

Rasputin

by Desmond Ford

It is always tempting to find simple solutions to complex problems. "But the truth is rarely simple and never pure." When it is forgotten that most situations are closer to a jigsaw puzzle than to the simple addition of one and one, ^{the result is} ~~it is customary to~~ exaggerate ^{10 or 20} a single factor.

With this in mind, ^{the result is} our contention that the wickedness of Rasputin, professed religionist of Siberia, contributed significantly to the launching of modern Communism, must not be overpressed but neither should it be underrated. Biographer after biographer **has** seen a significant relationship between the unrest engendered by Rasputin's malicious influence over the Czar and Empress and the tragic days of 1917. We intended ~~ed~~ to indicate some of the reasons for this conviction, thereby illustrating how powerful for good or ill the influence of a single individual can be.

Grigori Yefimovich later called Rasputin which means debauché was born in Siberia in 1873 but died in the city of the Czar Dec. 30-31, 1916. Some have seen in him an extreme illustration of the conflict between the spirit and the flesh sketched in Rom 7:14-25 (though we personally believe that this particular Scripture applies only to the truly converted, and we doubt Rasputin was ever among them.)

Of all the biographical accounts of this man with which I am familiar only one makes a "good" case for his innocence. This is the account given by his daughter Maria, and put into literary shape by Pattie Barham. We think, however, that almost certainly Robert K. Massie is right when he comments:

According to this faithful daughter, her saintly father's good name was blackened by the monstrous device, concocted by the Tsar's enemies, of hiring an actor who resembled the staretz and instructing him to debauch himself in the most obscene manner in the most public places. It is a dutiful effort, but it breaks down under the weight of contrary evidence. *Nicholas and Alexandra*, p. 340 n.

With this comment in mind we are more inclined to consider the verdict of Alexander Kerensky, "Without Rasputin, there could have been no Lenin." Cited by Massie, vi.

Grigori was the son of peasants and in his early years acquired a reputation for debauchery. About the age of thirty he came into contact with a religious sect that stressed that in order to know salvation one must also know sin in its depths. Such teaching struck an answering chord in the licentious peasant. All history and biography testifies to the fact that lust is ever counterfeiting love in every place, and thus professed religion and impurity often run side by side. Grigori alternated between desires for women and desires for holiness. During a period when the

latter held sway, he married (in 1895). He had four children, one of whom died, another turned out to be mentally defective. Ultimately he took the other two to St. Petersburg. Often ~~he had~~ ^{he took} prior to this time of residence at St. Petersburg, left his family for long pilgrimages throughout Russia or into Palestine.

It was in 1904 that this "holy" man appeared in the Russian capital and took the aristocrats of society by storm. After wooing religious leaders of the city he was introduced to the court and the Czar and Empress in particular. At this time he appeared for what he was—a filthy peasant, coarse and lascivious. But he was also bold and resourceful. Though it was affirmed that he never washed or changed his clothes, and though his hands were grimy with black nails and his beard laced with dirt and his odor repulsive, yet cultured women were increasingly attracted to the new phenomenon. He offered to satisfy the contrary desires of such women—holiness and sensual fulfillment.

It should here be conceded that biographers while almost unanimous about the incongruous mixture of professed holiness and real sensuality, agree that many of the published accounts are frequently erroneous. It has been said that there have been more biographies about Rasputin than any other man, but the claim is false. That honor belongs to Martin Luther. But just as many of the biographies of Luther fall far short of the truth, so it is with many of the accounts of Rasputin's life.

But even daughter Maria's account, with all its natural prejudices on the side of her father, yet makes it clear that to her knowledge he had many moral lapses. On the other side, these lapses are set forth as characteristic. Probably the full truth will never be known, but it seems clear that the Siberian staretz from the time of his early experience with sectarian religionists of unusual dogmas, reflected in his own life the same strange combination of religion and sensuality ascribed to his original teachers.

Both healing and hypnotic powers belonged to Rasputin if even a tenth of the accounts are true. By 1905 he was a court favorite particularly with the empress of Russia whose great overwhelming sorrow was that her son, the next Tsar to be, was a hemophiliac. Hearing of the new holy man after a serious hemorrhage overtook Alexis, she called for Rasputin immediately. That very night they saw the boy take a turn for the better and fall into a sound sleep after the bleeding had ceased. In the years to come, the staretz ~~was~~ talked openly to the ailing boy and his sisters and, by diverting the young lad's fears, gave him that peace of mind which in itself can ease many infirmities.

Robert K. Massie in his *Nicholas and Alexandra* offers a possible explanation for Rasputin's healing powers, as manifested in the royal court on behalf of the young prince.

'Rasputin took the empire by stopping the bleeding of the Tsarevich,' wrote J. B. S. Haldane, the British geneticist. 'It was perhaps an imposture, but it is also possible that by

hypnotism or a similar method, he was able to produce a contraction of the small arteries. These last were placed under the regulation of the (autonomic) nervous system and although they are not normally controlled by the will, their contraction can be provoked in the body of a hypnotized subject.' pages 200-201.

Massie continues:

The probable answer to this mystery derives from recent explorations into the shadowy links between the working of the mind and body and between emotions and health. In hematology, for example, it has been proved that bleeding in hemophiliacs can be aggravated or even spontaneously induced by emotional stress. Anger, anxiety, resentment, and embarrassment cause an increase in blood flow through the smallest blood vessels, the capillaries. In addition, there is evidence that overwrought emotions can adversely affect the strength and integrity of the capillary walls. As these tend to become more fragile and break down under stress while at the same time they are attempting to handle an increased flow of blood, the likelihood of abnormal bleeding becomes greater.

There is an opposite side to this proposition. It is strongly suspected that a decrease in emotional stress has a beneficial effect on bleeding. As calm and a sense of well-being returns to a patient, his capillary blood flow will decline and the strength of his vascular walls increase. pages 201-202.

In the strange Siberian monk the Russian court had an outstanding story-teller whose voice had a mesmerizing effect. He brought calm and reassurance to the entranced prince and with these came healing. The suggestions we have quoted were written in 1966, but modern consensus agrees.

According to most biographers, those who opposed the new power behind the throne soon found themselves exiled. Yet the starets was to take a stand that would make him unwelcome to the Tsar. He opposed Russia's participation in the coming conflict and took every opportunity to warn against it.

By 1912 there was growing unrest among workers and peasants. The following year seven hundred thousand Russian workmen went on strike. By January the following year, the numbers were closer to one million. Come July, and it was a million and a half. No wonder Germany felt sure that Russia would never enter the war.

Massie reminds us that the summer of 1914 was marked by glorious weather, and millions left their work to holiday. Then came Sarajevo and the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand. A few days prior to this crisis, the Russian Imperial family left Peterhof to cruise along the Baltic coast. Unexpectedly Alexis fell ill again after a minor accident. Then came the word that an attempt had been made to assassinate Rasputin.

Massie's comment is thought provoking:

It was sheer coincidence that placed the two assassination attempts, the one at Sarajevo and the one at Pokrovskoe, so close together in time. Yet the coincidence alone is enough to provoke a tantalizing bit of speculation. Suppose the outcome of these two violent episodes had been reversed. Suppose the Hapsburg Prince, a well-meaning man, the heir and the hope of a crumbling dynasty, had lived, while the surging life and mischievous influence of the Siberian peasant had ended forever. How different the course of that long summer—and perhaps of our twentieth century—might have been. page 258

When the Austrian government delivered its ultimatum to Serbia, the whole world knew that Russia had to be involved. Traditionally the guardian of the Slavs, Russia was obviously under threat. To maintain her position as a first class power, Russia had to act. This was the start of the slippery-dip, a dramatic careening that would finally involve at least half the world traumatically, and the rest of the world to some degree.

The hour of Marx, Lenin, Stalin had dawned! And for Nicholas and his tightly knit affectionate family, life was almost over. But first the marching of over fifteen million Russian soldiers to war and initial victories, despite the success of Germany in August and September. The losses of Tannenberg were avenged.

... the main mass of the Austro-Hungarian army, one million strong, launched itself north from Galicia intending to amputate Poland from Russia. Within less than three weeks, the Russians had stopped and smashed these invaders. Four Austro-Hungarian armies were ousted, two hundred thousand prisoners and Lemberg, the capital of the province were taken, and Russian cavalry crossed the Carpathians to ride out onto the great Danube plain towards Budapest and Vienna. In terror, ~~hinting that I might be forced to a separate peace,~~ the Austrian government appealed to Berlin for help. Massie, page 309

But the tide turned dramatically when the German army gave its specific attention to a single sector of the Russian line. From the time of this monster barrage from southern Poland the Russian army began to bleed to death. Nearly one and a half million men were killed or wounded. The hatred for everything German that now pervaded Russia was to involve the German Empress. From Red Square came the throaty cry of the mob that the Empress be confined to a convent, the Tsar deposed and Rasputin hanged.

In desperation Nicholas II left for the front as the figurehead for his army. Now he was hundreds of miles from the center of government, and the Empress influenced by Rasputin took over. "Together they would finally bring down the Russian Empire." Massie, page 324.

But none could deny the dedication of the wife of Nicholas. She served as nurse where a constant stream of wounded deluged her and the other medical personnel. As though made of steel, she did all that was humanly possible to alleviate the pain, physical and mental, of the casualties. Obviously she needed whatever help she could get, and who better than Rasputin? He

✕ would be at her side to choose leaders or to remove them. He would help her make the many decisions of state, for God was with him—or so she thought.

From Rasputin's daughter comes this summary of the crisis:

... in spite of his infirmities, my father kept one thought uppermost in his mind: he must do what was best for his country. And his plans, if not always in the highest tradition of statecraft, were still, to him, an improvement on the current policies of the government.... He could see no other way than that of placing himself under God's will and guiding the Tsar according to that will. Maria Rasputin, page 255.

When Anna Vyrubova was apparently mortally wounded in a train accident, the Tsar and Tsarina gave up all hope till Rasputin prayed and predicted her survival. Such events bolstered the man's status at the palace and his power in government.

✕ Outside Rasputin's apartment by day, the curb was lined with the cars of the wealthy and influential who came to visit him. Ascending the stairs, and often a stair at a time with minutes between, was a long time of people to solicit his help. Massie tells us that they included "bankers, bishops, officers, society women, actresses, adventurers and speculators, peasant girls, old women who had traveled miles simply to get his blessing." page 335.

✕ In contrast, hanging around his house was a detective squad taking notes of everything that happened, including Rasputin's frequent sexual liaisons. After strenuous nights of carousal, the monk staggered home with an entourage of exhausted officers of the law. But when he went to the palace it was a different man, and the Empress refused to believe all the reports that represented him otherwise.

The passing days comprehended not a comedy of errors but a tragedy of evil. From Bruce Lockhart came this description of one of Rasputin's nights out.

I was at Yar, the most luxurious night haunt of Moscow, with some English visitors. As we watched the music hall performance in the main hall, there was a violent fracas in one of the private rooms. Wild shrieks of women, a man's curses, broken glass, and the banging of doors. Headwaiters rushed upstairs. The manager sent for policemen.... But the row and the roaring continued.... The cause of the disturbance was Rasputin—drunk and lecherous, and neither police nor management dared evict him. Massie, page 339.

When the police commander sent a report to the palace it was only a matter of time before he was removed from his position. Maria's explanation of such events is that enemies hired an actor to pose as her father and to behave abominably. But to quote Massie, this attempt "breaks down under the weight of contrary evidence." Even Maria frequently admits to her father's lechery in her own record.

Gradually the government disintegrated. Any who failed to approve of Rasputin had only a slippery standing. Some of the replacements were hideously unsuitable. And all the while the

populace seethed ~~more and more~~. Yet Rasputin became increasingly daring, even advising as to Russian military tactics. Soon Petrograd echoed with the accusation that both the Empress and Rasputin were German spies. 7.

On December 2nd, the governing body (the Duma) heard an impassioned plea from Vladimir Purishkevich to have Rasputin removed. He charged that on the recommendation of the monk the most abject citizen could be elevated to high office. Then came his challenge:

If you are truly loyal, if the glory of Russia, her mighty future which is closely bound up with the brightness of the name of the Tsar means anything to you, then on your feet, you Ministers. Be off to Headquarters and throw yourselves at the feet of the Tsar. Have the courage to tell him that the multitude is threatening in its wrath. Revolution threatens and an obscure monk shall govern Russia no longer. Massie, page 369.

One who heard these rhetorical thunders was the young Prince Felix Yussoupov. This wealthy dissolute fop had caroused with Rasputin at night clubs, but gradually he came to see the monk as a threat to the monarchy, and decided he must be assassinated. 7.

That December Rasputin was moody and fearful, sensing that his end was near. Thus some time towards the end of that month in the year 1916 he wrote a prophetic letter chiefly addressed to Nicholas. 7.

I write and leave behind me this letter at St. Petersburg. I feel that I shall leave life before January 1. I wish to make known to the Russian people, to Papa, to the Russian Mother and to the Children, to the land of Russia, what they must understand. If I am killed by common assassins, and especially by my bothers the Russian peasants, you, Tsar of Russia, have nothing to fear, remain on your throne and govern, and you, Russian Tsar, will have nothing to fear for your children, they will reign for hundreds of years in Russia. But if I am murdered by boyars, nobles, and if they shed my blood, their hands will remain soiled with my blood, for twenty-five years they will not wash their hands from my blood. They will leave Russia. Brothers will kill brothers, and they will kill each other and hate each other, and for twenty-five years there will be no nobles in the country. Tsar of the land of Russia, if you hear the sound of the bell which will tell you that Gregory has been killed, you must know this: if it was your relations who have wrought my death then no one of your family, that is to say, none of your children or relations will remain alive for more than two years. They will be killed by the Russian people.... I shall be killed. I am no longer among the living. Pray, pray, be strong, think of your blessed family. Gregory. Massie, page 374.

God, who once spoke through a donkey and on another time prophetically through the wicked Caiaphas, had much to do with this letter, and it is one of the most astounding documents of all history. 7.

The prince nurtured his friendship with Rasputin in order to lure him to the place of death. As for bait, there was the promise that he would meet that renowned beauty, Princess Irena. So the cellar of the Moika Palace was prepared, including, according to the prince's later record, the poisoning of cakes and wine.

Most accounts of Rasputin's death take for granted the accuracy of Yussouron. His story is that Rasputin ate two of the poisoned cakes, drank of the poisoned wine but was unaffected. It took many bullets to topple the monk. ~~And~~ Minutes after he had been pronounced dead by a participating doctor, Rasputin's eyes twitched. Shaking himself, he arose and attacked Yussoupov. Finally, more shots, a pounding with a club and the binding of the body with a rope. The corpse was pushed through a hole in the ice of the river Neva. Three days later he was found with his hand upraised in benediction or malediction, free of the ropes and with his lungs filled with water, testifying to his death, not by poison or gun wounds, but by drowning.

Yussoupov's own account makes one's hair almost stand on end. He tells how after the swallowing of poisoned cakes and wine, the ebullient monk demanded of his host guitar music—for two and a half hours. Fleeing upstairs to the other conspirators, ^{de prince} he asked what he should do. The verdict was that the poisoned man must not be allowed to leave alive. Taking Grand Duke Dmitri's revolver, the prince returned holding the gun behind him.

At this point Rasputin is said to have suggested a visit to the gypsies for feminine company. "With God in thought, but mankind in the flesh," he had said with a wink. But the prince led him to an ornate crucifix and shouted, "Gregory Efimovich, you'd far better look at the crucifix and say a prayer." Next came the firing of the weapon, a scream and the fall of Rasputin. Yet after the pronouncement of death by Dr Lazover the face of the 'corpse' twitched and the eyes opened.

Yussoupov describes the moment thus:

I then saw both eyes—the green eyes of a viper—staring at me with an expression of diabolical hatred. Massie, page 377.

Foaming at the mouth, the monk leaped upon the assassin who fled up the stairs. Immediately behind him was the roaring "corpse." Thus was a Shakespearean drama enacted until the conspirators rested when as they saw the ascending bubbles from the hole in the frozen ice. Massie's conclusion to the account cannot be equaled:

History, with all its sweep and diversity, produces few characters as original and extravagant as Gregory Rasputin. The source and extent of his extraordinary powers will never be fully known; the shadow of this uncertainty perpetually will refresh the legend. The duality of his countenance—the one face peaceful, soothing, offering the blessings of God; the other cynical, crafty, reddened by lust—is the core of his mysterious appeal. In his single, remarkable life, he represents not only the two sides of Russia's history, half compassionate

and long-suffering, half savage and pagan, but the constant struggle in every soul between good and evil. Massie, page 380.

Let every man say, "There, but for the grace of God, go I." The most shocking thing about the Eichmann trial in Israel was the ordinariness of the villain. Eichmann loved his children and good music. He was a disciplined capable administrator, and a murderer on a gigantic scale. But he looked like you and me. More than that, in many ways he was like you and me.

The terrible accounts of sin in Scripture such as in the book of Judges ^{and the tragedies of history} are a warning to us all. We must have God, we must, or it would be better that we had not been born.