

1894: *Imperial Russia*

NOTE

The titles EMPEROR and TSAR, and EMPRESS and TSARITSA, are all correct and are used interchangeably in this book. EMPEROR was a higher rank, first taken by Peter the Great, but Nicholas II, a Slavophile, preferred the older, more Russian title, TSAR.

Dates in Russian history can be confusing. Until 1918, Russia adhered to the old Julian calendar. In the nineteenth century, this calendar was twelve days behind the Gregorian calendar used almost everywhere else. In the twentieth century, the Russian calendar fell thirteen days behind. In this book, all dates are given according to the newer, Gregorian calendar, except those specifically indicated as Old Style (O.S.).

Every Russian has three names: his first or Christian name; the name of his father with VICH added (meaning SON OF); and his family name. Thus, Nicholas was Nicholas Alexandrovich Romanov. For women, the second name is their father's with EVNA or OVNA (DAUGHTER OF) added. The Tsar's youngest daughter was Anastasia Nicolaeвна.

FROM the Baltic city of St. Petersburg, built on a river marsh in a far northern corner of the empire, the Tsar ruled Russia. So immense were the Tsar's dominions that, as night began to fall along their western borders, day already was breaking on their Pacific coast. Between these distant frontiers lay a continent, one sixth of the land surface of the globe. Through the depth of Russia's winters, millions of tall pine trees stood silent under heavy snows. In the summer, clusters of white-trunked birch trees rustled their silvery leaves in the slanting rays of the afternoon sun. Rivers, wide and flat, flowed peacefully through the grassy plains of European Russia toward a limitless southern horizon. Eastward, in Siberia, even mightier rivers rolled north to the Arctic, sweeping through forests where no human had ever been, and across desolate marshes of frozen tundra.

Here and there, thinly scattered across the broad land, lived the one hundred and thirty million subjects of the Tsar: not only Slavs but Balts, Jews, Germans, Georgians, Armenians, Uzbeks and Tartars. Some were clustered in provincial cities and towns, dominated by onion-shaped church domes rising above the white-walled houses. Many more lived in straggling villages of unpainted log huts. Next to doorways, a few sunflowers might grow. Geese and pigs wandered freely through the muddy street. Both men and women worked all summer, planting and scything the high silken grain before the coming of the first September frost. For six interminable months of winter, the open country became a wasteland of freezing whiteness. Inside their huts, in an atmosphere thick with the aroma of steaming clothes and boiling tea, the peasants sat around their huge clay stoves and argued and pondered the dark mysteries of nature and God.

In the country, the Russian people lived their lives under a blanket of silence. Most died in the villages where they were born. Three

fourths of them were peasants, freed from the land a generation before by the Tsar-Liberator Alexander II's emancipation of the serfs. But freedom did not produce food. When famine came and the black earth cracked for lack of rain, and the grain withered and crumbled to dust still on the stalks, then the peasants tore the thatch from their roofs to feed their livestock and sent their sons trudging into town to look for work. In famine, the hungry *moujiks* wrapped themselves in ragged cloaks and stood all day in silence along the snowy roads. Noble ladies, warm in furs, drove their *troikas* through the stricken countryside, delivering with handsome gestures of their slender arms a spray of silver coins. Soon, along came the tax collector to gather up the coins and ask for others.

When the *moujiks* grumbled, a squadron of Cossacks rode into town, with lances in their black-gloved hands and whips and sabers swinging from their saddles. Troublemakers were flogged, and bitterness flowed with blood. Landowner, police, local governor and functionaries were roundly cursed by Russia's peasants. But never the Tsar. The Tsar, far away in a place nearer heaven than earth, did no wrong. He was the *Batiushka-Tsar*, the Father of the Russian people, and he did not know what suffering they had to endure. "It is very high up to God! It is very far to the Tsar!" said the Russian proverb. If only we could get to the Tsar and tell him, our troubles would be at an end—so runs the plot of a hundred Russian fairy tales.

As the end of the century approached, the life of many of these scattered towns and villages was stirring. The railroad was coming. During these years, Russia built railroads faster than any other country in Europe. As in the American West, railroads bridged the vast spaces, linked farms to cities, industries to markets. Travelers could step aboard a train in Moscow and, after a day in a cozy compartment, sipping tea and watching the snowbound countryside float past, descend onto a station platform in St. Petersburg. In 1891 the Imperial government had begun the construction of Russia's greatest railway, the Trans-Siberian. Beginning in the eastern suburbs of Moscow, the ribbon of track would stretch more than four thousand miles to the Pacific Ocean.

Then, as now, Moscow was the hub of Russia, the center of railroads, waterways, trade and commerce. From a small twelfth-century village surrounded by a wooden stockade, Moscow had become the capital and Holy City of Russia. It was there that Ivan the Terrible announced, when he took the throne in 1547, that he would be crowned not as Grand Prince of Moscow, but as Tsar of all Russia.

Moscow was "The City of Forty Times Forty Churches." High

above the green rooftops glistened the blue-and-gilded onion domes of hundreds of church towers. Below, the wide avenues were graced by the columned palaces of princes and the mansions of wealthy textile merchants. In the maze of back streets, rows of two-story wooden buildings and log cabins sheltered the city's clerks and factory workers. The streets themselves lay deep in the snows of winter, the spring mud or the thick dust of summer. Women and children who ventured out had to watch for the sudden dash of a carriage or a thundering band of Cossacks whooping like cowboys in a town of the American West.

In the heart of Moscow, its massive red walls jutting from the bank of the Moscow River, stood the somber medieval citadel of Russian power, the Kremlin. Not a single building but an entire walled city, it seemed to a romantic Frenchman no less than a mirror of Russia itself: "This curious conglomeration of palaces, towers, churches, monasteries, chapels, barracks, arsenals and bastions; this incoherent jumble of sacred and secular buildings; this complex of functions as fortress, sanctuary, seraglio, harem, necropolis, and orison; this blend of advanced civilization and archaic barbarism; this violent conflict of crudest materialism and most lofty spirituality; are they not the whole history of Russia, the whole epic of the Russian nation, the whole inward drama of the Russian soul?"

Moscow was the "Third Rome," the center of the Orthodox Faith. For millions of Russians, most of the drama and panoply of life on earth were found in the Orthodox Church. In the great cathedrals of Russia, peasant women with kerchiefs over their heads could mingle with princesses in furs and jewels. People of every class and age stood for hours holding candles, their minds and senses absorbed in the overwhelming display taking place around them. From every corner of the church, golden icons glittered in the glowing light. From the iconostasis, a high screen before the altar, from the miters and crosses of gold-robed bishops, blazed diamonds and emeralds and rubies. Priests with long beards trailing down their chests walked among the people, swinging smoking pots of incense. The service was not so much a chant as a linked succession of hymns, drawing unbelievable power from the surging notes of the deepest basses. Dazzled by sights and smells, washed clean by the soaring notes of the music, the congregation came forward at the end of the service to kiss the soft hand of the bishop and have him paint a cross in holy oil upon their foreheads. The Church offered the extremes of emotion, from gloom to ecstasy. It taught that suffering was good, that drabness and pain were inevitable. "As God wills," the Russian told himself and, with the aid

of the Church, sought to find the humility and strength to bear his earthly burden.

For all its glory, Moscow in 1894 was no longer the capital of the Tsar's empire. Two hundred years before, Peter the Great had forcibly wrenched the nation from its ancient Slav heritage and thrust it into the culture of Western Europe. On the marshes of the Neva River, Peter built a new city, intended to become Russia's "Window on Europe." Millions of tons of red granite were dragged into the marshland, piles were driven, and two hundred thousand laborers died of fever and malnutrition, but before Peter himself died in 1725, he ruled his empire from this strange, artificial capital at the head of the Baltic Sea.

Peter's city was built on water. It spread across nineteen islands, chained by arching bridges, laced by winding canals. To the northeast lay the wide expanse of Lake Ladoga, to the west the Gulf of Finland; between them rolled the broad flood of the river Neva. "Cleaving the city down the center, the cold waters of the Neva move silently and swiftly like a slab of smooth grey metal . . . bringing with them the tang of the lonely wastes of forests and swamp from which they have emerged." The northern shore was dominated by the grim brown bastions of the Fortress of Peter and Paul, surmounted by a slim golden spire soaring four hundred feet into the air above the fortress cathedral. For three miles along the southern bank ran a solid granite quay lined by the Winter Palace, the Admiralty, the foreign embassies and the palaces of the nobility.

Called the Venice of the North, the Babylon of the Snows, St. Petersburg was European, not Russian. Its architecture, its styles, its morals and its thought were Western. The Italian flavor was distinct. Italian architects, Rastrelli, Rossi, Quarenghi, brought to Russia by Peter and his heirs, had molded huge baroque palaces in red and yellow, pale green or blue and white, placing them amid ornate gardens on broad and sweeping boulevards. Even the smaller buildings were painted, plastered and ornamented in the style and colors of the south. Massive public buildings were lightened by ornamented windows, balconies and columned doorways. St. Petersburg's enormous Cathedral of Our Lady of Kazan was a direct copy of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome.

Despite its Mediterranean style, St. Petersburg was a northern city where the Arctic latitudes played odd tricks with light and time. Winter nights began early in the afternoon and lasted until the middle of the following morning. Icy winds and whirling snowstorms swept across the flat plain surrounding the city to lash the walls and windows

of the Renaissance palaces and freeze the Neva hard as steel. Over the baroque spires and the frozen canals danced the strange fires of the aurora borealis. Occasionally a brilliant day would break the gloomy monotony. The sky would turn a silvery blue and the crystal snowflakes on the trees, rooftops and gilded domes would sparkle with sunlight so bright that the eye could not bear the dazzling glare. Winter was a great leveler. Tsar, minister, priest and factory worker all layered themselves in clothing and, upon coming in from the street, headed straight to the bubbling *samovar* for a glass of hot tea.

Summer in St. Petersburg was as light as the winters were dark. For twenty-two hours the atmosphere of the city was suffused with light. By eleven in the evening the colors of the day had faded into a milky haze of silver and pearl, and the city, veiled in iridescence, slept in silence. Yet those who were up after midnight could look to the east and see, as a pink line against the horizon, the beginning of the next dawn. Summer could be hot in the capital. Windows opened to catch the river breezes also brought the salt air of the Gulf of Finland, the aromas of spice and tar, the sound of carriage wheels, the shouts of street vendors, the peal of bells from a nearby church.

St. Petersburg, in 1894, still was faithful to Tsar Peter's wish. It was the center of all that was advanced, all that was smart and much that was cynical in Russian life. Its great opera and ballet companies, its symphonies and chamber orchestras played the music of Glinka, Rimsky-Korsakov, Borodin, Mussorgsky and Tchaikovsky; its citizens read Pushkin, Gogol, Dostoyevsky, Turgenev and Tolstoy. But society spoke French, not Russian, and the best clothing and furniture were ordered from Paris. Russian noblemen vacationed in Biarritz and Italy and on the Riviera, rather than going back to the huge country estates which supplied the funds to finance their pleasures. Men went to the race track and the gambling clubs. Ladies slept until noon, received their hairdressers and went for a drive to the Islands. Love affairs flourished, accompanied by the ceaseless rustle of delicious gossip.

Society went every night to the Imperial Ballet at the gorgeous blue-and-gold Maryinsky Theatre or to the Théâtre Français, where "fashionable décolletage was compensated for by an abundance of jewels." After the theatre, ladies and their escorts bundled themselves into furs in little, bright red sleighs and sped noiselessly over the snows to the Restaurant Cuba for supper and dancing. "Nobody thought of leaving before 3 a.m. and the officers usually stayed until five . . . when the sky was colored with pearl, rose and silver tints."

The "season" in St. Petersburg began on New Year's Day and

lasted until the beginning of Lent. Through these winter weeks, the aristocracy of the capital moved through a staggering round of concerts, banquets, balls, ballets, operas, private parties and midnight suppers. Everybody gave one and everybody went. There were receptions at which officers in brilliant uniforms with blazing decorations and old ladies in billowing white satin dresses milled about in high-ceilinged drawing rooms, plucking glasses of champagne from passing servants and filling their plates with cold sturgeon, chicken creams, stuffed eggs and three different kinds of caviar. There was the *Bal Blanc*, at which young, unmarried girls in virginal white danced quadrilles with young officers, carefully watched by vigilant chaperones sitting in stiff-backed gold chairs. For young married couples, there were the *Bals Roses*, a swirl of waltzes and gypsy music, of flashing jewels and blue, green and scarlet uniforms, that "made one feel one had wings on one's feet and one's head in the stars."

At the height of the season, ladies put on their diamonds in the morning, attended church, received at luncheon, took some air in the afternoon and then went home to dress for a ball. Traditionally, the finest balls of all were those given by Their Majesties at the Winter Palace. No palace in Europe was better suited for formal mass revelry. The Winter Palace possessed a row of gigantic galleries, each as wide and tall as a cathedral. Great columns of jasper, marble and malachite supported high gilded ceilings, hung with immense crystal and gold chandeliers. Outside, in the intense cold of a January night, the whole three blocks of the Winter Palace would be flooded with light. An endless procession of carriages drew up, depositing passengers who handed their furs or cloaks to attendants and then ascended the wide white marble staircases, covered with thick velvet carpets. Along the walls, baskets of orchids and palm trees in large pots framed huge mirrors in which dozens of people could examine and admire themselves. At intervals along the corridors troopers of the Chevaliers Gardes, in white uniforms with silver breastplates and silver eagle-crested helmets, and Cossack Life Guards in scarlet tunics stood rigidly at attention.

The three thousand guests included court officials in black, gold-laced uniforms, generals whose chests sagged with medals from the Turkish wars, and young Hussar officers in full dress with elkskin breeches so tight it had taken two soldiers to pull them on. At a great court ball, the passion of Russian women for jewels was displayed on every head, neck, ear, wrist, finger and waist.

An Imperial ball began precisely at 8:30 in the evening, when the

Grand Master of Ceremonies appeared and tapped loudly three times on the floor with an ebony staff, embossed in gold with the double-headed eagle of the tsar. The sound brought an immediate hush. The great mahogany doors inlaid with gold swung open, the Grand Master of Ceremonies cried out, "Their Imperial Majesties," and hundreds of dresses rustled as ladies sank into a deep curtsy. This announcement in the winter of 1894 produced the appearance of a tall, powerful, bearded man, Tsar Alexander III. Beside him, in a silver brocade gown sewn with diamonds, her famous diamond tiara in her hair, was his dark-eyed Danish wife, Empress Marie. The orchestra broke into a polonaise, then as the evening progressed, a quadrille, a chaconne, a mazurka, a waltz. At midnight, in adjacent rooms, a supper was served. While demolishing plates of lobster salad, chicken patties, whipped cream and pastry tarts, the merry-makers could look through the double glass of the long windows to see the wind blowing gusts of fine powdered snow along the ice-bound river. Through clusters of tables, the Tsar, six feet four inches tall, ambled like a great Russian bear, stopping here and there to chat, until 1:30, when the Imperial couple withdrew and the guests reluctantly went home.

Tsar Alexander III had an enormous capacity for work and awesome physical strength. He could bend iron pokers or silver plates. Once at dinner the Austrian ambassador hinted at trouble in the Balkans and mentioned ominously that Austria might mobilize two or three army corps. Alexander III quietly picked up a silver fork, twisted it into a knot and tossed it onto the plate of the Austrian ambassador. "That," he said calmly, "is what I am going to do to your two or three army corps." Alexander's mode of relaxation was to rise before dawn, shoulder his gun and set off for a full day of hunting in the marshes or forests. Like a bear, he was gruff, blunt, narrow and suspicious. He had a strong mind, strong likes and dislikes and a purposeful will. After making a decision, he went to bed and slept soundly. He disliked Englishmen and Germans and had a passion for everything Russian. He hated pomp and felt that a true Russian should be simple in manners, table, speech and dress; he wore his own trousers and boots until they were threadbare. Queen Victoria once said frostily of this huge Tsar that he was "a sovereign whom she does not look upon as a gentleman."

Alexander III dominated his family as he did his empire. His wife achieved a role of her own by charming the gruff giant; his children, especially his three sons, scarcely had any independence at all. The Tsar's words were commands and, to one official of his court, when

he spoke he "gave the impression of being on the point of striking you." When he gathered a small group to play chamber music together, the Tsar dominated the room, puffing away on his big bassoon.

Under Alexander III, the Russian system of autocracy appeared to work. The tsar personally was the government of Russia. His power was absolute, his responsibility only to God. From the tsar, power flowed downward and was exercised across the empire by an army of ministers, governors, clerks, tax collectors and policemen, all appointed in the name of the tsar. No parliament existed, and the people had no say in their government. Even members of the Imperial family, the grand dukes and grand duchesses, were subject to the tsar's will. Imperial grand dukes served as governors of provinces, or high-ranking officers in the army or navy, but they served only at the pleasure of the tsar. A snap of his finger and they stepped aside.

Alexander III was a dedicated autocrat, exercising to the limit the powers of his rank. He would have been a forceful tsar under any circumstances, but the fierceness of his belief in autocracy was inspired by his revulsion against those who had murdered his father, the Tsar-Liberator Alexander II. That his father's assassins were not liberals but revolutionary terrorists did not concern Alexander III; he lumped them all together.

Throughout the thirteen years of his reign, Alexander III devoted himself to crushing all opposition to autocracy. Hundreds of his political enemies made the long journey to exile in the lost towns of Siberia. Heavy censorship shackled the press. Before long, the vigor of his policies actually began to create a psychological force in favor of autocracy, and the zeal of the assassins and revolutionaries began to wane.

Except in his reactionary political views, Alexander III was a forward-looking tsar. He made a military alliance with republican France and acquired the huge French loans he needed to build Russian railways. He began rebuilding the Russian army and resisted all temptations and provocations which might have dragged it into war. Although he disliked Germans, he encouraged German industrialists to bring their capital and develop the coal and iron mines of Russia.

The attempt to run this vast empire by himself required all of Alexander III's great energy. In order to work undisturbed, he chose to live in the palace at Gatchina, twenty-five miles southwest of St. Petersburg. The Empress Marie much preferred living in town, and every winter she brought him into the capital to preside over the season. Alexander III flatly refused, however, to live in the huge,

ornate Winter Palace, which he thought cold and drafty, and the Imperial couple took up residence in the smaller Anitchkov Palace on the Nevsky Prospect.

It was Russia's good fortune that Alexander III was married to a woman whose talents exactly suited her position. Born Princess Dagmar of Denmark, she was a younger sister of Princess Alexandra, who married Edward, Prince of Wales, and became Queen of England. As a girl, Dagmar was engaged to Tsar Alexander III's older brother, Nicholas, then the heir to the Russian throne. When Nicholas died before their marriage, he bequeathed to Alexander not only his title of Tsarevich, but his dark-haired fiancée as well. Before her marriage, Princess Dagmar took the Russian name of Marie Fedorovna.

Russians loved this small, gay woman who became their Empress, and Marie gloried in the life of the Russian court. She delighted in parties and balls. "I danced and danced. I let myself be carried away," she wrote at the age of forty-four. Seated at dinner, she was an intelligent, witty conversationalist and, with her dark eyes flashing, her husky voice filled with warmth and humor, she dominated as much by charm as by rank. When something worth gossiping about occurred, Marie delightedly passed the tidbit along. "They danced the mazurka for half an hour," she once reported in a letter. "One poor lady lost her petticoat which remained at our feet until a general hid it behind a pot of flowers. The unfortunate one managed to hide herself in the crowd before anyone discovered who she was." Amused by human foibles, she was tolerant of human weaknesses. She regarded with droll pity the ordeal suffered by the Archduke Franz Ferdinand when he paid a ceremonial visit to St. Petersburg in 1891: "He is feted, he is stuffed with lunches and dinners everywhere so that he will end by having a monstrous indigestion. Last night at the theatre, he looked already rather pasty and left early with a migraine."

By the time she was thirty, Marie had met the requirements of royal motherhood by producing five children. Nicholas was born May 18, 1868, followed by George (1871), Xenia (1875), Michael (1878) and Olga (1882). Because of her husband's involvement in work, it was Marie who clucked over the children, supervised their studies, gave them advice and accepted their confidences. Frequently she acted as a maternal buffer between her growing brood and the strong, gruff man who was their father. Her oldest son, the shy Tsarevich Nicholas, was especially in need of his mother's support. Everything about Alexander inspired awe in his son. In October 1888, the Imperial train was derailed near Kharkov as the Tsar and his family

were eating pudding in the dining car. The roof caved in, but, with his great strength, Alexander lifted it on his shoulders and held it long enough for his wife and children to crawl free, unhurt. The thought that one day he would have to succeed this Herculean father all but overwhelmed young Nicholas.

As the year 1894 began, Nicholas's fears appeared remote. Tsar Alexander III, only forty-nine years old, was still approaching the peak of his reign. The early years had been devoted to reestablishing the autocracy in effective form. Now, with the empire safe and the dynasty secure, he expected to use the great power he had gathered to put a distinctive stamp on Russia. Already there were those who, gazing confidently into the future, had begun to compare Alexander III to Peter the Great.

CHAPTER TWO

The Tsarevich Nicholas

IT WAS with special care that Fate had selected Nicholas to be Tsarevich and, later, Tsar. He was the oldest of four sons, but by a series of mishaps, he was denied the support which brothers could give a reigning monarch. One of these brothers, a little prince named Alexander, had died in infancy. The next, George, was Nicholas's closest boyhood companion. Throughout their childhood Nicholas admired George's sparkling humor, and whenever his brother cracked a joke, the Tsarevich carefully wrote it down and filed it away in a box. Years later when Nicholas was heard laughing alone in his study, he would be found rereading his collection of George's jokes. Unhappily, in adolescence George developed tuberculosis and was sent to live in the high, sun-swept mountains of the Caucasus. The youngest brother, Michael, was ten years younger than Nicholas, too young ever to become a serious companion to the Tsarevich.

Although the palace at Gatchina had nine hundred rooms, Nicholas and his brothers and sisters were brought up in spartan simplicity. Every morning, Alexander III arose at seven, washed in cold water, dressed in peasant's clothes, made himself a pot of coffee and sat down at his desk. Later when Marie was up, she joined him for a breakfast of rye bread and boiled eggs. The children slept on simple army cots with hard pillows, took cold baths in the morning and ate porridge for breakfast. At lunch when they joined their parents, there was plenty of food, but as they were served last after all the guests and still had to leave the table when their father rose, they often went hungry. Ravenous, Nicholas once attacked the hollow gold cross filled with beeswax which he had been given at baptism; embedded in the wax was a tiny fragment of the True Cross. "Nicky was so hungry that he opened his cross and ate the contents—relic and all," recalled his sister Olga. "Later he felt ashamed of himself but admitted that it had tasted 'immorally good.'" The children ate more