‘A Programme for the Reign’: Press, Propaganda and Public Opinion at Russia’s Last Coronation

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Russia’s last coronation took place in Moscow on 14 May 1896, according to the Julian calendar still used in Russia. This was 26 May in the west’s Gregorian calendar. In many ways, the magnificent event and its attendant ceremonies encapsulated themes that would recur in the reign of Tsar Nicholas II. A series of apparently ancient ceremonies would consecrate the young Emperor to his nation while the world watched, its mass participation brought about by the burgeoning media on the verge of the twentieth century. To the click of camera shutters, the rattle of telegraphs and the whirring of the earliest cine machines, the twenty-eight-year-old Nicholas would crown himself as absolute autocrat, inheritor of the spiritual-political legacy of Byzantium. His coronation was the supreme expression of the religious ideas forming his character and justifying his rule. In Moscow, according to his self-presentation, he would be bound to Orthodox Russia, solidifying and sanctifying his place above all other Russians. As Richard Wortman summarizes it, ‘A Russian coronation not only consecrated the Russian emperor, but also made known the image he intended to embody as monarch, setting forth what might be described as a symbolic program for his reign.’

The publicity Nicholas sought for this pivotal occasion proved a double-edged sword. Within days of the Tsar’s moment of triumph, the assembled journalists and photographers would report on another quite different event, the tragic crush at Khodynka Meadow in which thousands of ordinary Muscovites and visitors were killed in the rush for commemorative mugs and free food and drink. In retrospect, this accident, and Nicholas’s seemingly indifferent response to it, seemed to foreshadow events of the reign. For the next two decades, Nicholas presented a personal, reactionary conception of his role to the modern world through the use of nationalistic, sentimental and religious propaganda as his country suffered through two major wars and, ultimately, revolution. Passivity in the face of disaster, and inability to adapt, led to abdication and the murder of the Tsar’s immediate family.

The Khodynka tragedy alone has been the subject of a full article and Ph.D. thesis which examine its impact on perception of the monarchy. Additionally, Richard Wortman has written a great deal on myth and ceremony at the Russian court, including articles dedicated to coronations specifically and to the coronation albums commemorating them. This article draws on aspects of research for our book *A Life for the Tsar: Triumph and Tragedy at the Coronation of Nicholas II*. While other writers have analysed specific events or themes, our

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aim has been to offer a comprehensive portrait of the ceremonies in Moscow. While exploring their historical roots and how the Khodynka tragedy shaped perceptions of the monarchy under Nicholas, we have also examined the Coronation seen by witnesses as varied as English missionaries, American hostesses of the Gilded Age, diplomats, and factory workers, comparing the views visitors formed with each other and with the official image presented to them. We supplement these views with material from Nicholas's own diaries and letters, some unpublished, often providing damning evidence of things his admirers refused to believe. In light of the regime's deliberate courting of publicity, and of the speed with which events turned sour for Nicholas, it is fascinating to examine how the young Emperor and his rule were perceived at a moment in time both triumphant and disastrous. Copies of all but two of the published accounts we use here are held in the British Library, and paint a varied picture of a man who was at once the supreme representative of a repressive power and a young husband and father related to every other European monarch of his day. The accounts, most of them rare or obscure, also tell us a great deal about the mindsets and expectations of their particular authors.

Born on 6 May 1868, Nicholas was brought up to believe that he would be endowed at the moment of anointing with supreme power to act as God's representative on earth; he was nevertheless cocooned from the world by possessive parents who feared for his safety, resented intrusions into their family life and taught him to believe that instinct alone was sufficient to guide him on the throne. The boy emerged from his education with an unfortunate combination of personal shyness and dynastic arrogance, a deep-seated insecurity manifesting itself in suspicion of everyone else's motives and belief that he alone knew what was good for Russia. According to the nationalistic creed he absorbed at his father's knee, his own status as autocrat was identical with the nation's well being. Citing his faith in 'the wisdom of Providence', he warned his subjects that in giving their allegiance to him, they must never forget 'that the strength and stability of Holy Russia lie in her Unity with Us, and in her unbounded devotion to Us.' Despite this, he was young, and people looked to him for this reason alone with hopes that he would prove more liberal than his father had been. Those who knew him well shared no such hope, and instead worried at his apparent weakness of character.

Within days of acceding to the throne on the early death of his father, the young Emperor married Princess Alix of Hesse, a young woman as shy and religious as he was himself. As a granddaughter of the nineteenth century's best known constitutional monarch, Queen Victoria, Alix of Hesse had a liberal lineage, and most western observers perceived her as a thoroughly modern princess, a tomboyish, banjo-playing British girl who would influence Nicholas on a liberal path. 'Princess Alix is a modern woman, well abreast of her times', wrote W. T. Stead, the campaigning journalist and Russophile. 'She has been reared as a modern English girl [...] those that know her best are the most sanguine as to the good influence which she is likely to exert in the new reign [...] The important thing to note is that there is now in Russia what was not there two years ago — a young Empress who is thinking and studying how to improve the conditions of her people.' Clifton Breckinridge, the American Minister in Russia, looked forward to 'a gradual but substantial relaxation of the more rigorous and reactionary features of the last reign'. That the young couple were clearly in love was also a boon to most Victorian journalists, who would vie with one another to produce the most gushing characterization of their joint appearances at the Coronation. Yet hopes for liberal influence were soon dashed: Alexandra's spiritual preoccupations left her vulnerable to Russia's national propaganda, and she ardently supported Nicholas's exalted notions about his role.

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The Coronation consisted of three weeks of pageantry, starting with the Tsar’s official entry to Moscow and continuing with proclamations, concerts, galas, parades, reviews, receptions and balls. The pageantry itself carried tremendous symbolic significance. The parades and processions and public appearances offered visible demonstration of imperial power: of the Army on which the dynasty’s power rested, and which provided the model for a well-ordered society; of resplendently adorned courtiers; of a loyal populace lustily cheering its ruling family and validating their privilege. But the Coronation, above all, carried Court pageantry over into the realm of spiritual power. It was a benediction, the physical crowning of the man who ruled Russia but, more importantly, his anointing, at the hands of priests, bishops, and metropolitans of the Orthodox Church, as Batiushka-Tsar, the Father of the Russian People and voice of God on earth. The merging of secular power with divine mandate made Nicholas II unique among modern European monarchs. In an era when the coronation ceremony itself had all but ceased to exist in European monarchies, no other western ruler claimed, by virtue of birth, by tradition, and by sacrament, such absolute authority as did Russia’s last tsar. Nicholas was the centre-piece; everyone else, from Alexandra to the cheering population, was a bit-player in a passive, supporting role.

The ceremony had evolved over time, shaped and influenced by the visions of successive monarchs as they adapted to political realities and the intellectual world around them. This was particularly the case when it came to the carefully orchestrated symbolic displays of power and the way in which their meaning was interpreted and promoted to add lustre to the throne. Nicholas I, who had come to the throne in the middle of the 1825 Decembrist Revolt and suppressed it harshly, used the ceremonies in Moscow to consolidate his power and promote himself and his family as the centres of a new imperial vision. His 1826 coronation was the first which was actively promoted to the Empire and to the world, using national and international correspondents to convey its rituals and inspire loyalty to the Imperial Family. The Enlightenment values of his grandmother Catherine the Great were banished, and the Prussian militarism of his father Emperor Paul, although present to a degree as a reminder of the means by which imperial power was to be maintained, was supplemented with repeated, overt appeals to Russia’s historic past, emphasizing supposedly ancient antecedents to more directly link the imperial throne with its Muscovite origins. The ceremonies in Moscow were conceived to inspire loyalty to the throne and subservience to the evolving triple formula of ‘Orthodoxy, Nationality, and Autocracy’. In what Richard Wortman has termed a ‘scenario of power’, Nicholas I offered himself and his family as objects of public adoration, to be idolized and emulated. This mythology, which imagined a direct, invisible, spiritual link between ruler and ruled that existed beyond the realms of court and church, took form when, following their crowning, Nicholas I and his consort climbed to the top of the Kremlin’s Red Staircase, turned to the thousands gathered in Cathedral Square, and bowed to them three times. Never before had a ruler bowed to his subjects, a gesture, complained critics, beneath ‘his godlike person’, as if Nicholas I were ‘beholden to mere mortals’. But this was less an acknowledgment of the Emperor’s people than it was an occasion to view the resulting popular acclaim as ‘historical justification for absolute monarchy’.

With his passive character, Nicholas II – great-grandson of the first Nicholas - was happy to follow a similar scenario. He had been trained to see his ancestor’s policies, reign and style as a golden age of stability and national glory, enthusiastically continued by his own father Alexander III after the turbulent hiatus represented by the reign of Alexander II, the liberator of the serfs, who had died in a bomb blast for his reforming pains. After thirteen years of relative stability under his father, Nicholas II and his imperial family saw reaction as the guarantor of peace, and intended to remain at the apex of power, epitome of and

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7 Wortman, Scenarios of Power, vol. i, pp. 280-1.
8 Ibid., vol. i, pp. 291-2.
model for the Orthodox nation. The Russian people were cast as supporters whose loyalty and needs justified his position. That one of the two senior organizers of the Coronation was the Tsar’s own Uncle, Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovich, Governor-General of Moscow, underscored the dynastic point.

The Coronation was officially detailed in *Koronatsionnyia torzhestva. Al’bom sviaschennago Koronov Imperatorskikh V Llichestvo Gosludaria Imperatora Nikolaia Aleksandrovicha i Gosudaryni Imperatrixy Aleksandy Feodorovy* (Moscow, 1896; British Library shelfmark, L.R.416.c.13), and later in the magnificent and enormous commemorative album of 1650 copies published by the Imperial Court, in both Russian and French, at a massive cost of some 166,000 rubles (approximately $3.3 million or £2.3 million in 2010). Both were a measure not just of the ceremony’s importance but also of the government’s desire to enshroud the reign in a compelling mythological narrative. Of the 1650 copies of the album produced, 1300 were in Russian and 300 in French: Krivenko, V. S. (ed.), *V Pamiat’ Sviaschennago Koronovaniia Ikh” Imperatorskih” V Llichestvo” Nikolaia Aleksandrovicha i Aleksandra Feodorovy*, and *Les Solennités du Saint Couronnement: Ouvrage Publié avec l’autorisation de Sa Majesté l’Empereur par le Ministère de la Maison Impériale* (St Petersburg: Ministerstvo Imperatorskago Dvora i Udielov, 1899; BL shelfmark, L.R.23.c.20; fig. 1). Every official guest received one: the copy of the single-volume French version, *Les Solennités du Saint Couronnement*, which is now in the British Library originally belonged to Colonel Waters. He was a military attaché based in St Petersburg, and accompanied Prince Arthur, Duke of Connaught, to Moscow, where the Duke represented his mother, Queen Victoria (fig. 2). Also in this British party were two authors of private accounts of the Coronation. Both Ian Malcolm and General Sir Francis Wallace Grenfell wrote up their extensive notes of what they saw or experienced and published them for small audiences; Grenfell’s also has sketches included. Hugely more significant than either official or private accounts would be the words of journalists, whose influence Nicholas fully recognized, albeit not always enthusiastically, and wanted to harness. The Ministry of the Imperial Court established a Correspondents’ Bureau in Moscow, under the direction of the Imperial Chancellery. Temporarily quartered in the Kristii House, a mansion on Moscow’s Rakhmanovsky Boulevard, the Bureau resembled an exclusive private club, where journalists gathered day and night to exchange stories over lengthy dinners and cigars. Those seeking accreditation had to deposit five photographs in various bureaux before 31 March 1896, along with their requests and credentials, to be scrutinized by officials. Approved applicants had one of the photographs returned, with a seal, label, and details stamped on the front and back showing that they had received the sanction of the Court Chancellery. These photographs were to be carried at all times, along with credentials issued by the Correspondents’ Bureau requesting ‘the authorities of the Government and public institutions to withhold no possible assistance’ from the bearer in reporting the Coronation. Those recognized this way by the Government, remembered the British journalist Arthur Sykes, were assisted ‘in every possible way’, receiving tickets to observe the State Entrance, passes for receptions, and even invitations to a gala performance at the Bolshoi. Bronze badges with the imperial couple’s initials in blue enamel, inscribed with the date, the Orthodox cross, and a tiny raised pen and scroll to signify their status as reporters, allowed reporters through police lines and entitled them to free use of city cabs.

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12 Ibid., p. 62
Fig. 1. Les Solennités du Saint Couronnement (St Petersburg, 1899). LR.25.c.20, front cover.
Fig. 2. The Duke of Connaught’s suite, *Les Solennités du Saint Couronnement*, unnumbered photograph. Colonel Waters is standing second from the right.
It was perhaps to be expected that Russian correspondents, subject to the censor and reporting on the coronation of a sovereign who also happened to be the head of their church, would adopt a reverential tone and repeat much official propaganda. The Russian newspaper *Moskovskie Vedomosti*, for example, linked the idea of a religiously ordained autocracy to the Empire’s greatness: the direct intervention of God in selecting Russia’s rulers, it declared, had relieved the country of the political strife and shifting constitutions that characterized the West. The faithful prayers of his loyal subjects strengthened the Emperor in his rule, which the paper characterized not merely as a political reign but as a heroic, spiritual struggle against the evils of the modern world.\(^{14}\)

Many of the foreign journalists, however, adopted similar tones. The Government provided these journalists with copious propaganda describing the ceremonies in four different languages, and as he read it the American Richard Harding Davis was struck by references to the Romanovs and to God, noting that the capital letters used for names seemed ‘equally divided’ between Tsar and deity, as if the two were interchangeable.\(^{15}\) He was easily able to suspend any sense of cynicism about this material, however. In an era when many U.S. citizens abroad made a particular show of being beholden to no king or emperor, Davis himself was certainly an exception to prove the rule, particularly in his writing on the young Empress. Reporters from republican France, Russia’s new European ally, also forgot their egalitarian ideology as soon as they arrived in Moscow. Thérèse Vianzone, known at home for her writings on religious topics, regarded the Tsar with as breathless an adoration as that Davis felt for the Empress, while Pierre d’Alheim of *Le Temps* offered florid accounts emphasizing the special relationship between Russia and France, and portraying the imperial couple as the very models of enlightened rule.

The British press contingent ranged from Sir Donald Mackenzie Wallace of *The Times*, a former diplomat who knew Nicholas personally, and Edwin Arnold, the esteemed editor of the *Daily Telegraph*, to a cub reporter and occasional *Punch* contributor named Arthur Alkin Sykes. What set them apart from their French or American colleagues was the surprising fact that many of them understood Russian. Wallace had lived in Russia for many years and wrote a popular book on it;\(^{16}\) Sykes translated Gogol.

There was also another translator present: Tolstoy’s, in this case. Aylmer Maude was not a journalist as such, but he produced a short memoir of the Coronation, which he published pseudonymously as *The Czar’s Coronation, as seen by De Monte Alto*.\(^{17}\) Unlike most of the personal accounts left by participants, it was intended for general distribution, and was quite different in tone from the other little books. The son of an Ipswich clergyman with no previous ties to the country, Maude came to Russia in 1874. He studied at the Moscow Lyceum and worked as an English-language tutor before marrying the daughter of a British jeweller in the city and pursuing his own career in business. Maude’s company was Muir and Mirrielees, the largest department store in Russia.\(^{18}\) Since he was successful, he was able to retire before he was forty in order to take up his real, literary interests. He came to know Count Tolstoy’s family very well, and wrote or annotated their biographies as well as translating a great many of Tolstoy’s works into English. His wife, Louise Shanks, was also a translator, concentrating on Tolstoy’s literary output, while Aylmer dealt more with philosophy and politics. A radical activist who was later a leading light in the Fabian Society and co-operative movement in Britain, Maude

\(^{14}\) See *Moskovskie Vedomosti* (6 May 1896).

\(^{15}\) Richard Harding Davis, *A Year From a Correspondent’s Note Book* (London, 1898), p. 35.


\(^{17}\) (London, 1896).

\(^{18}\) Muir and Mirrielees Moscow shop is now TsUM, the Central Universal Department Store, itself highly fashionable. The current building dates from 1908, after Maude’s retirement, but the shop had been on the site in a previous building since the 1880s. See [http://www.tsam.ru/company/history](http://www.tsam.ru/company/history).
investigated matters that other, less politically inclined writers ignored, and disseminated his views as harsh counter-propaganda to the official one. He was a committed Christian of a puritanical bent, and spared few words describing what he saw as the excesses, hypocrisy and incompetence surrounding the Coronation. His book is cynical, deflationary, sometimes heavy-handed or humourless, but always invaluable, contrasting sharply with official accounts and with the gushing or credulous words of other writers. Where others lapped up propaganda or sought to ingratiate themselves with high society, Maude insisted on seeing the pageantry in the most banal light, as a welter of vulgarity centered upon an unworthy subject at the expense of the majority of the Russian people.

Most of the journalists and visitors were in Moscow for a few days before the Tsar arrived from the capital, St Petersburg. Walking in the footsteps of early Tsars, Nicholas would stay briefly at the Petrovsky Palace outside the city, awaiting his formal symbolic entrance to the old capital – still considered the spiritual heart of Russia – and holding receptions. The British contingent in their accounts of these meetings would recall previous encounters they had had with Nicholas or Alexandra and emphasize the imperial couple’s ties to their Queen. Whether through snobbery, laziness or a desire for the familiar, they saw this young couple as part of their own familiar world of service to and acquaintance with the supra-national Royal Family. Americans, meanwhile, liked to bring out the youth and friendliness of the imperial couple, explicitly linking this with a liberal future for Russia. ‘They were as simple and pleasant in their cordiality as any ordinary persons would be to their guests’, remembered the American Admiral Thomas Selfridge after a reception. Such optimistic impressions stand rather at variance with the reality of the young imperial couple. Alexandra was noted for shyness so paralysing it made others uncomfortable, while Nicholas was equally timid, and was on his dignity at all times. Ironically, he had once been particularly affronted by an American acquaintance addressing him as ‘My Friend’. 19

Humbler commentators had more to say about differences. Ordinary British or American tourists saw the security at the Coronation as confirming all their own – not unfounded – stereotypes about Russia as a land of assassins and repressive police. ‘This country is a hotbed of anarchists and nihilists’, wrote Mary Hickley, a Cornishwoman who came to Moscow especially for the Coronation. 20 Her own luggage was searched enthusiastically by the police. ‘It is evident one is no longer in a free country’, she concluded sadly. 21 Aylmer Maude collected examples of unwarranted scrutiny, subsequently confirmed by the recollections of Russian citizens who endured the same experiences. 22 It was precisely this environment which contributed to the naively hopeful opinions which many foreigners formed of Nicholas and Alexandra. How, they asked, could the young, modest imperial couple be part of this? How could this comfortingly familiar, westernized pair possibly fail to be shocked by and want to improve things in Russia?

The newspapers spent a great deal of ink during these days leading up to the Coronation in describing what the Emperor wore at each public appearance, as well as the rooms he would stay in. Aylmer Maude did not doubt that these accounts of ‘the young man who has so many clothes’ would find readers, which fact in his opinion simply proved the adage that ‘no portion of a man’s time is more completely wasted than that which he spends in reading’. 23 Noting the inflated prices of lodgings and hotels as visitors poured into Moscow,
he observed wryly that overcrowding had clearly not ‘reached the palaces’, in which whole suites were set aside for the use of dead Emperors or tiny children, the Tsar’s late father and his baby daughter.\textsuperscript{24} Aylmer Maude was probably the only foreign commentator who drew attention to the implicit contrast between the grandeur of the ceremony and the essential flimsiness of the man at the centre of it, as if the clothes and processions and palaces and ceremonies could disguise rather than enhance the reality of the monarchy. Nicholas II was a small, slight, ‘young man of twenty-eight, who’, Maude wrote, ‘differs from other young men chiefly in this, that having been cut off from the actual business of life – the task of wringing from nature food, clothes, and shelter, for the support of human beings – his views of what is good and what is bad, of what is important and what is trivial, are probably rather more artificial and contrary to the nature of things than even those of the poor peasants, for whose deception he has to be crowned.’\textsuperscript{25}

9 May was the day of Nicholas’s formal entry to the city. The police preparations for his procession, said Maude, ‘overstepped the bounds of the ludicrous’, with even fire escapes boarded up to prevent assassins using them as stake-outs. In reality, only the wealthy could get anywhere near the stands erected at street-sides for people to view the Tsar as he passed: the cost of tickets was prohibitive. The parade of horse after horse, carriage after carriage, filled with musicians, dignitaries, aristocrats, gowns, uniforms, orders and jewellery was undoubtedly impressive, and many observers responded with appropriate enthusiasm, some of the journalists apparently even copying out the details of the parade directly from the official information they were given.\textsuperscript{26} However, one senior Russian newspaper magnate noticed that a few of the young American tourists present watched the overblown cavalcade in bemused disbelief, mocking the circus atmosphere and laughing at how seriously Russians seemed to take this exaggerated pomp.\textsuperscript{27} Several others present observed that the cheers for the young Tsar and Empress were muted by comparison with those for Nicholas’s mother, the Dowager Empress Marie Fedorovna. The latter was an object of sympathy in her premature widowhood (she was just forty-seven when her husband Alexander III died) and a popular figure among the walks of society able to obtain places lining the streets, while her son and daughter-in-law were largely unknown quantities. Both Empresses, riding in carriages ‘that any respectable woman from a circus might have blushed to ride about in’, as Maude wrote, suffered in silence.\textsuperscript{28} Crammed into their airless and springless vehicles, they must have felt that they resembled popular entertainment rather more than the sequestered princesses of medieval Russia, who passed their existences in the Tartar-inspired Terem, hidden from public eye and from members of the opposite sex. Riding in the procession, they were admittedly anything but hidden, but their position was no less constrained and predetermined by biology than that of their forebears.

The whole procession stopped at the entrance to the old city and entered the celebrated Chapel of the Icon of the Virgin of Iberia (Ikona Iverskaia Sviataia i Chudotvornaia Bogomater), a powerful emblem of Moscow before which legend asserted that every citizen would bow as he or she passed. The Emperor and Empresses would make their own obeisance here, symbolizing their subservience to Russia’s history and Church, and then move on to the Kremlin’s Cathedrals, to kiss more icons and ‘some dried bits of the corpses of Moscow’s saints’.\textsuperscript{29} This Orthodox observance prompted a stream of sarcastic invective from Maude in which he drew attention to the fact that both Empresses – the one Danish by birth and the other Anglo-German – had formerly been Protestants who eschewed all such forms of worship. The

\begin{footnotes}
\item[24] Ibid., p. 33.
\item[25] Ibid., p. 34.
\item[26] Authors’ inference, based on contradictions between journalistic accounts and other memoirs.
\item[28] Maude, p. 39.
\item[29] Ibid., p. 41.
\end{footnotes}
hypocrisy of the whole scene was compounded in his mind when the imperial trio bowed before
the tombs of earlier monarchs described in something he read as ‘ancestors’.
‘That, of course, is a conventional way of speaking’, wrote Maude, ‘for it is a matter of
conjecture rather than of history, which of Catherine the Second’s lovers was the father of the
Emperor Paul, and no Russian Tsar can trace back his ancestry, in the male line, farther than to
that madman.’ 30 He was correct to observe that Paul, born in 1754, was not necessarily the
biological son of Tsar Peter III, but since their Romanov dynasty itself marked a break from the
earlier, Rurik family whose graves are in the cathedrals it was already understood that
‘ancestors’ was in this case a term used with as much political meaning as biological.
The days that followed offered the people of Moscow – ‘who had to work so much’ and see
the wealth they generated spent ‘so prodigally’ on the Coronation – a chance to obtain some part
of it for themselves in the form of souvenir copies of the official proclamation of the date of
crowning. The public reading of the proclamation was carried out by theatrically costumed
heralds whom some spectators likened to the Three Musketeers (fig. 3), accompanied by horses
in livery led by their grooms, and by several regiments with trumpets and kettle-drums. 31
Maude sniped that he ‘doubted whether the men reflected more than the horses did, as to the
wisdom of the performance they were engaged in’ 32 as enthusiasm to obtain the souvenirs soon
overcame all restraint. Several carriages were damaged and some of the souvenir copies ripped
to shreds as the crowd scrambled to take them. Far worse, eighteen people were actually killed in
the crush, though the newspapers hushed this fact up in order to spare the regime
embarrassment before the world. 33
On the same days, grand ceremonies and processions took place to move the imperial regalia
from the Armoury into the Grand Kremlin Palace in advance of the Coronation, and to bless
the banner made specially for the service. The regalia would rest overnight in the Hall of the
Order of St Andrei, the Imperial Throne Room, on a table guarded by officers drawn from the
Imperial Regiments. From time to time an elderly man shuffled on hands and knees across the
floor before these soldiers, polishing their boots as they stood motionless on duty. 34
Maude derided the ‘habitual practice of ignoring, denying, or making light of any
misfortunes which befell his meaner subjects, while attaching a preposterously exaggerated
importance to every rod or jewel feather that related to the Emperor’, pondering presciently if
such circumstances might one day lead to the collapse of the Imperial regime. 35 While soldiers
tended to jewels, the young Emperor and Empress prepared for the Coronation with a devotion
that was pointedly almost medieval.
Coronation day opened with further services, while the Emperor and Empresses, the court
and all the Imperial Family dressed in the Kremlin, and the crowds began to gather at their
allotted spots in the streets around. Maude drew an analogy between the darkness of the
Cathedral of the Dormition where the Coronation would take place, and the obscurantism of a
Church that shut out ‘the light of heaven’, before returning to his circus theme in time for the
appearance of the Dowager Empress. He managed to make Empress Marie sound ridiculously
over-dressed as she crossed the short expanse of sunny square beneath a canopy, wearing ‘a crown
sparkling with diamonds’, to take her place on a ‘gaudy chair, a throne’ at the heart of the
Cathedral. 36 Next came a whole assortment of pages and political deputies, then the regalia, the

30 Ibid.
31 These costumes were shown in the exhibition on Russian Imperial court dress held at the Victoria and Albert
Museum: see Magnificence of the Tsars: Ceremonial Men’s Dress of the Russian Imperial Court, 1721-1917
32 Maude, p. 42.
33 Ibid., p. 44.
34 John A. Logan, In Joyful Russia (New York, 1897), p. 118.
35 Maude, pp. 44-5.
36 Ibid., p. 51
Fig. 3. Herald, *Les Solennités du Saint Couronnement*, half title.
cavalry, many masters of ceremonies, and finally Nicholas and Alexandra themselves. The very
ground the imperial couple walked on was damped down ahead of them by holy water, and their
canopy required no less than thirty-two adjutants to hold it aloft. Maude wondered if these men
felt ashamed to be spending so much time and energy on ‘two young people who were taking a
walk’, and pursued the garden theme further by likening the aspersoria of holy water to
inadequate watering cans.

In the course of the ceremony there would be several little mishaps, some of which received
more publicity than others, but which were almost inevitable in an act as lengthy as the
Coronation. Even before the processions left the Kremlin, a young page who had indulged too
readily in the ample breakfast provided was violently sick upon a senior member of the
Dowager Empress’s entourage, who had no time to change. For the rest of the day the
unfortunate recipient of his stomach’s contents walked around exuding a smell that turned
other people’s stomachs.

The Emperor and Empress entered the Cathedral to the sound of the hundred and first
Psalm, followed by prayers and readings from the Epistles of Paul, including the exhortation,
Maude said, that they ‘render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, but unto God the things
that are God’s, with as much accentuation of the first clause and as little of the second as
possible.’ As if cued by this, Nicholas stood as adjutants and courtiers presented the Imperial
Regalia (fig. 4). After removing the Lesser Chain of the Order of St Andrei, Russia’s patron
saint, from the Emperor’s neck, his uncles Grand Dukes Vladimir, Sergei and Pavel
Aleksandrovich and his brother Mikhail Aleksandrovich wrapped his shoulders with the gold-
brocaded Imperial Mantle, fastening it with a diamond clasp set with emeralds. As they
arranged the Diamond Chain of the Order of St Andrei around the mantle’s ermine collar,
Vladimir Aleksandrovich missed or snapped a catch and it clattered to the carpet with a dull
thud. He quickly retrieved it, but not before many of those near the dais witnessed this incident,
which was interpreted later as an ill omen for the reign. A number of accounts, mostly second-
hand, relate that the chain broke unexpectedly as Nicholas II approached the altar to take
communion later in the ceremony, and this has become the standard version related in popular
works. His cousin Grand Duke Konstantin Konstantinovich and the press baron Aleksei
Suvorin, though, were both clear that they saw the chain fall as Vladimir draped it around
Nicholas’s neck.

The Emperor was to crown himself, signifying that he stood at the head of the church as well
as state, and received his power directly from God. At this most solemn of moments, disaster
struck, as if human nature were crying out in protest at the ceremony’s conceits. Suffering from
a stomach upset, the elderly State Councillor Dmitri Nabokov (grandfather of the novelist) had
nevertheless insisted on being present to proffer the crown. As he approached the
Metropolitan, who in turn would hand the crown to the Tsar, the poor man was suddenly
‘stricken with diarrhea’. He could do nothing but offer the crown as he stood in silent
embarrassment, stains spreading over his white trousers and pooling around his boots as the
awful smell mingled with that of the page’s vomit.

Lacking the portentous charm of the broken chain, neither incident received the same sort of attention, and were buried in obscure memoirs. This fact in itself says something about the imposing atmosphere of Russian coronations, for when the British king Edward VII was crowned six years later gossips happily spread tales of refreshments eaten in Westminster Abbey, and of a peeress who dropped her

37 ‘Court Service of the Corps des Pages during the Blessed Coronation in 1896: Memoirs of Baron Sergei Roop
38 Maude, p. 54.
Konstantinovich Romanov (also known as the poet ‘KR’) 14 May, 1896; and Suvorin, Dnevnik, p. 226.
41 Suvorin, p. 233.
Fig. 4. The Crown jewels, *Les Solemnités du Saint Couronnement*, after p. 156.
coronet into a lavatory. Most indecorously of all, Edward was said to have arranged seats for all of his mistresses, past and present. His racing friends quipped that their place should be called ‘the King’s loose box’.

Impervious to the discomfort of participants, the ceremony continued. Nicholas’s styles and titles were proclaimed, and with sceptre and orb in hand, he sat for a short while upon the throne before crowning his wife (fig. 5). Almost every contemporary account took the same view of this: the Tsar’s placing his crown upon his wife’s head was a moment of transcendant tenderness, epitomising all that was protective in him and submissive in her. From the official journalists watching breathless in the press seats to Alexandra’s intellectual and normally rather brisk sister Victoria of Battenberg, the commentators all emphasized the gentleness of the Emperor’s touch of the crown upon her head; the modestly lowered eyes and maidently blush of the young Empress. Alexandra, rhapsodized the official account, was ‘the ideal image of submission incarnated in feminine beauty and grace’ as she approached her husband.42

Richard Harding Davis stared at her from the press rows. ‘Of all the women there’, he declared, ‘she was the most simply robed, and of all the women there she was by far the most beautiful.’ Under his besotted gaze, her heavy $98,000 court dress in brocade, silk and silver tissue was transformed, quite ludicrously, into something ‘as simple as that of a child going to her first communion’. Her hair, which she wore down on her shoulders in ringlets, became ‘two long plaits’, dispatching the twenty-four-year-old mother firmly back to the schoolroom. ‘The color in her cheeks was high, and her eyes were filled with that shyness or melancholy that her pictures have made familiar’, Davis sighed, ‘and in contrast with the tiaras and plumes and necklaces of the ladies of the court surrounding her, she looked more like Iphigenia going to the sacrifice than the queen of the most powerful Empire in the world waiting to be crowned.’43

Alexandra herself saw the ceremony very much as an extension of her marriage vows, the moment at which she consecrated herself to Russia, as she was already consecrated to Russia’s Emperor. The gushing eye-witness accounts seem informed by this same sensibility, evoking an image almost sensual and tempered in some accounts by trembling trepidation as she bent her head before her gently conquering husband, giving herself to him and to Russia. The official album echoed this, filling a whole page with an image of the Tsar kissing his newly crowned wife.44 Such representations could have been inspired by the relatively recent marriage of the Emperor and Empress, but in fact they echoed the way his parents had been portrayed at their own coronation, when they had already been wed for seventeen years.45 Alexander III and Marie Fedorovna were themselves a genuinely fond couple, but perhaps the portrayal of their mature union encouraged scepticism, a sensation that even the stalest or least faithful of marriages would be represented as young love.

Maude – who, of course, was not there, and based what he wrote on what he read or heard later – was naturally sceptical regardless of cue, and was cuttingly prescient in his view of Alexandra, the young woman who would become known later in the reign as the power behind the throne, more autocratic than Nicholas himself. Nicholas, he said, allowed the crown to rest for a second on her hair, but snatched it back with almost indecent haste, not because he feared its weight would hurt her but because he was ‘afraid that she might keep it’.46 However

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44 Krivenko, p. 253
46 Maude, p. 56.
Fig. 5. The Emperor crowning the Empress, *Les Solennités du Saint Couronnement*, after p. 144.
incorrectly, Maude presented the young Empress as motivated by ambition rather than love and religious conviction. While Alexandra and most observers took the monarchy’s religious propaganda at face value and saw her actions in renouncing Protestantism and assuming the imperial crown as expressions of supreme devotion to husband and God, Maude thought it a charade cooked up for political benefit. He wondered whether either half of the young couple thought of Nicholas’s connection to the ballerina Matilda Kschessinska, who had been his mistress before his engagement, and who, in Maude’s view, thus had ‘prior claim’ on him, ‘established without any ecclesiastical play acting’.47

Finally, Alexandra received her own crown in place of the imperial one, and as her husband bent forward to whisper caution to the ladies in waiting who might have driven the pins right into her scalp as they secured it, the relatives and journalists sighed in rapture again. At a signal from an attendant at the Cathedral’s door, the crowd in the square outside suddenly rose to its feet or sank to its knees, while church bells rang out and cannon began to roar their salute to the newly crowned monarchs, an orchestrated cacophony of timeless celebration. At the same time, a softer yet equally insistent sound was heard, as the modern media flashed news of the crowning around the world in seconds: it was the furious click of the telegraph machine, sending word ‘to Odessa, to Constantinople, to Berlin, to Paris, to the rocky coast of Penzance, where it slipped into the sea and hurried on under the ocean to the illuminated glass face in the Cable Company’s tall building on Broadway, until the world had been circled, and the answering congratulations came pouring into Moscow while the young Emperor still stood under the dome of the little chapel.”48

The lengthy ceremony was far from over. Next came the act of homage to the Tsar by men who ‘were fathers before he was born’, and which offended Maude immeasurably. To him, the Coronation as a whole was ‘as near as we go nowadays to the deification of mortal man.’49

The only other sour voice was that of the American journalist Richard Harding Davis, whose complaints came from a different perspective. Davis declared himself annoyed that Comte Gustave de Montebello, Ambassador of Russia’s French ally, refused to kiss the Empress’s hand, ‘because, forsooth! The poor little soul held that act of homage to be unbecoming of the representative of a free republic. As though discourtesy had ever been a sign of independence, or as though kissing the hand of a woman could bring anything but honor to any man, even to a Frenchman whose republicanism has not become so serious that it has made him forego his title.’50

Davis was confused: no foreign ambassadors were required to pay homage to the imperial couple, and his memories of the Coronation itself seem tangled up with a later incident. Nevertheless, his attitude to the propriety of hand-kissing is a notable perspective at a date when U.S. citizens abroad often made heavy weather of their own republicanism. Indeed, the American diplomatic delegation at Nicholas’s coronation had prolonged discussions over what to wear, as the Minister, Clifton Breckinridge, knew he would be mocked in the press back home for compromising his principles no matter what he wore. The Europeans would be in court dress or uniform, so the Americans decided at length upon evening dress, though Breckinridge’s colleagues teased him that he would be mistaken for a waiter.

At the end of the obeisance, Nicholas rose from his throne, handed the orb and sceptre to attendants, crossed himself, kissed the hand of the Metropolitan, knelt upon the crimson-carpeted dais, and read his coronation prayer. It ran:

O Lord, God of Our Fathers and King of Kings, Who Hast Created all things by Thy Word, and in Thy Wisdom hast made Man, that he may Govern the World in Holy

41 Ibid., p. 57.
42 Davis, Year, p. 59.
43 Maude, p. 58.
44 Davis, Year, p. 50.
Righteousness [...] Thou hast chosen me as Sovereign and Judge over Thy People. I confess Thy inscrutable Providence in selecting me, and bow in gratitude before Thy Majesty. I beg Thee, My Lord, to aid me in the task Thou hast given me and guide me in this Great Mission. May the Wisdom which descends always from Thy Throne always be with me. May it descend to me from On High, that I may understand what is pleasing in Thy Holy Heavens and in Thy Eyes, and may Govern according to Thy Commandments. May my Heart be in Thy Hand, that I may Order all I do for the advantage of the People Thou has entrusted unto My Care and to Thy Glory. Guide Me, O Lord, that at the Day of Judgment I may render, without condemnation, My Account to Thee. Grant to Me Thy Mercy and Bounty, through Thine Only Begotten Son, with Whom, and with Thy Holy and Life-Giving Spirit, Thou hast Blessed the World unto All Ages.

The words, reported the official account, were 'eagerly repeated by the Emperor’s subjects, who prayed to the Lord to strengthen the Sovereign in his great, heroic feat in service of his Homeland.'

The prayer was one whose words both Nicholas and Alexandra would take literally throughout their reign, justifying autocratic rule as a personal and direct commission from God. 'God', the Empress later insisted to her husband, 'anointed you at your coronation, He placed you where you stand’ and they would understand a constitution or any form of representative government to be ‘against what you swore at your coronation’. The words of the prayer, however, had been cut down substantially from the text traditionally used during previous coronations ‘to spare the Emperor spending more time on his knees.’ No one watching quite agreed about the result, but their opinions seemed roughly divided by nationality. Princess Victoria of Battenberg, the Empress’s sister, was typical of optimistic foreign observers in thinking that her brother-in-law read the prayer ‘in a clear and moving voice’. But Russians, who understood the words and so were alert to any fumbling, and who moreover knew Nicholas better and had misgivings about his firmness of character, seemed to see this reflected in the Tsar’s delivery. His older cousin Grand Duke Konstantin Konstantinovich claimed that he scarcely heard the words, and the veteran Russian journalist and publisher Alexei Suvorin felt that the prayer had been recited ‘hesitatingly and without confidence’.

As the choir burst into a hymn, said the Times correspondent Donald Mackenzie Wallace, ‘a staggering ray of sunshine’ filtered down from the dome, ‘lighting up for a moment the great mass of diamonds’ in the Imperial State Crown. Handing the regalia to adjutants, Nicholas next walked from the dais to the Holy Door at the centre of the iconostasis. His wife followed, the pair walking along a red carpet which the Governor-General of Moscow, Nicholas’s uncle Grand Duke Sergei, unrolled before them. Before the iconostasis, the Metropolitan anointed them with Holy Chrism prepared during Lent specially for the Coronation. Using a golden...
pod, Metropolitan Palladius anointed Nicholas on the forehead, eyes, nose, lips, ears, breast, and both of his hands, pronouncing, ‘The Seal of the Gift of the Holy Spirit’, as a salute of ten guns and the ringing of bells marked the moment. He anointed Alexandra only on the forehead in emphasis of her lower status.

Then, for the only time in his life, Nicholas entered the Sanctuary to celebrate the Eucharist. This was a privilege extended to a sovereign only during his coronation, though one rooted less in a munificent spiritual extension by the Orthodox Church than in extraordinary rights claimed and wrested from the clergy in the name of autocratic power. Tradition dictated that the rite be conducted with the Royal Doors of the *iconostasis* open, so that members of the congregation in the Cathedral of the Assumption could observe the ritual. This, as Richard Wortman has noted, ‘revealed the sovereign as the most favored of the lay population rather than as a member of the clergy’ for by canon law, only ordained priests were allowed to take communion out of sight, with the Royal Doors closed. Nicholas II’s immediate predecessors – Alexander I, Nicholas I, Alexander II, and Alexander III – had all followed this custom.58 The young Nicholas II, however, abandoned this practice. Once he entered the Sanctuary, the Royal Doors firmly closed behind him, an extraordinary piece of symbolism suggesting that his was a mixture of both temporal and spiritual rule.59 Within the Sanctuary, out of sight of the congregation, bishops removed the Emperor’s Imperial Mantle, replacing it with a dalmatic of golden brocade imitating clerical robes. No Russian sovereign since the ‘mad’ Emperor Paul, who believed himself a literal priest in the Orthodox Church, had made such an overt claim to priestly powers.60 Communion reinforced this extraordinary status. Nicholas took the wafer and wine separately, a privilege reserved for actual members of the clergy (fig. 6).

The ceremony lasted three hours. Some of those present became intoxicated in the heady atmosphere of incense and chant; others, less reverent, chattered away as if at a tea party.62 As the congregation was obliged by Orthodox custom to remain standing throughout, several women fainted from the combination of tight corsets, heavy gowns and oppressive heat. Nicholas himself developed a headache. The nine pound Imperial State Crown rested heavily on a sensitive scar he bore from an assassination attempt in Japan when he had travelled there as a young man, and this and the heat did their work. Crown and scar were the Tsar’s badges of office, and he drew his family’s attention to both in conversation that day. The crown, symbolizing his destiny and privileged position, was an unwanted burden that now, even in his moment of greatest glory, oppressed him with literal pain. And the scar, the mark of an assassin’s sabre, was a visible representation of his own, self-fulfilling, belief that a terrible fate awaited him.

Several thousand guests crowded the palace to partake of the Coronation banquet. Among them, feeling herself placed in the role of an inadequate, rather common tourist, was Emily Roebling, whose family built the Brooklyn Bridge. She consoled herself by assuring her companions that back home in Trenton, New Jersey, she was the object of curiosity, and people walked around her rooms peering at her possessions when she held a reception. She was anxious to make it clear to everyone that she felt herself beholden to no royalty, and during dinner enjoyed drinking her husband’s health – for it was his birthday – with the Tsar’s champagne.

58 Wortman, *Scenarios*, vol. ii, p. 31
59 Ibid., p. 31, p. 353; LaPauze, p. 109; Maude, p. 60.
62 Davis, *Year*, p. 63.
Fig. 6. The Emperor receiving communion, *Les Solennités du Saint Couronnement*, after p. 156.
Mandell Creighton, Bishop of Peterborough, was the only foreigner who sat in the Palace of Facets with the Emperor and Empress and their Russian guests during the Coronation banquet, a particular mark of favour to the Church of England. Konstantin Pobedonostsev, the Ober-Procurator of the Holy Synod and architect of many of the theocratic policies of the last reign, flattered Creighton with attentions. Pobedonostsev had tutored Nicholas and before him his father, Alexander III, inculcating their mistrust of democracy and belief in the providential nature of their role as Tsar. Shrewdly conscious of the power of the press and other forms of propaganda, Pobedonostsev hoped to use Creighton to disseminate benevolent views of Russia through the Anglican Church, and carefully explained the meaning of everything the Bishop heard or saw. Creighton duly took the Russian Church’s propaganda about the Tsar’s role on trust, and received the Coronation ceremonies as an expression of popular will, ‘an attempt to set forth in a becoming way the sentiments of the people, who wished their ruler to feel how entirely their hopes were set upon him, and who commended themselves and him alike to God’s guidance and direction. The whole atmosphere seemed charged with a simple, childlike earnestness, and intensity of faith and hope.’

Later in the evening, the young Empress lit 200,000 electric bulbs that illuminated the Kremlin and flooded Moscow with the illusion that its walls and towers were outlined in endless scintillating strings of jewels. Even Maude was impressed until he recalled the work that had made this possible, and heard about numerous small fires which resulted from the illuminations and caused damage to property and to historic monuments including even the Kremlin’s own Ivan Veliki tower. He noticed pointedly that ‘the class of people who were most anxious to make their loyalty and patriotism conspicuous’ included foreigners and people to whom the regime was aggressively unfriendly. ‘For instance, the large house of a well known Jewish capitalist was conspicuously decorated with a gigantic inscription: “Rule to our glory and to the terror of our enemies, Orthodox Tsar”.’

Given the religious justification with which Russian nationalists endowed their anti-Semitism, the inscription was rich in an irony that all who saw it would have understood.

Meanwhile, ‘one of the most brilliantly and expensively lighted houses on the south side of the river belonged to a man of German origin.’ His workers lived in notoriously unsanitary conditions, making it apparent in Maude’s eyes that his patriotism did not extend as far as paying ordinary Russians a decent wage. It seems likely that the German plutocrat he was referring to was Gustav List, who lived or had lived at 12/14 Sofievskaya Embankment, opposite the Kremlin. List’s workers included 16-year-old Semen (‘Senka’) Kanatchikov, who left his own account of the Coronation, and who would remember the eight-hour day with lunch break that he and his colleagues enjoyed as a special privilege during this period as a life goal. Kanatchikov was a country boy who had come to Moscow to find work, and lived in a communal lodging house. Apart from cursory mentions of excessive police activity in tourist accounts, his is the one published memoir aside from Maude’s which provides real evidence of the darker side of the Coronation and the effects it had on the lives of ordinary Muscovites before the notorious tragedy at Khodynka.

After the interlude marked by the announcement of awards to ministers and members of the Imperial Family, festivities would resume with the Coronation gala, a high society event showcasing scenes from Mikhail Glinka’s opera *A Life for the Tsar*, as well as a new ballet. As a tale of sacrifice by peasants, *A Life for the Tsar* foreshadowed Khodynka in a slightly sinister manner, even if its protagonist’s sacrifice in leading invading troops away from the Tsar to a

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65 Maude, pp. 66-7.
66 The house is now known as the Kharitonenko House after its subsequent owner, and was the British Embassy until 2001. Several sources suggest that Kharitonenko acquired at least part of the site as early as 1891, but it seems likely that it was still popularly associated with List, as there is a limit to the numbers of German plutocrats who had houses opposite the Kremlin.
wood where they duly kill him for the deception was a conscious and willing one. With its theme of loyalty and sacrifice, the opera traditionally served as a leitmotif for the Coronation.

Even as the Coronation gala was going on, at nearby Khodynka the crowds awaiting the popular celebrations next day were getting out of hand (fig. 7). Some were undoubtedly drunk, but even had every person there been stone cold sober the fact that the arrangements for their celebration had fallen victim to a territorial dispute between two senior members of the Tsar’s entourage predisposed the event to disaster. Neither the Emperor’s uncle, Grand Duke Sergei – who, as Governor of Moscow, was arguably the responsible party – or the Minister of the Imperial Court, Ilarion Vorontsov-Dashkov, would take full charge of arrangements, and indeed they had not really worked together cordially on any aspect of the Coronation to date. It was the People’s Event, however, which was to bear the harshest brunt of their poor relationship, resulting in shoddy policing and safety arrangements. The attenders at Khodynka camped on and walked across a field generally used for military manoeuvres, its trenches and pits covered in flimsy pieces of wood that easily gave way beneath the weight of trampling feet. Insufficient water was provided for the 400,000 revellers who were expected, and the police chief in charge of arrangements was too involved in the dramas on stage at the gala to pay much attention to the drama unfolding at the People’s Feast.

Worried that supplies of Coronation mugs and sweets would run out before the day even began, the crowd began to push forward. Stumbling on the uneven ground, people tumbled into ravines and plunged through rotted planks into the wells. Fists, elbows and arms pressed men, women and children to the dusty ground, from their feet to their knees, and from their knees to their stomachs as those behind pushed relentlessly on. Bodies were trampled, arms broken, and faces smashed to pulp as screams rose above the meadow. Those who somehow managed to remain standing sometimes died as they stood, crushed and dehydrated in the hot May night. In all, between 1500 and 4000 people lost their lives at Khodynka, or afterwards from their injuries. No-one was ever held responsible at a senior level, despite the appointment of several commissions of enquiry. The luckless Moscow police chief lost his job, but retained a handsome pension.

Potentially more disastrous in the immediate aftermath was the Tsar’s decision to attend the site of the People’s Feast as planned, but acting as if nothing had gone wrong, while bodies were still being removed from the field. He and Alexandra stood on the Imperial Pavilion at the heart of Khodynka while bells rang and orchestras played the national anthem. There were no prayers for the dead, no moments of silence, no acknowledgement at all of the events of the night and early morning. Some of the spectators argued that the reason for this curious silence was that the Tsar did know what had happened. ‘Neither Emperor nor his smiling tender-hearted Empress, nor any of the occupants of those gala and state carriages, having the slightest idea of the terrible tragedy which had taken place just a few hundred yards away’, wrote the British journalist Aubrey Stanhope, who went on to claim for dramatic effect that he himself broke the news of the disaster to the Tsar later in the day. The American Admiral Thomas Selfridge repeated a similar story: few people present in the Imperial Pavilion at Khodynka knew what had happened; ‘it is even said that Emperor was not informed of it.’ But the Emperor’s own diary is clear: he was told of the tragedy before 10.30 in the morning, and attended the People’s Feast around 1 pm, where, to his surprise, it seemed as if ‘nothing had happened’. Nicholas was apparently deceived by the cheering crowds close to him into missing the bodies piled under the pavilion on which he stood – and several of the foreign commentators were similarly taken in, though other members of his party, including his sister, noticed the corpses.

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67 Stanhope, pp. 252, 259.
The foreign guests who failed to notice the bodies also took the probably hand-picked, cheering spectators who stood nearest the Tsar at face value. The Bishop of Peterborough, Mandell Creighton, went so far as to imply that the celebrations had continued only because the people wanted them. ‘We in England’, he wrote, ‘would have shrunk from further demonstrations of loyalty, and would have dispersed sadly to our homes in mourning. It was not so in Moscow.’ Some of the most critical voices, by contrast, were those of conservative Russians like the future War Minister Aleksei Kuropatkin, who concluded bitterly ‘that the People’s Feast is organized not for the people, that the people should present only a majestic living decoration, and that this decoration at the appropriate moment must cry, “Hurrah” and throw their hats into the air.’

Later in the evening, the Emperor compounded his error by attending the French Ambassador’s Ball, apparently swayed by the argument of some of his elder relations that to cancel it would needlessly offend Russia’s new ally. The Ball, which would have drawn extraordinary attention anyway, was one of the many Coronation events where pomp tipped over into vulgarity. The Ambassador’s house was bedecked with tapestries and furniture brought from Versailles and, in his eagerness to emphasize the alliance, the Ambassador ordered bouquets and fans in the matching red, white and blue colours of the French and Russian flags. The same garish colours were also used in the livery of the French pages in some of the processions. In the event, the ball would be remembered for the sheer misfortune of its taking place at all, irrevocably tainted by the Empress’s red, swollen eyes, by the absence of the Dowager Empress (who might herself be said to be using Khodynka to evade events she had not been enjoying), and by the tense atmosphere. Several of the more liberal and publicity-conscious Grand Dukes walked out in protest, and the Grand Duke Sergei was seen smiling broadly in defiance, determined to show his many enemies that nothing had happened to disturb his composure.

In the official Coronation souvenir album, the crush at the People’s Feast at Khodynka would appear as a tragedy suffered by Nicholas rather than the victims, a great sorrow for the Tsar at his most important ceremonial moment. ‘The people’, claimed the account, which gave the disaster just two paragraphs, ‘understood the suffering and emotion of their Emperor, and showed sympathy for his sorrows.’ Insulated from reality and impressed by the splendid pageantry of the Russian Court, many of the foreign visitors to Moscow were affected by the same spirit, ignoring or brushing past the suffering of the wounded and dead while portraying the Tsar as the victim. From there, they moved on to impute all manner of courtly virtues to him as he struggled to deal with the tragedy befalling him. One American visitor to Moscow, completely bewitched by three weeks of imperial pomp and pageantry, insisted that when Nicholas was informed of the accident he ‘called for his horse and accompanied by an ADC rode to the scene of the carnage. Here he showed the greatest grief over what had happened.’

A touching image, evoking so many old legends of the noble prince who goes informally among his people to witness how they live – but unfortunately it is completely untrue. The tragedy and the Tsar’s response, wrote the same visitor, proved to the Empire ‘that their new ruler has a kind, a brave, a manly heart’ and thus ‘laid the foundations of a sympathy between the great under class of the Russian people and the Throne.’ Emily Roebling of Brooklyn Bridge fame had particular empathy for the Tsar. Soon after the Bridge had opened a number of people were killed in a panicked crush crossing it, and as engineers the Roebling family felt responsible, their achievement sadly tarnished. For Emily and Washington Roebling, the Brooklyn Bridge incident acted as a spur to implementing further safety measures for their staff and contractors;

72 Krivenko, p. 311.
73 Logan, p. 183.
74 Ibid.
she assumed that the ‘very frail, thin’ young Tsar, with his ‘thoughtful sad expression as though the weight of his responsibilities are greater than he can endure’ shared her humane response. Her sympathies went out to him for the ‘terrible tragedy’ that spoiled his own celebrations. ‘The poor Emperor!’ wrote the French journalist Henry LaPauze. ‘This is the first blood spilled for him.’

Such ideas evoked a Russian national myth of an inseparable bond between Church, Tsar and People, painting Nicholas as a sufferer on behalf of his nation. ‘This national disaster and common grief’, the British tourist Mary Hickley pondered, ‘may draw Sovereign and People closer: it has revealed how deep is the love between them.’ Ian Malcolm spoke of ‘the sympathy, sincere and immediate, which on this shocking occasion was poured upon the people by the Tsar’, which he was convinced would be forever cemented ‘as one of the most striking and touching features of his reign.’ The tourists and journalists can only have been influenced by Nicholas’s declaration that he would pay 1000 rubles recompense to each bereaved family. This was the apparent basis of some of the gushing accounts of his ‘grief’ and ‘sympathy’ at Khodynka Meadow, which contradicted the claims of other spectators that Nicholas looked impassive because he was unaware. The Emperor who pays from his own pocket for the errors of his underlings is rather like a figure in a fairy tale, and some of those present elaborated still further on his supposed munificence and concern. ‘A stringent order from the Emperor called for the determination of those who had been responsible in the matter, and that severe punishment should be administered to the guilty person or persons’, wrote the imaginative British journalist Aubrey Stanhope, with as little basis in reality as his claim to have personally told Nicholas what had happened. Nicholas would order and then cancel several investigatory commissions, but no punishment was ever meted out or conclusions ever published. Nor were the promised thousand rubles paid to every victim’s family: the sums that were paid to those considered deserving were from government funds rather than Nicholas’s own. Stanhope predicted that this would happen, but he absolved Nicholas of any blame. ‘The Czar of Czars’, he wrote, ‘is, after all, with all his supposed prerogatives, little more than a prisoner in his own country. Around him the chinnovniks have erected a Chinese wall of officialdom, so as to make it almost impossible for the Emperor to act independently upon any subject unless it suits their pleasure.’ This simplistic view of Nicholas – or any Tsar – as a well-meaning individual barred from access to his subjects by a wall of self-interested bureaucrats was one which enjoyed a certain currency in nationalist circles throughout Nicholas’s reign, not least among the people closest to the Tsar. But his own diary and accounts by courtiers and relations leave no doubt that Nicholas was fully appraised of the events of Khodynka in the early morning, with regular updates throughout the day, and that his decisions were conscious ones. He was more concerned that the welter of court and family in-fighting resulting from an open investigation would reflect badly on his regime than he was with meting out punishment to the responsible parties or sending signals that lessons would be learned and that the pointless deaths of so many ordinary people were deeply regretted.

Absolving the Emperor of guilt, the foreign visitors seemed as disinclined as he was to blame any other official. They had little doubt who bore real responsibility for the disaster: those gathered on Khodynka had brought about the disaster. Uneducated

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75 Weigold, p. 102.
76 Ibid., p. 60.
77 LaPauze, p. 128.
78 Hickley, p. 35.
79 Malcolm, p. 68.
80 Stanhope, p. 259.
81 For full details of these investigations and the payments, see Baker, Nicholas II and the Khodynka Tragedy.
82 Stanhope, p. 259.
factory workers and peasants were unruly at the best of times; gathered together, and influenced by alcohol, they were a dangerous force. Aubrey Stanhope, despite having genuine sympathy for the victims, insisted that the crowd on Khodynka had been sub-human. ‘The Russian moujik, or peasant’, he wrote, ‘is a creature of such childish naivety and absolute stupidity, full of superstition, and with a reverence and adoration for the Great White Tsar […] In intelligence and habits of life he is not far removed from the animal.’ He likened the crowd at Khodynka to wolves, ‘dangerous and bloodthirsty’. This was the most extreme example of a view expressed by several of the visitors and even by some of the victims themselves. ‘We’re the guilty ones ourselves. We coveted those gifts, we didn’t maintain order, and, well, we crushed one another’, remembered one Moscow worker.

These clichéd observations on ‘national character’ were a sharp contrast to the angry response more widespread on Russia’s streets and in newspapers abroad, where the tragedy was quickly seen as a sign of official incompetence and indifference to the fate of ordinary people. Aylmer Maude, as ever, was the one foreign spectator who articulated this anger when he heard that a ball had been cancelled in mourning for the Austrian Archduke Karl Ludwig, when Khodynka had warranted no such gesture of respect. ‘To be able to make head or tail of the Coronation proceedings’, Maude wrote, ‘one has to grasp the idea that human beings are not brothers, sons of one Father as Jesus taught, but that they are made of various qualities of dirt, and therefore an Austrian Archduke may well, in the sympathies of the Court of Russia, outweigh thousands’. Nicholas and Alexandra spent just half a day visiting two hospitals in which some of the victims of Khodynka lay. Mismanagement followed mismanagement, with Nicholas missing opportunities at every turn, often ignoring the advice of his more sensitive relations in favour of the most arrogant and entrenched. His mother had begged him not to go to the Ball; this was rejected. One cousin suggested a memorial service for the dead; this too was rejected.

A few days later, Nicholas and selected guests went to the ancient Troitsky-Sergievskaia Monastery outside Moscow, one of Russian Orthodoxy’s holiest shrines. The prayers of the monks at this monastery were credited with having driven back the Tartar occupation, and the Bishop of Peterborough, who was in the Emperor’s party, viewed the visit as particularly significant to the Coronation ceremonies. It was, he thought, intended to transport the Tsar ‘back to the lives of simple men, instinct with faith, who supplied the motive power and maintained the principles […] round which the Russian nation had been formed.’ No one noted the irony of elevating these long-dead ‘simple men’ to the autocratic roster of honour while so many present-day workers and peasants lay unvisited in Moscow’s hospitals. Nevertheless, this obscure trip is just one of many gestures which highlight the gap between the political image Nicholas was trying to convey at his coronation, and the empty reality of his personal rule.

‘A contagious spirit of combined patriotism, awe, veneration, and love permeated the populace’, wrote an American visitor as he recalled the Coronation later. ‘They loved the Tsar as a man, they venerated him deeply as the head of their church, they felt awe from the fact of his unlimited power, while his personification of political and military Russia herself appealed strongly to their national pride and loyalty. All contributed to an atmosphere which gave to the grand pomp and forms a unique and deep significance, the influence of which dominated all who were there.’ Although written with a huge dose of retrospective nostalgia (and just how many members of the ‘populace’ did this privileged visitor actually see?), this view gives some idea of the sense of hope and expectation vested in Nicholas not only by the naively expectant

83 Ibid., pp. 245-6.
84 See also Kate Koon Bovey, Russian Coronation, 1896 (Minneapolis, 1942), p. 13.
85 Zelnik, p. 43.
86 Maude, pp. 34-5.
87 Creighton, Historical Essays, p. 325.
foreign visitors but undoubtedly by many of his subjects as well. Despite – or perhaps because of – the uneasy state of the country and the cynicism of the educated class, there were still plenty who wanted Nicholas to succeed and saw him as the hope of the future. He was faced with a uniquely distressing event in the course of his coronation, but it was one which with imagination and flexibility could have been turned around. In showing human solidarity with his bereaved subjects Nicholas also, in the most cynical terms, could have used Khodynka to cement his own position. In 1825, Nicholas I had come to the Imperial Throne amid the Decembrist Rebellion. Danger demanded decisive action of the autocrat, and with professions of reluctance he spilled the blood of his subjects as his reign began. Yet he turned this bloodshed to his own advantage, portraying himself as a stern, paternalistic bastion of order, guarding Russia against chaos. Three-quarters of a century later, faced with bloodshed at the symbolic beginning of his reign, his great-grandson Nicholas II let a disastrous situation spiral out of control. A generally well-meaning man who saw himself as embodying Russia’s sorrows, Nicholas II faced a tragedy that offered a similar chance for imperial clarity, an opportunity to display a sorrowful unity with his people and give body and meaning to his own vision at the most public moment of his reign. Some of the more fanciful foreign accounts reflected just this vision, but the majority of dispassionate spectators saw something quite different. Anxious to appease his uncle and allies, to distract attention from the imperfections of the governing caste he intended to maintain, and unable to weigh the effect of indulging his personal craving for a quiet life against the public desires of his injured subjects, Nicholas’s actions unwittingly fed a perception that he was a foolish, callous youth, hopelessly inept and lacking in basic human sympathy. He left his coronation in Moscow having effectively taken the first steps along the road that would lead many of his subjects to condemn him as ‘Nicholas the Bloody’ and his regime as a degenerate tyranny.

Unrest, strikes, and political assassinations followed the Coronation in rapid succession. Most of these had the roots in the previous reign or earlier, but Nicholas was ill-equipped in personal or public relations terms to deal with them. Discontent swelled into revolution during Russia’s disastrous war with Japan, itself partly a consequence of the Tsar’s strange theosophical conception of himself as a natural, spiritual leader for Asian peoples. In January 1905, troops in St Petersburg shot down unarmed groups of workers attempting to march on the Winter Palace to present Nicholas II with a petition calling for industrial and governmental reform. ‘Bloody Sunday’, as the massacre came to be called, left ninety-two dead, at least according to the Government, though few believed the official tally. It was Khodynka all over again, another public relations disaster for the Tsar, both in Russia and abroad.

In October, under enormous pressure, Nicholas reluctantly granted a parliament, the Duma, potentially transforming the Empire from autocracy to the germ of a constitutional monarchy. But neither Nicholas nor Alexandra reconciled themselves to this concession. Both continued to believe and insist, despite the October Manifesto, that the Tsar remained an autocrat, solely responsible for the Russian nation. During the Coronation ceremony, Nicholas took no oath, nor did he promise to preserve the autocracy. Yet both insisted that he had done, referring to this phantom oath to justify decisions against reform. The Duma became an inconvenience, a troublesome reminder of a moment of weakness. Desperately clinging to rights that had been signed away, the imperial couple undermined the country’s new government, deluding themselves with notions of divine, autocratic power. The First World War, the shadow of Rasputin, disorders and food shortages, ministers dismissed or resigning as the government devolved into chaos, and an Empress popularly believed to be a German all came to a head in 1917, when for the second time discontent became a Revolution. On a cold March day, isolated at the Pskov train station, Nicholas signed away the throne in a document all the more remarkable for its mystical interpretation of the circumstances. The Revolution, Nicholas declared, was ‘a harsh new ordeal’ sent down by ‘the Lord God’ upon Russia. Even in his last act as Tsar, he viewed abdication as God’s vengeful judgment upon a nation disobedient to imperial authority, not as the consequence
of his own failings upon the throne.\textsuperscript{89} This divine judgment swept the Romanovs from power, both Nicholas and Alexandra sincerely believed, to punish the sins of their subjects.\textsuperscript{90}

Khodynka had christened Nicholas II’s new reign in blood, enveloping the Coronation in sorrow and unease. Like a perverse mirror image of the tale of Ivan Susanin in \textit{A Life for the Tsar}, the sacrificial blood shed on Khodynka only amplified the tragedies of the Romanov dynasty, and disillusion, not expiation, followed the disaster. Failing to understand the precarious situation, the Tsar displayed insufficient public sympathy for the victims, allowed the guilty to escape punishment, and fulfilled his promises to the bereaved in incomplete or half-hearted ways. Members of the execution squad who shot Nicholas and his family in the summer of 1918 viewed the blood they spilled in a dingy Siberian cellar as retribution for the dynasty’s crimes. Then and today, however, others saw Nicholas II’s death as penitential sacrifice, the destruction of a Tsar-Martyr innocent of guilt who died for Russia’s sins. What happened on Khodynka, Nicholas recorded in his diary, was ‘a very grave sin’ in which ‘about 1,300 people were trampled’.\textsuperscript{91} One website insists that these words are evidence that he felt the sin was his own, and was ‘taking the blame upon his soul’, as a Christ-like sufferer for the nation.\textsuperscript{92} This view is not unique to the site, but it is wishful thinking nevertheless, rationalizing Nicholas’s fatalistic inaction as deliberate martyrdom and taking the religious propaganda of the monarchy at face value. Nicholas’s own words seemed to feed this delusion, since in a letter to his brother he described the Coronation and its aftermath as ‘a year of hard labour, with Alix and me as the martyrs’. In the circumstances, however, it was a particularly insensitive analogy.\textsuperscript{93}

\textsuperscript{89} Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii, F. 601, Op. 1, D. 2100: Nicholas II’s Abdication Manifesto, 2 March (Old Style), 1917.
\textsuperscript{90} For a full exploration of Alexandra’s religious views, see Janet Ashton, ‘God in All Things: The Religious Outlook of Russia’s Last Empress’, \textit{eBLJ} (2006), art. 4, pp. 1-22.
\textsuperscript{91} Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii, F. 601, Op. 1, D. 236: Nicholas II’s Diary, 18 May (OS), 1896.