

THE MAN FROM TOBOLSK

January 28, 2008

Arnold Schrier

I turn now to a Russian, a man from Tobolsk in Siberia. His name was Rasputin. For many people that name conjures up an image of the mad monk of Russia. That image is wrong. Rasputin was neither a monk nor was he mad. His Russian name comes much closer to the truth: it means dissolute, debauched. Yet that fact alone would not make him worth remembering. Rather it is that he appeared at a critical moment in Russian history, one that enabled him to have a decisive impact on the course of developments. Had he not existed, the tsarist regime might well have survived and there might never have been a revolution that enabled Lenin and the Bolsheviks to seize power.

That's a lot of significance to hang on one man. So who was this Rasputin? How did he come to play so influential a role in Russian history? Certainly nothing in his early life pointed in this direction. Rasputin was born on 10 January 1869 into a peasant family in a small village near the city of Tobolsk deep in Siberia. He was named Grigory because he was born on a saint's day and Russian custom was to name the infant after the saint. Grigory was not the first-born. He did have older sisters and brothers, but the girls all died as infants and the brothers died as young boys. Grigory was the only one of the children to survive.

Rasputin grew into a skinny, unattractive youth. Yet even then he had a strange hypnotic charm. There was about him a certain dreaminess that appealed to young women. More than once he was caught in intimate relations with young women and each time he was severely beaten for it. But that didn't stop him. As a young man, Rasputin was constantly drunk. Drunkenness was the norm for peasants. His father drank heavily. When drunk, Rasputin would frequently have fits of violent debauchery and get into vicious fist fights. He even got into fist fights with his own father.

In 1897, when Rasputin was 28, he married a peasant woman who was two years older. She was a hard worker. Since Rasputin had no independent means of support, he and his wife lived with her parents. Eventually his wife bore him five children: three sons and two daughters, all of whom survived. The entire family was illiterate, including Rasputin. But Rasputin did manage to teach himself how to write and became semi-literate.

It was at about this time, when Rasputin was in his late twenties, that he had a deep religious experience and became a pilgrim. He started wandering to visit various holy places, mostly monasteries. By the age of 30 he gave up drinking and smoking. In his wanderings he walked hundreds of miles and relied on strangers to feed him and put him up for the night. He

was gone from his home and village for long periods of time. His family had come to accept that he had become a holy wanderer. He also developed a reputation for being a healer. Just by looking deeply at a person, or by gently touching and speaking softly, he seemed able to cure people of various ailments. At the start of the 20th century his fame as a man of miracles began to spread.

One other aspect that is crucial to understanding Rasputin's character is that he became a member of a religious sect. There were a large number of religious sects in Russia that were associated with the Russian Orthodox tradition. None of them were officially approved by the church but they all claimed a special form of devoutness. There were the Malokane, or milk drinkers; there were the Skoptsy, who practiced castration. Rasputin became associated with the Khlysty. A khlyst is a whip or a switch with which the Khlysty practiced self-flagellation. But their key belief was ridding oneself of sin through sin. Rasputin fastened onto this notion and used it with great success with every young woman he met and wanted to seduce.

Rasputin first came to the capital, St. Petersburg, in the winter of 1903-04 when he was thirty-four. It was the winter that the Russo-Japanese War began. By then Rasputin had a reputation as a healer, a man who with a laying on of hands could make diseases disappear. He got to meet with Bishop Sergius and made a strong impression on him. Sergius eventually became Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Since Rasputin had no place to stay, another bishop named Feofan invited Rasputin to stay at his place. This turned out to be a critical move for Rasputin. Through Feofan, Rasputin got introduced to a member of the royal family. His name was Grand Duke Pyotr Nikolaevich, who happened to be a cousin of the Tsar, Nicholas II. Grand Duke Pyotr Nikolaevich was married to a woman from Montenegro named Militsia. This Militsia knew a great deal about mystical and ascetic literature. When she met Rasputin, she was deeply impressed. It was through Militsia that Rasputin got to meet Nicholas II and his wife.

That might never have happened had the Tsarina Alexandra Fyodorovna not gotten pregnant for the fifth time. Alexandra was a granddaughter of Queen Victoria and raised in her court. She spoke English better than Russian and communicated with her husband, the Tsar, in English. The two of them already had four children but they were all daughters. Alexandra very much wanted a son as heir to the throne. She had her wish. On 30 July 1904 she gave birth to a son, who was christened Alexei Nikolaevich. But the joy turned to grief when it was discovered that the infant had hemophilia. From then on, the major focus of Alexandra's life was to find a way to relieve her son of the pain caused by internal bleeding and to keep him alive.

Militsia told the Tsar and Tsarina that they needed to meet Rasputin, that he was a miracle worker. On November 1, 1905 they met Rasputin for the first time. By now he was being called Father Grigory, which was much warmer than the hateful name Rasputin. Father Grigory impressed the Tsarina. In October 1906 Rasputin had an audience with Nicholas II. He gave the Tsar an icon and talked with him for an hour. Nicholas too was impressed. A short time later, while meeting with the Tsar at his living quarters in Tsarskoye Selo (Imperial Village) outside St. Petersburg, Rasputin heard the Tsar's two-year-old son crying in pain. He asked to see the little boy. Rasputin was brought into the nursery, walked up to the crib, laid his hands upon the boy and spoke softly to him. That calmed him down; he stopped crying and fell asleep. To the Tsarina it was a miracle..

At that point, Rasputin became indispensable to the Tsar and Tsarina: he was the savior of their son. Whenever the boy had an attack of pain caused by the hemophilia, they summoned Father Grigory and he eased the boy out of his pain. In the eyes of the Tsar and Tsarina, Father Grigory was a holy man who could do no wrong. They refused to believe anything evil about him. For example, in 1910 Rasputin raped the nurse of the Tsar's son, a young woman named Maria Vishnyakova. When Maria told the Tsarina about it, she was accused of lying and was fired

Around 1909-1910 Rasputin began to interfere in high political matters. He sought revenge against anyone who spoke badly of him, even if they were ministers in the government. All he had to do was tell the Tsarina, she would tell the Tsar, and that person would lose his job. By this time powerful Moscow newspapers began to publish sensational articles about Rasputin. His name began to acquire a wicked meaning. It was turning into a punning synonym for debaucher.

By 1911, high-ranking members of the Church were convinced that Rasputin was sleeping with the Tsarina. That wasn't true but many people believed it was. In 1912 the story was picked up by newspapers in all the cities and especially in St. Petersburg and Moscow. Members of the aristocracy were shocked and had nothing but revulsion for Rasputin. In their view, Rasputin was nothing but a common peasant who was besmirching the honor and dignity of the royal family. Indeed, this common peasant was sullyng the whole aristocracy.

In January 1912 the Minister of Internal Affairs, a man named Makarov, ordered the police to conduct constant surveillance of Rasputin. The police told Rasputin they were doing it for his own safety-to prevent him from being beaten or maimed, or even killed. Rasputin agreed to the surveillance. The police followed him everywhere. Their reports describe Rasputin's orgies and his constant hiring of prostitutes, often several times a day. His sexual appetite was

insatiable—and this was before Viagra.

Early in 1914 a young woman writer looking to do a story on Rasputin, visited him in his apartment in St. Petersburg. Her name was Vera Zhukovskaya. According to her memoirs, Rasputin looked at her with his hypnotic eyes and said: "Sin is given so that we may repent, and repentance brings joy to the soul and strength to the body... Without sin there is no life, because there is no repentance, and if there is no repentance, there is no joy... . You want me to show you what sin is? Wait till next week, then come to me after taking communion, when there will be heaven in your soul. Then I will show you what sin is ." She never went back. But the approach did work with many other women.

At the beginning of 1914, Rasputin began to drink heavily again, mostly wine. He had given up drinking in 1904 but that abstinence lasted only ten years. That same year a young woman tried to stab him to death on the street because Rasputin did not want Russia to go to war. Rasputin recovered, but because of this incident, he became even closer to the Tsar and Tsarina. At this point petitioners began to besiege him for help, hoping he would take their petitions to the Tsar and Tsarina. They bribed him with large sums of money. Rasputin threw away the petitions and spent the money on huge drinking binges.

By 1915, various high officials were involved in intrigues against one another. Because they knew that Rasputin had a great deal of influence with the Tsar and Tsarina, they began using Rasputin to advance their schemes. So Rasputin became key to the dismissing and appointing of high government officials.

Even the Tsarina used this technique. In August 1915, she got Rasputin to testify against the Tsar's uncle, who was the commander-in-chief of the Russian army. The Tsarina wanted him fired so that her husband, the Tsar, could be commander-in-chief. Rasputin did the Tsarina's bidding and at a high-level hearing in the Tsar's palace at Tsarskoye Selo, he blamed the uncle for the terrible military defeats of the Russian army. The uncle was forced to resign and the Tsar then took over as commander-in-chief. Nicholas was totally unqualified for the position but it made the Tsarina happy. She was convinced that the Tsar should hold the top military command so that he could inspire the troops. Nicholas didn't inspire anyone; the Russian army continued to suffer disastrous defeats. Another result of Nicholas' taking over as commander-in-chief was that it kept him away from the capital, now renamed Petrograd. Since he had to be at military headquarters in Mogilev, the Tsarina was left to run things at home and she was blindly obedient to Rasputin.

By the autumn of 1915, the Tsarina, with Rasputin's help, got the Tsar to dismiss various ministers in the government and even to depose the head of the Russian Orthodox

Church. None of the people who were proposed as successors were qualified for their positions. What mattered to the Tsarina was that they professed to believe in Rasputin. All of this was having a demoralizing effect on people and was going on in the midst of the most serious war Tsarist Russia had ever fought. Newspapers began cynically referring to the constant changes in government as "ministerial leapfrog." Confidence in the government was rapidly eroding.

Throughout 1915 and 1916 Rasputin continued his heavy drinking and sexual exploits. Many young women came to him in his apartment in Petrograd with petitions. They were seeking help for friends or relatives. All had to pay by granting him sexual favors. His lust continued unabated. On January 10, 1916 he celebrated his 47th birthday; he would not live to see his 48th.

Toward the end of 1916, Rasputin's constant interference in the appointment of key officials, most of whom were incompetent, and his continual drunken and sexual orgies reported by the spying police agents, convinced many members of the nobility and the Duma that Rasputin was dragging the dynasty down. To save the dynasty—and themselves—they were convinced they had to get rid of Rasputin. It was at this time that Rasputin began to fear for his own safety. He was hearing rumors of conspiracies against him. His fears were well justified.

In late November 1916 two members of the Romanov family worked out a plan to assassinate Rasputin. One was Prince Felix Yusupov, who was married to a daughter of Nicholas' brother; the other was Grand Duke Dimitry, a cousin of Nicholas II and a friend of Felix Yusupov. Both had befriended Rasputin and gained his confidence. In fact, Rasputin took a liking to the young Felix Yusupov and trusted him completely. There may even have been a homosexual relationship between the two.

In any case, the scheme worked out by Felix Yusupov, Grand Duke Dimitry and a few others who were brought into the plot, was to play to Rasputin's lust. Felix's wife, Irina, was a niece of the Tsar and a beautiful young woman. The plotters knew that Rasputin longed to seduce her. To get Rasputin to leave his apartment and come to the Yusupov palace on the Moika Canal, they would invite him to a small intimate gathering that the Yusupovs were having and tell him that Irina would be there. What they did not tell him was that Irina would be safely in the Crimea, hundreds of miles south of Petrograd.

The murder of Rasputin was planned for the night of December 16-17, 1916 at the Yusupov Palace. Since the Palace was located directly across from a police station, it ruled out using pistols because that would alert the police who would immediately inform the Tsarina. They decided to use poison, potassium cyanide, which they crumbled into sweet pastries and

also dissolved in wine. Five people took part in this plot. Everything was set up in a basement room of the palace. It was elegantly furnished as a small living room. The poisoned pastries and wine were set out on tables.

When Rasputin arrived, he used a side door from the courtyard to enter the basement room. By not using the front entrance he avoided detection. He looked around for Felix Yusupov's wife and didn't see her. The conspirators told Rasputin that Irina was upstairs attending a soiree and that as soon as it was over and the guests left, she would come downstairs and join them. Meanwhile, he was offered pastries and wine.

But the poisoned pastries and wine seemed to have no effect on Rasputin. That unnerved the couple of conspirators in the room. Rasputin became suspicious and began to yell. At that point another of the conspirators came running down the stairs to the basement room with a pistol in his hand. This conspirator, a right-wing member of the Duma, was very nervous and a lousy shot. Twice he fired at Rasputin and missed. Rasputin then ran into the courtyard. Felix Yusupov grabbed the pistol and fired two more shots. Rasputin fell. The conspirators wrapped the body, tied it up, dragged it across the yard and put it into a car. In their haste they forgot to put weights on the body. It was now about 3 A.M. of December 16, 1916. The conspirators drove along the frozen Malaya Nevka River until they were out of town. Then they stopped, cut a hole in the ice and pushed the body through.

Because they had forgotten to put weights on the body, it surfaced a few days later. When an autopsy was performed, water was found in the lungs. Neither the poison nor the bullets had killed him. He had drowned to death. What the conspirators did not know was that Rasputin didn't eat sweets, and the poison solution they put in the wine was too weak. Also, Felix Yusupov was a bad shot; he had only wounded Rasputin and knocked him unconscious. Rasputin revived under water and tried to untie himself but his strength gave out and he drowned.

Two months later, in February 1917 (according to the Russian calendar), Tsar Nicholas II was forced to resign. After 300 years, the Romanov dynasty was no more. Eight months later, in October 1917, Lenin and the Bolsheviks seized power. Russia now became a nation ruled by communists.

So, aside from Rasputin having led a bizarre life, did he have any historical significance? The best short answer was given by Alexander Kerensky who became head of the Provisional Government after Nicholas resigned. His comment was succinct: "without Rasputin there would have been no Lenin."

There is an epilogue to this bizarre story. After the war, the murderer Felix Yusupov and

his wife Irina managed to get out of Russia taking with them a fortune in jewelry and art work. They settled in Paris and traveled widely, even visiting the United States in 1930. Felix Yusupov died in Paris in 1967 at the age of eighty.