Nicholas II, painted by Liphart, 1900

Sweden, Germany, Denmark, Romania, and Greece. The wealthiest man in the world, he possessed an empire that stretched across one-sixth of the land surface of the globe and encompassed 140 million subjects. As an autocrat, Nicholas II was responsible to no one. Imbued with a deep belief that his was a role ordained by God, he relied only on his own conscience for guidance as his empire entered the turbulent waters of the twentieth century.

Yet it is hard to imagine a man more incapable of this onerous burden than Nicholas II. Shy, thoughtful, and exceptionally polite, Nicholas came to the throne obsessed with the idea that he was ill prepared to rule and was pursued by fate. Even the date of his birth—May 6, 1868, the Feast of St. Job in the Orthodox liturgical calendar—played into this self-fulfilling prophecy. Like Job, Nicholas felt himself tested and tried at every turn, a victim of divinely mandated misfortune. With a tragic sense of fatalism, Nicholas would ascribe every catastrophe that befell his empire to "God's will."



The future Nicholas II with his two brothers, George and Michael, and eldest sister, Xenia, 1886

Nicholas was the eldest of six children born to Alexander and his wife, Marie Feodorovna. A second son, Alexander, lived less than a year; a brother, George Alexandrovich, followed in 1871; a sister, Xenia Alexandrovna, in 1875; another brother, Michael Alexandrovich, in 1878; and a second sister, Olga Alexandrovna, in 1882. Alexander III had dominated his family in much the same way he did his empire: his word was law, his decisions uncontestable. Capable of great warmth and indulgence, he was, at the same time, "ruthless even with his children," recalled an official at court, "and loathed everything that savored of weakness."[2] He despised his eldest son's gentle character, once loudly complaining, "You are a little girlie!"[3] Nicholas feared the unpredictable behavior that followed his father's drunken carousals; when Alexander became violent, his wife gathered their children and escaped to an apartment in St. Petersburg's Tauride Palace.[4]

Marie Feodorovna provided a warm refuge, but her protection took the form of an oppressive cocoon that stifled maturity, and Nicholas remained innocent

and childish. The cloistered world of the imperial palaces, with their fawning servants and gold-braided courtiers, did little to encourage independent thought. Instead, Nicholas was subject only to emotion, relying on instinct and on passion in making important decisions. From his sixth birthday on, a string of teachers, military instructors, generals, and government officials tutored Nicholas in history, Russian literature, the classics, geography, arithmetic, science, languages, and religion, yet it was an education conceived along idiosyncratic lines. On his father's orders, instructors were not allowed to question him, nor were his studies graded, leaving Nicholas's mistakes and opinions unchallenged.[5] The role of his mother was equally damaging. Fearing the loss of her dominance, Marie Feodorovna personally selected men of limited capabilities, arranging lessons so that Nicholas never saw the same tutors for more than two successive days to avoid any lasting influences.[6]



The future Emperor Alexander III and his fiancée, Marie Feodorovna, 1866

Nicholas had an excellent memory. He spoke Russian, French, German, Danish, and English, the latter with a perfect accent; his Russian, as Prince Andrei Lobanov-Rostovsky noted, was even tinged with "a slightly English accent."[7] In May 1890, he jubilantly recorded in his diary: "Today I finished forever my education!"[8] Short, with blue eyes and a chestnut beard and mustache, Nicholas made his first forays into official life, though the results were far from encouraging. One Russian referred to him derisively as "just a little, fair officer. He comes up to my shoulders."[9] The wife of an American diplomat noted, "The men of the Imperial Family are such large, tall, fine-looking men that the Russians will find it difficult to connect the idea of majesty with one who is so small."[10] He lacked, recalled one courtier, "the inspiring presence of his father; nor did he convey his mother's vibrant charm."[11] At official receptions, his boredom gave offense. Yet his father, himself poorly trained, did nothing to prepare Nicholas for his eventual role. When Nicholas was twenty-three, Alexander III dismissed his son as "nothing but a boy, whose judgments are utterly childish."[12]

Like any other young aristocrat, Nicholas joined the Imperial Army, immersing himself in the carefully regulated world of the Russian military. He had a liaison with the prima ballerina Mathilde Kschessinska, but his true passion lay elsewhere. He first met Princess Alix of Hesse *und Bei Rhein* in 1884 at the wedding of her sister Elizabeth, known as Ella, to his uncle, Grand Duke Serge Alexandrovich. After a week together, the sixteen-year-old tsesarevich was utterly convinced of his love for the shy and solemn golden-haired girl, but it was to be five years before they met again. Alix spent that winter of 1889 with Ella and Serge, and Nicholas lavished her with attentions, much to the consternation of his mother, who, recalled one aristocratic lady, "made no attempt to disguise her displeasure at her son's infatuation."[13] St. Petersburg society thought her ill humored and unsmiling, but Nicholas was determined. "My dream is to one day marry Alix H.," he confided to his diary.[14]



Empress Alexandra, 1896. See plate 9.

The politically unimportant German state of Hesse, stretched along the banks of the Rhine and centered round the medieval city of Darmstadt, had long provided brides to the Romanov Dynasty. Only six when her mother, Queen Victoria's second daughter, Princess Alice, died, Alix had been raised according to the dictates of her powerful grandmother. Under her direction, Alix developed into a shy but serious young woman with a stubborn will and belief in the superiority of her own morality and intelligence. Her cousin Princess Marie Louise later complained that "from her earliest childhood, there was that strange, impregnable obstinacy that nothing could overcome."[15] She never developed the social skills necessary to her rank, giving the impression of boredom, of disinterest, and of distinct unease. The most powerful influences in her life were her mother, her grandmother, and her sisters. Her father was easily dictated to, and her brother Ernie was equally submissive. These models of feminine power, weak men, and domination characterized her youth and later marriage.

Alix was confirmed into the Lutheran Church at sixteen, and her devotion to her faith became for Nicholas an almost insurmountable obstacle. "I can never change my religion," she wrote to his sister Xenia Alexandrovna.[16] This was welcome news to Nicholas's mother, who "remained in a negative state of mind" over her son's obsession, according to one official; she even "forbade" him to meet Alix during her 1890 visit to Russia.[17] Nicholas was persistent, and circumstance conspired in his favor when, two years after her father's death, he traveled to Germany to attend the wedding of Alix's brother Grand Duke Ernst Ludwig IV to his cousin Princess Victoria Melita of Edinburgh, known as Ducky within the family. Conspiring with him were Alix's brother and her sister Elizabeth, his aunt

Grand Duchess Marie Pavlovna—known in the family as Miechen—and his and Alix's mutual cousin, Kaiser Wilhelm II. Nicholas's efforts weakened her resolve, and changing personal circumstances ultimately led her to accept his proposal.

Six months later, Alexander III's death brought Nicholas to the throne. Alix, who had come to the Crimea to receive the dying emperor's blessing for the betrothal, converted to Russian Orthodoxy, embracing her new faith with a fervor bordering on exaltation and taking the new name of Alexandra Feodorovna. A week after Alexander III's funeral, the couple wed, beginning a marriage that was one of history's greatest love stories. For twenty-four years, husband and wife remained true to each other. "Even after many years of marriage," remembered Prince Christopher of Greece, "they were like young lovers."[18]

Few Russians took to the empress, nor did members of her husband's own family, particularly his difficult mother, who regarded her with jealousy and treated her with barely disguised contempt. In contrast to her husband, Alexandra at least looked the role. "A real Empress she is," declared one diplomat, "tall, golden haired, and a pink and white face."[19] "Much of her beauty comes from exquisite coloring," recalled one woman, "and there is about her a subtle charm impossible to picture and difficult to describe." The woman was particularly struck by her expression: "a singularly wistful and sweet sadness that never went quite away even when she smiled."[20]



Grand Duchesses Olga and Tatiana Nikolaievna, 1913

Alexandra flung herself into her new role, filled with enthusiastic ideas that were often met with scorn. Increasingly, noted one aristocrat, she suffered "from the misinterpretation of everything she said and did, and even her thought, her unspoken word, was a source of eternal suspicion and persecution."[21] As she fell under Orthodoxy's spell, Alexandra grew even more serious. "There had always been something strained about her," recalled her cousin Queen Marie of Romania. "She had no warm feeling for any of us and this was of course strongly felt in her attitude, which was

never welcoming. Some of this was no doubt owing to shyness, but the way she closed her narrow lips after the first rather forced greeting gave you the feeling that this was all she was ready to concede and that she was finished with you."[22]

The Russian court, with its scandals, gossip, and flaunted love affairs, shocked Alexandra. "Most Russian girls," she complained, "seem to have nothing in their heads but thoughts of officers."[23] Inevitably, Alexandra struck those she encountered as "very distant and unapproachable," as Princess Anatole Bariatinsky recalled.[24] The St. Petersburg ladies who attended her first reception left with distasteful impressions: her shyness was ascribed to haughtiness, her dislike of ceremony to indifference or hatred of Russia. Society mocked her, as did members of the imperial family: Grand Duke Nicholas Mikhailovich made no secret of his feelings, deeming the empress "the Abominable Hessian," "the Hessian Tigress," and, most amusingly, "the woman who wanted to set Christ straight."[25]

Through her influence, Nicholas began a gradual withdrawal from society. Residing for most of the year in the Alexander Palace at Tsarskoye Selo, fifteen miles south of the capital, the imperial family remained hidden from the outside world. Nicholas and Alexandra valued the sanctity of their family and regarded public duties as an encroachment on their private lives. Four daughters came in quick succession: Olga was born in November 1895, followed by Tatiana in 1897, Marie in 1899, and Anastasia in 1901.

Olga most resembled her father, with her light chestnut hair and blue eyes. Her broad face and slightly turned-up nose detracted from her beauty, though, as Gleb Botkin, the son of an imperial physician, recalled, her personality made her "the most attractive" of the girls.[26] She was not only the quietest of the children, but also the most intelligent. The tutor Pierre Gilliard noted that she "possessed a remarkably quick brain. She had good reasoning powers as well as initiative, a very independent manner, and a gift for swift and entertaining repartee."[27] Her serious nature echoed that of her mother. Alexandra imbued all of her children with a sense of purpose, but Olga, as the first, bore the most criticism. She could be willful, "very straight-forward, sometimes too outspoken," as a member of the court recalled.[28] Resenting this treatment and armed, as Anna Vyrubova wrote, with "a strong will" and a "hot temper," Olga occasionally clashed with her mother.[29] Confined to a world where even simple friendships were rare, she sought solace in religion.

With her lean figure and fine features, Tatiana most resembled her mother. Proud and refined, she impressed everyone with her grace and character. "She was a poetical creature," recalled the empress's friend Lili Dehn, "always

yearning for the ideal and dreaming of great friendships."[30] In manner, Tatiana was "gentle and reserved," according to Anna Vyrubova, "kindly and sympathetic," looking after her younger sisters and brother with "such a protecting spirit" that they called her "the Governess."[31] Of all the girls, it was Tatiana who most inherited her mother's sense of authority and acceptance of their privileged positions, and Alexandra indulged her second daughter, confiding in her in a way she found impossible with the headstrong Olga. Tatiana tried to emulate her mother's religious piety but was unable to exhibit the same depth of feeling; instead, she assumed the role of caretaker, surrounding her mother with constant attentions.[32] In contrast to her mother, however, Tatiana was the most social of the sisters, and her natural charm and beauty made her immensely popular with her father's subjects.[33]

Marie was the most beautiful of the sisters, with thick, golden hair and deep blue eyes so large that within the family they were known as "Marie's Saucer's."[34] Modest and warm-hearted, she was, recalled one courtier, "kindness and unselfishness personified."[35] She flirted with the young officers surrounding the family, slipping into their dining room to chat about their families. Marie paid little attention to her lessons, preferring walks in the park. Of all the girls, she seemed the most confined by her position. Her dream, she said, was to marry and raise a large family.[36] Like Olga, Marie was headstrong, "energetic and determined to get her own way," recalled Alexander Mossolov.[37] As a third daughter, Marie suffered from the idea that she had been unwanted, and her elder sisters exacerbated the situation, refusing to include her in their activities and, as courtiers recalled, treating her like an outcast and calling her "fat little bow-wow."[38]



Grand Duchesses Marie and Anastasia Nikolaievna, 1913

The idea that she, too, had been unwanted undoubtedly resulted in the famously roguish behavior of the youngest daughter, Anastasia, deemed "the most amusing" of the four by one courtier.[39] Her small, boyish frame was suited to her wild pursuits: she climbed trees and refused to come down, terrorized her tutors with practical jokes, and made frequent, often barbed, comments at those around her. Her cousin Princess Nina Georgievna

remembered her as "nasty, to the point of being evil."[40] Short and somewhat overweight as a girl, Anastasia eventually developed into a beauty, with auburn, shoulder-length hair and, as Tatiana Botkin recalled, "the most extraordinary blue eyes of the Romanovs, of great luminescence."[41] Although the least intellectual of the children, Anastasia was perhaps the brightest of the five. General Count Alexander von Grabbe remembered, "Whenever I talked with her, I always came away impressed by the breadth of her interests. That her mind was keenly alive was immediately apparent."[42] Her aunt Grand Duchess Olga Alexandrovna later said, "Her teachers called it laziness. But I am not so sure. I think books as books never said much to her."[43]

The isolation enforced by their mother was meant to safeguard her daughters from what she considered the temptation, loose morals, and self-indulgence of society. Alexandra did not understand that even as royal children, they needed outside influences. As Anna Vyrubova wrote, "The Empress dreaded for her daughters the companionship of over-sophisticated young women of the aristocracy, whose minds, even in the schoolroom, were fed with the foolish and often vicious gossip of a decadent society. The Empress even discouraged association with cousins and near relatives."[44] Such isolation moved their grandmother to once speak of them as "hostages to their mother's paranoia."[45] Not surprisingly, the grand duchesses remained immature. "I never heard the slightest word suggestive of the modern flirtation," recalled Alexander Mossolov. "Even when the two eldest had grown into real young women, one might hear them talking like little girls of ten or twelve."[46]



Empress Alexandra with her new son, Tsesarevich Alexei, 1904

The grand duchesses aroused public curiosity, but they were mere ceremonial adornments in their father's world. The primogeniture of the Romanov succession laws demanded a male heir. After four daughters, Nicholas and Alexandra grew frantic, seeking the intervention of a number of dubious holy men in an effort to produce a son. Finally, on Friday, July 30, 1904, Alexandra gave birth to an heir, Tsesarevich Alexei. Within six weeks of his birth, however, the first signs of hemophilia appeared, a discovery that shattered the couple's lives forever. Nicholas submissively accepted his son's illness as "God's

will," while Alexandra, her physical and mental health devastated by the knowledge that she had passed on the disease, turned to mystics for comfort. When, in 1905, Gregory Rasputin first appeared, both Nicholas and Alexandra readily accepted him and his mysterious ability to alleviate their son's illness.

Alexei grew up to be a tall, thin young boy, closely resembling his mother. "He had a long, finely chiseled face," recalled Pierre Gilliard, "delicate features, auburn hair with a coppery glint in it, and large blue-gray eyes."[47] The emperor and the empress assigned two sailors, Derevenko and Nagorny, to watch over their son. They watched while he played, warned him when he exerted himself, and carried him when he was unable to walk. Constrained by his illness, Alexei allowed his emotions full range. One of Nicholas II's adjutants later recalled, "Despite his good nature and compassion, he promised to have a stubborn and independent character in the future. From his earliest days he did not like to obey and would only do so, like his father, when he was completely convinced of it himself."[48]

"His mother," recalled the tutor Gibbes, "loving him passionately, could not be firm with him, and through her, he got most of his wishes granted."[49] Wild and uncorrected when young, he often embarrassed family members. After his wife lunched with the imperial family, Grand Duke Konstantin Konstantinovich recorded in his diary: "He wouldn't sit up, ate badly, licked his plate, and teased the others. The Emperor often turned away, perhaps to avoid having to say anything, while the Empress rebuked her elder daughter Olga, who sat next to her brother, for not restraining him. But Olga cannot deal with him."[50] Although eventually Alexei began to grow out of this churlish behavior, neither Nicholas nor Alexandra did much to correct the problem.

But Alexei was also capable of great charm. Alexander Grabbe recalled him as "an extremely handsome boy . . . svelte, elegant, intelligent, and with unusual presence of mind. He possessed, moreover, other winning qualities: a warm, happy disposition and a generous nature which made him eager to be of help and enabled him quickly to establish rapport with others."[51] He had a great sympathy for those who also suffered and could be unusually thoughtful for a boy of his age.

The tsesarevich's hemophilia remained a carefully guarded secret within the imperial family. The public knew only that the heir to the throne was frequently ill, and rumor replaced fact. The reasons for the imperial couple's reliance on Rasputin were never revealed, and the swirl of gossip and sexual innuendo surrounding the peasant attached itself to Nicholas and Alexandra, further undermining public affection for the Romanovs.

Nicholas II did little, if not to win public sympathy, then at least not to alienate it. In the first days of his reign, he found himself overwhelmed with the onerous duties he had assumed. "I don't know anything," he once complained. "The late Emperor did not anticipate his end, and thus did not train me in anything."[52] And, as he admitted to his cousin Grand Duke Konstantin Konstantinovich, Alexander III "had never once mentioned the responsibilities that awaited him." When the dying emperor was asked frankly if he had counseled his heir, Alexander replied, "No. He himself knows everything." Nicholas, however, knew little, complaining that his father "had never given him any instructions and had left him to act as he thought best."[53]

"He was very young when he ascended the Throne," wrote Count Paul von Benckendorff, who knew Nicholas well, "with no experience of life or of affairs, and his character never had a chance to be formed. To the end of his life he lacked balance, nor could he grasp the principles that are necessary for the conduct of so great an Empire, hence his indecision, his limitations, and the fluctuations that lasted throughout his reign."[54] Nicholas maintained a firm reserve with all. "I found him invariably pleasant and gracious," noted Alexander Grabbe, "yet inscrutable. As I was soon to learn even with persons of his immediate Entourage he seldom revealed what he thought or how he felt except in trivial matters, never showed like or dislike, and never made his position known on any subject."[55] By reducing many encounters to trivial conversation, Nicholas surrendered any opportunity to hear informed opinion on the crucial events of the day; the few who ventured into such territory were quickly reminded of the emperor's displeasure.[56]

The early twentieth century presented Nicholas with challenges both to his authority and to the nature of the Russian empire. Social and economic aspirations of an ever-increasing working class had been kept in check during the reign of his father, and the revolutionary movement was forced underground after ruthless suppression. Nicholas's reign saw these forces coalesce into a powerful alliance, but he was unable to understand the problems and form a cohesive response.[57] Instead, believing that God ordained the autocracy as the only just power in Russia, Nicholas resisted efforts that hinted at an infringement on his rights. He perceived the autocracy in spiritual, not political, terms, inheriting, wrote one official, "an unshakable faith in the providential nature of his high office. His mission emanated from God. For his actions he was responsible only to his own conscience and to God."[58]

Nicholas was hostage to the peculiarly Russian idea of *sud'ba*, or fate, a manifestation of predetermined events that controlled every aspect of life. The

autocracy, as Nicholas understood it, was a mystical force, ordained by God and therefore not subject to the ministrations of man. He felt no need to question the many disasters of his reign or understand the factors that had caused them; instead, all events were ascribed to fate, a view that absolved Nicholas of all personal responsibility. Believing, as his cousin recalled, that "the mysterious forces emanating during the sacrament of taking the oath on the day of Coronation provided all the practical data required by a ruler," Nicholas relied only on intuition to navigate the tumultuous events of the day.[59] He ruled by resignation, unwilling and unable to question the mystical nature of the autocracy that had been inculcated into him since birth.

As emperor, Nicholas perceived himself as a modern monarch, while clinging desperately to a medieval view of his own prerogatives. "He lived a totally Western life in St. Petersburg in surroundings more English than Russian," writes Anne Odom, "and in his early years he often traveled to Western Europe. Increasingly, however, he sought refuge from the strains of ruling over a modern society by turning to his romantic view of the reign of Tsar Alexei . . . which he considered to have been a peaceful period of harmonious relations between Tsar and people."[60] In his view, the autocracy stood apart from the institutions of the Russian state and the government. Distrusting most officials, he made no effort to work within the system as his predecessors had done. In the world inhabited by Nicholas, he and he alone was the source of all authority and power. He considered, as Richard Wortman notes, the "formal apparatus of administration as alien and anti-monarchical."[61]

"The ministers I knew," recalled Sir Samuel Hoare, "told me that there was no intimacy between the Emperor and his Government. If they saw him, it was in official audiences, in uniform, with portfolios under their arms, and for a fixed and limited time."[62] Nicholas once complained that Prime Minister Peter Stolypin had provided too much leadership, thereby distracting attention from himself. "Do you suppose I liked always reading in the papers," he petulantly asked, "that the President of the Council has done this, or the President of the Council has done that? Don't I count? Am I a nobody?"[63] He viewed the student unrest, strikes, and pleas for reform that ringed the disastrous Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905 as direct attacks against his divine mandate, and he ruthlessly crushed them. During the Revolution of 1905, some ten thousand Russians were executed by the government, with thousands more in the years that followed.[64] "No Romanov before Nicholas," wrote W. Bruce Lincoln, "had ever put down his subjects on such an enormous scale."[65]

Nicholas's response to the 1905 Revolution underlined his conviction that the autocracy was indissoluble from the Russian empire. With the country collapsing around him, Nicholas was forced to take decisive action to save his throne: on October 17, 1905, he reluctantly signed a manifesto creating the Duma, Russia's first elected legislature. Although he granted civil liberties, freedom of religion, speech, and assembly and enfranchised the majority of his subjects, Nicholas did not view this as an infringement on the autocracy. He recognized that he had transformed the empire into something approaching a democratic monarchy, yet he refused to acknowledge the change to his own power. To Nicholas, the Duma gained its power directly through his benevolence: it was his gift to Russia, subject to his whims and orders as an extension of the autocracy itself. Although he had promised to "keep unchanged the institutions I have granted," both the First and the Second Dumas were closed on Nicholas's orders and their deputies put into the street when they insisted on launching investigations into government-sponsored pogroms.[66]

In 1907, in anticipation of the Third Duma, the emperor illegally altered the voting laws, to narrow the chances of socialists winning seats.[67] In 1913, he again tried, unsuccessfully, to limit the power of the Duma and to revoke it altogether.[68] The October Manifesto had been wrested from an unwilling emperor, and in the years that followed, he turned away from not only his ceremonial duties as sovereign but also from bureaucrats, officials, ministers, the aristocracy, and the court—in short, from educated Russians, the very people he believed had driven a wedge between him and his people. To the end of his life, he firmly believed that the majority of Russians—the simple, uneducated masses far away from the corrupting influences of St. Petersburg or Moscow—remained steadfast in their devotion. Seeking validation, he began to appeal directly to the people, taking great pains—as Alexander Grabbe recalled—to seek out peasants during his walks, to confirm his beliefs.[69] Even so, Nicholas, according to Mossolov, spoke to them "as if they were children," reinforcing his own view of himself as national father.[70]

This appeal to popular sentiment eventually found voice in a burgeoning twentieth-century media. Bowed by discontent and modern expectations, Nicholas cleverly adapted to the changing world and recognized the inherent propaganda value of its mass media. By utilizing modern methods, he strove not only to assert the archaic prerogatives of a vanished autocracy but also to retain control over the only aspect of his life that had not fallen victim to the tide of change: the presentation of himself and his family.[71] It was no accident that in the

last decade of his reign, he increasingly turned to public ceremonies and presentations of his idealized family, with innumerable postcards and souvenirs of his beautiful daughters and handsome son issued with imperial approval in an effort to win back the interest and affection of a public alienated from the throne and excluded from the imperial court.

These efforts reached their zenith in 1913, when Nicholas authorized a biography, published to mark the Tercentenary of the Romanov Dynasty. Publication of *The Reign of the Sovereign Emperor Nicholas Alexandrovich* marked a turning point in the history of the Russian monarchy. Never before had a ruler authorized a biography or allowed such intimate glimpses into every aspect of his life. Written by Major-General Andrei Elchaninov, a member of the Imperial Entourage, the book presented Nicholas as he saw himself: he personally read through the manuscript prior to publication, making revisions in his own hand.[72] It emphasized that which Nicholas wished to be known and ignored that which he found troublesome. Although the First World War was still a year distant, it was no accident that in addition to the Russian edition, English and French translations were also published in London and Paris in 1914—the two countries to which Russia had allied herself.

Elchaninov presented Nicholas as a man who stood in direct communication with God; the legal, bureaucratic, and spiritual institutions of the empire were superfluous to Nicholas's autocratic role. The portrait was one of dedication and an almost supernatural ability in every aspect of his life. "He never lays down his work," Elchaninov asserted, "on week days and weekends, resting only during his short period of sleep, offering in small things, as in great, a lofty example of loyalty in the performance of his duty."[73] This is how Nicholas wished to be seen, and the book continued in a hagiographic tone, stating that the emperor had "full and exact knowledge of every subject dealt with" in his daily meetings with officials, a portrait at odds with the experiences of hundreds of those whom he encountered. Such statements, though they reflected Nicholas's view of himself, elevated his abilities to the point of absurdity.[74]

In commissioning the book, Nicholas II crossed a fragile line. Everyone could now read—with the emperor's approval—of his daily life within the palace walls. This, too, presented Nicholas as he saw himself and as he wished to be seen—a model husband and father, completely devoted to his family to the point of abjuring his imperial obligations. "Entertainments at the Palace," Elchaninov wrote, "are comparatively rare. Great balls and processions are presented only when necessary, as a duty of service. A modest, frugal way of life is evident here, too."[75]

Thus, for the first time, dereliction of the ceremonial role of the Russian sovereign was presented as a deliberate virtue.

Elchaninov's book reflected Nicholas's attempts to reassert himself as a focus of national unity after a frequently catastrophic twenty years on the imperial throne. Yet such claims were balanced against the near-isolation in which the emperor and his family lived, leaving his subjects unaware of their real personalities and existence behind the walls of their palaces. As the first years of the twentieth century crept toward the oblivion of 1914, the empire contented itself with the proliferation of souvenir postcards and flickering newsreel images of its ruling dynasty, while the few privileged participants enacted its archaic rituals for an audience about to be swept away in the flood of revolution.