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History

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Abstract

The public and private attitudes towards the last pre-revolutionary French queen, Marie Antoinette, and Russian empress Alexandra Fedorovna of Russia can best be described as one of hostility, disdain, and hatred. This essay attempts to identify and reveal the perceptions about Marie Antoinette and Alexandra and analyze the circumstances prevailing at the time that shaped those impressions. Although the French and Russian revolutions provide the backdrop for the lives of both women, their complex relationship with the people of their adopted countries is worth examining. The common grounds on which both the queens were criticized can be classified into two broad categories – their status as foreigners and their female gender. This thesis seeks to identify and evaluate the common dynamic and conditions prevailing during the revolutions that led to Marie Antoinette and Alexandra Fedorovna being targets of intense abhorrence. In doing so, it attempts to provide useful insights into the tensions prevailing in the French and Russian societies and how fears of alien powers and radical repression of women served as a release point for those stresses.

At the heart of several networks, we still find accounts and stories that draw attention to the role of individuals shaping important events in the past. This anecdotal evidence can provide substantial insights into the impersonal narratives of most political historians. No other woman in French history has ever received the amount of abuse and disapproval as piled upon Marie Antoinette in France during the mid-eighteenth century. The origin of the phrase "let them eat cake" is obscure, but it is widely understood that the woman whose name was most associated

with the phrase, Marie Antoinette, the last pre-revolutionary Queen of France, never said it. Despite the lack of its truthfulness, the phrase demonstrates the hatred directed at the Queen. This hatred was not unique to Marie Antoinette. Alexandra Fedorovna, the last czarina of Russia, was the focus of parallel disdain in the early part of the twentieth century. Their situations are strikingly similar; both were criticized on common grounds of nationality and gender.[1] Both Marie Antoinette and Alexandra Fedorovna were German-born, and in each case, this accident of birth was to haunt them in later years when their adopted countries went to war with their countries of birth.[2] Like Marie Antoinette, the young foreign princess, Czarina Alexandra quickly became the target of people's mounting ire. Did the French Queen and Russian Czarina serve as lightning rods that sparked the collapse of the monarchy and did their gender and nationality play in the delegitimization of power of the royal families of France and Russia? To answer this question, the essay will provide a more profound understanding of the complications of being a foreign queen in France and Russia. The purpose of this comparative study is to highlight that while the causes of the French and Russian revolutions were deep and complex such as unequal distribution of wealth and opportunity, the actions of the revolutionaries to delegitimize power and authority were motivated by fears that were based on nationality and gender.

Marie Antoinette and Alexandra Fedorovna were extraordinary but minor figures in French and Russian history respectively. They contributed little to the tragedy that immersed France and Russia. Far more important were the grossly incompetent monarchies of Louis XV and Nicholas II, the costly involvement of the French and Russians in the American Revolution and World War I respectively, and ruthless revolutionaries in the form of George Danton, Robespierre, and Jean-Paul Marat and Lenin.

The French nationalists faced no oppressive foreign power, no alien institution denying the right to an ethnically distinct state, and no penalties for the use of French or the practice of French culture. By 1792 the Revolution had moved into a less cosmopolitan, more xenophobic phase. "In December 1793, this irrational dislike had resulted in the expulsion of Anarchasis de Cloots and Thomas Paine, of Prussian and English birth from the National Convention despite their French

[1] Let Them Eat Cake Gender, Nationalism and Tyranny in Revolutionary France and Russia, [Page 1], PDF.

[2] Talani and Gervasi, Maria Antonietta d'Austria: natali 2 9.bre 1755: [estampe], image, Stanford University Libraries, 1774, accessed July 7, 2018, https://frda.stanford.edu/en/catalog/ bp296cx799

citizenship."[3] Marie Antoinette was tainted with perceptions of foreign status as well. However, attempting to present herself in a French manner was emphasized to her from the moment she was selected as the bride of the then-son of the King. She spoke French well, used it in her daily life, and had spent half of her life in France. Her father spoke French as well.[4] That background was insufficient as the French aristocracy still looked at her as a foreigner. In those days, only members of the royal family were able to identify with the state as they considered the state personal property. As such, Marie Antoinette had to be detached from the Austrian state. This was partly achieved by the symbolic stripping of her Viennese clothing and acceptance of French clothing during her first entry into the French Kingdom on a small neutral island in the Rhine.[5] This act alone could have given nationalist revolutionaries some pause that Marie Antoinette was willing to learn from and be enlightened by the French. Yet this did not happen. Historian Thomas Kaiser argues that hostility toward the Queen in the pre-revolutionary period was motivated by hostility toward Austria.[6] The foreign ministry officials considered the Austrian state unreliable and often pointed to the breach of the Treaty of Westphalia to make their point and incite the peasants. The most obvious victim of this hatred by the peasants was Louis XVI. The revolutionaries found it necessary to repeatedly emphasize his submission to his Austrian wife.

Ideas about exactly what was and what was not appropriate behavior for a woman were a constant feature of public life throughout the revolutionary period. The common views expressed by the revolutionary authorities were that the appropriate place for a woman was the home. Her only possible contribution to public affairs was to support her husband so that he would be able to discharge his civic responsibilities fully. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, often seen as the founding father of the French Revolution stressed and threw his weight behind the proposition that the role of women was largely to be supportive and housebound wives. Rousseau warned that women fulfilling masculine roles would relegate men to perform womanly responsibilities. Marie Antoinette's mother was labeled as an Amazon.[i]

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[3] Let Them Eat Cake Gender, Nationalism and Tyranny in Revolutionary France and Russia, [Page 87].
[4] Ibid., [Page 135].
[5] Dena Goodman, Marie-Antoinette: Writings on the Body of a Queen, ed. Thomas E. Kaiser (Routledge, 2013), [Page 62], accessed July 12, 2018, https://books.google.com/books?id=VA9oTIyrWr4C&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false.
[6] Kaiser, Thomas, 'Who's afraid of Marie Antoinette?' in *French History,* Vol 14, No 3, 2000, pp. 241-271.

Against this backdrop, Marie Antoinette was often portrayed as having masculine traits. She was depicted in literature as enjoying sexual relations with other women. Pamphlets showed the queen of France as having a voracious sexual appetite and being indiscriminate, contrary to the image of a traditional French woman. These images served to confirm the masculinity of Marie Antoinette in the eyes of both the aristocrats and the peasantry. A narrative developed that the queen did not conform to social customs surrounding relationships and sex. One of the core functions of the queen in France was to deliver an heir. Her debasement as a woman who was behaving inappropriately served to delegitimize the French monarchy. As rumors about her purported affairs circulated, there were fears that the philandering queen would admit somebody other than the monarch in her marital bed and produce an illegitimate child that would pass as heir to the throne. In this context, Marie Antoinette was failing at her role, and in doing so harming the wider public interest.

Among several similarities between the French and Russian revolutions, one of which stands out is that both were nationalist revolutions. The status of Alexandra Fedorovna as the most prominent and 'first' woman of Russia meant that anything she did could be identified as political. The causes of Russian resentment towards the czarina began in 1905. The unrest and division within the Russian government that eventually led to its dissolution in 1917 was greatly aggravated just weeks before the appearance of Rasputin in November 1905. Following repeated defeats in the Russo-Japanese War, many Russians began to criticize their government, which led to protests. They demanded a legislative body and other structural changes to the government. The St. Petersburg Workers' march – later known as Bloody Sunday – on the Winter Palace was a notable example of the growing discontentment that the czars struggled to control; nonviolent marchers brought forth a petition of changes to present to their king and were met with gunfire. News of the violence spread quickly; protests and strikes followed closely behind. All over Russia, workers, students, members of the military, peasants, and others became involved in the social movement for change. Workers created the Soviets of Workers' Deputies which organized demonstrations and negotiated with employers and the police. Public resentment grew to a fever pitch with a strike in the capital of St. Petersburg. Other cities experienced similar situations, bringing the country to a standstill. As the government had just managed to end the Russo-Japanese War, the czar realized he needed to act, and fast, before the country completely fell apart. Nicholas II's proclamation on October 17, 1905 – known as the October Manifesto – was an attempt by the imperial family to appease

the dissatisfied and disenfranchised to prevent a rebellion. The October Manifesto "guaranteed" the Russian people the right to freedom of speech and proposed a legislative body called the Duma. The nationalists in Russia in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had a tense relationship with Russia's peasants. For example, Pavel Miliukov, a politician who occupied a senior position in the Constitutional Democrat party before 1917, told his fellow Duma members that "the nation is adaptable, it changes, it expresses itself… it prepares for the morrow."[7] These views alienated the uneducated, unambitious peasantry and offered ample grounds to disqualify peasants from membership in the nation. Introducing Rasputin into this context had predictable results.

Alexandra was born in Germany, spoke German, practiced a German religion, and lived in Germany for most of her years. The czarina's status as a foreigner was harmful to her. Alexandra's attempts to make herself more appealing to the Russians by associating herself with the war effort and connecting with Rasputin backfired. In hindsight, this was a foregone conclusion, given her origin in Germany, a nation with a convoluted but intensive relationship with Russian nationalists. The czarina was willing to accept interaction with Rasputin as a substitute for interacting with the Russian nation. Alexandra felt that the measures she had attempted before Rasputin was insufficient.

Rasputin was a Siberian peasant who was prominent in St. Petersburg society by presenting himself as a follower of Orthodox traditions. Rasputin was the highest profile member of the peasant class to be found in Russia at the time due to his dogged refusal to persist with his peasant clothing and mannerisms. The aristocrats in the Russian court strongly disapproved of his presence as they felt that his modest attire and behavior were inappropriate for a close confidant of the czars. Rumors of his drunken excesses and orgies kept gossip mills busy for hours. Douglas Smith writes, "Rasputin had become in the eyes of much of the world the personification of evil. His wickedness was said to recognize no bounds, just like his sexual drive that could never be satiated no matter how many women he took to his bed."[8] He promoted himself as the possessor of miracles and gifts, including healing. He held no public office in the Russian government or even in the church hierarchy. Rasputin's status as a patron was expressed through the imperial family, and within the imperial family primarily through the czarina. The myth goes that the czarina, with her grave concern for the

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[7] Stockdale, Melissa Kirsche, *Paul Miliukoff and the quest for a Liberal Russia,* Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1996, pp. 188.

[8] Douglas Smith, *Rasputin: Faith, Power, and the Twilight of the Romanovs* (n.p.: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2016), [Page 2].

health of her son and her piety, was most susceptible to Rasputin's appeals. The Rasputin story is most valuable for what it reveals of late imperial Russia, especially its upper classes. Aristocratic Petersburg was in large measure projecting onto Rasputin its decadence, while revulsion towards him was driven in part by the shock that a mere peasant could attain such favor. The dysfunctional ruling class, in its quest to replace its uncomfortable feelings of guilt, frustration, and anger with noble feelings of piety, was looking for a villain and in Rasputin, they found one. They loathed Rasputin while refusing to recognize that the monarchy itself suffered from deep-seated cultural and political flaws. The czarist system was much too rigid, unwieldy, inflexible authoritarian, and inefficient, to adapt itself to the economic and cultural churn engulfing the country. These flaws proved fatal under the pressure generated by World War I. The revolutionaries took advantage of the divide with the aristocracy and successfully cast Alexandra as an outsider in the Russian nation through her association with Rasputin. As Rasputin's fame spread across St. Petersburg and the Empire, Russia was left in disbelief. The court and the imperial family became objects of ridicule, to be despised. Nicholas and Alexandra on the other hand were always interested in hearing what they wanted to think was a "voice of the Russian people." Rasputin was sufficiently cunning to satisfy their expectations. Moreover, the czarina's excessive devotion to her son, Alexis was perceived as giving Rasputin the supposed ability to put the child's hemophilia into remission temporarily. Since Alexis's hemophilia remained a carefully guarded secret within the imperial Family, no one understood why Nicholas and Alexandra continued to tolerate the presence of this ill-mannered, vulgar, and filthy man in their lives. Nicholas was repeatedly warned about Rasputin but would hear none of it. While there is still debate over the nature of his powers over the health of Alexis, it is very clear that his influence over the czar and czarina was considerable. The Romanovs saw him as the authentic peasant devoted to the czar and wiser and more sacred than the educated Petersburg sophisticates. Nicholas appreciated the calming effect Rasputin had on his anxious wife and ailing son. "Better than Rasputin,"[9] he told his prime minister, Pytor Stolypin, "than one of the empress's hysterical fits." Military defeats in World War I turned Russian society against the court and the government and the economic crisis of the war radicalized the working class. In August 1915, Buchanan the British ambassador to Russia, filed the following report in which he observed that: 'the unpopularity of the empress is assuming serious proportions [since] it is known that she still sees the monk Rasputin whose private life is a scandal'[10] Two months later Buchanan's

[9] Smith, *Rasputin: Faith*, [Page 151].

[10] British Perceptions of Tsar Nicholas II and Empress Alexandra Fedorovna 1894-1918 Claire Theresa McKee, [Page 276].

impression was even more grave. He told London that 'hatred is the only word to describe the feeling against the empress.[11] She and Rasputin are regarded as the czar's malicious advisors. At the start of 1916, Bruce Lockhart, a British diplomat, added to the dismal impression, writing that knowledge of Rasputin's relationship with the empress was no longer confined to elite circles and, as a result, 'the czar had lost considerable popularity with the common people'. As the war dragged on gossip circulated in all levels of society suggesting that Alexandra was Rasputin's mistress. Many assumed that since Alexandra was from Hesse, she was a German agent. The wave of animosity included other members of the imperial family. An ugly demonstration erupted in Moscow in May 1915. Angry crowds demanded the arrest of Alexandra's sister, Elizabeth, accusing her of being a German spy and hiding her brother, the grand duke of Hesse, in her convent. Looking for scapegoats, people noted that many officers and high officials bore German names. People imagined that spies were lurking in restaurants and public places. Suspicion fell heavily on Rasputin – the man who before the war was always praising German power and calling on the czar to back down in a crisis. Millions were convinced that Rasputin was working for Russia's defeat. They took for granted that he was on the Kaiser's payroll and working for a "separate peace" that would betray the allies and join Russia's fortunes to those of her enemies.

Ironically Alexandra's association with Rasputin was as much a sign of her inability to understand the nature of the Russian ideals as she desired to connect with them. Perhaps, Alexandra saw all negative narratives about Rasputin as a product of personal hatred, which blinded her to how Rasputin made her unpopular with the Russian masses. Rasputin's presence as the closest confidant of the czarina served to add fuel to the fire and give credence to the theory that the czarist regime had an anti-national character.

Condemnation of Alexandra Fedorovna based on her status as a woman to delegitimize her has ready parallels with Marie Antoinette. Like the queen of France, the czarina willingly presented herself as a woman in a way she did not depict herself as a foreigner. Like Marie Antoinette, she occupied a position, which was specifically reserved for a woman. And similarly, she was not perceived as simply a woman, but as a 'bad woman.'[12] Although the two women found themselves in similar situations, they were not identical. For starters, there was little expectation amongst the French supporters that Marie Antoinette would

[11] Ibid.
[12] Let Them Eat Cake Gender, Nationalism and Tyranny in Revolutionary France and Russia, [Page 180].

actively back the French-Austrian war of 1791. The war was being waged against a coalition in which her brother, Hapsburg Emperor Leopold II, played a major role. Conversely, Alexandra Fedorovna was part of a monarchy that was committed to and associated with the war against Germany from its outset. She had to find a way to demonstrate her commitment, on a personal level, to the war. Her attempts to do so and the criticisms of those who saw these attempts as inappropriate revealed much about gender narratives prevailing in Russia. For instance, Alexandra's response to the war had been as patriotic as any Russian. The parallel between Alexandra to Nicholas' military service was nursing. At the time nursing was a uniquely female profession, so any statement made regarding nurses was a statement regarding women. An article in the *American Journal of Nursing* described missionary nurses as 'heroic' and praised the wider ability of nurses to 'combat' 'immoral tendencies' and to promote 'self-control' and 'self-discipline' in men.[13] The act of nursing was an act of self-abasement by the nurse. This was consistent with the Russian feminist journal *Zhenskoe Deloe*'s exhortation to its readers, mostly middle-class professional women, that they must undertake a 'holy sacrifice.'[14] One newspaper emphasized the extremely hard work done by Grand Duchess Olga, exclaiming that 'for The Princess, neither day nor night exists' The czarina organized several hospitals and many Red Cross trains. Alexandra joined her daughters, Olga and Tatyana, and Anna Vyrubova in training as nurses and spending hours each week in the hospital that she established at Tsarskoye Selo. Alexandra assisted in operations and comforted sick and depressed soldiers. Rasputin encouraged these efforts. He believed that such work pleased God and inspired patriotic fervor. But some complained that these energies were misdirected. They insisted that an empress should limit herself to appearing at patriotic events and fostering wartime charities. Anyone could empty bedpans or assist in operations: Alexandra debased her position – or so their reasoning went – by focusing on such a menial task. Alexandra Fedorovna's judgment of the criticisms facing her and her attempts to address them through nursing compares favorably to Marie Antoinette, whose only response to the growth of opposition was indifference. But this discernment was not effective. By the end of the war, a strong association of nurses with prostitutes had appeared, and the sexualized jokes made by peasants and soldiers began to be applied to the czarina and her daughters.[15] By placing themselves in the public eye, Alexandra Fedorovna suffered a similar fate as Marie Antoinette and

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[13] Stanley, Elva Mills, 'Nursing and Citizenship' in *The American Journal of Nursing,* Vol. 1, No 16, Oct 1915, pp. 22-24.
[14] Alpern Engel, Barbara, *Women in Russia: 1700-2000,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004*,* p. 128.
[15] Alpern Engel, *Women in Russia*, p. 129.

opened herself to sexual innuendos. Her task from the very beginning was an impossible one. The Russian nationalists harbored an unalterable perception that her efforts were insufficient.

In February 1917, Russia's Romanov Dynasty came to a bloody end. Plagued by social and political unrest the last czar, Nicholas II, lost control of his empire and he and his family lost their lives. The revolt did not happen overnight. Years of increasing discontentment and alienation led to the Russian Revolution of 1917. Attempts on the part of the czarina, Alexandra, to appease the populace were limited and ineffective. By the end, the empress was disconnected from the Russian people and had lost their trust. She also lost the confidence of many important members of the Russian government and the Russian Orthodox Church. Some experts feel that this was in great part due to Alexandra's association with the infamous Gregory Rasputin. However, when Rasputin arrived on the political scene, Russia was already divided and dealing with the aftermath of the Revolution of 1905 and the October Manifesto.

The aim of this paper is not simply to provide a chronology of events or a presentation of anecdotes. Instead, it has intended to reach a position where we are able to claim an understanding of the underlying narratives dictating the commonalities and discrepancies between the manners in which nation and gender were treated by the participants of the French and Russian revolutions. A theme running through this paper is one of opposition to what is natural, easy, and even every day. To be foreign and to be female were integral factors in portraying Marie Antoinette and Alexandra Fedorovna as being indifferent and tyrannical to the organic communities of their country of residence.

The revolutionaries had to rely on over-simplifications and heuristics which were more comforting and easier to understand than complex and insightful analysis. These popular accounts allowed them to mobilize and communicate their alienation. In constructing these narratives, they drew extensively on concepts of gender and nationalism.

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[i] Who's Afraid of Marie Antoinette?, [244].