

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 135

“Stupidity or Treason?”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

“It is said that a member of the Council of Ministers...on being told that the State Duma would on this occasion speak of treason, exclaimed excitedly: ‘I may, perhaps, be a fool, but I am not a traitor.’...[D]oes it matter, gentlemen, whether we are, in the present case, dealing with stupidity or treason? When the Duma keeps everlastingly insisting that the rear must be organized for a successful struggle, the Government persists in claiming that organizing the country means organizing a revolution, and deliberately prefers chaos and disorganization. What is it, stupidity or treason?”

Pavel Milyukov’s speech to the Duma, November 14, 1916.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 135. Stupidity or Treason?

The Polish-American historian Richard Pipes begins one of his books on the Russian Revolution by inviting us to ponder the etymology of the word “revolution.” I think that’s an excellent idea, though I don’t fully agree with Pipes’ etymology, but that’s no problem; I’ll just give you mine. Here we go.

The word “revolution” has its roots in the Latin verb *volvere*, which means, “to turn.” *Revolvere*, therefore, suggests to return, or turn back, or come full circle. Hence, the word “revolution” first appears in English in the fourteenth century as an astronomical term, referring to one circuit of the orbital motion of a heavenly body, like the Moon around the Earth. From here, the meaning of “revolution” next extends to embrace the turning in circles of a mechanical device, like an axle or a gear.

But how did it come to have this other meaning, the violent overthrow of a government. Well, the answer to this question, like most questions, is: history.

According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, the first recorded use of “revolution” in a political sense was to describe the Restoration of King Charles II to the throne of England in 1660. Note that in that case, England had gone from a monarchy to a commonwealth and then returned to a monarchy once again, reflecting the circular, “there and back again,” implication of the word “revolution.”

Twenty-eight years later, in 1688, the overthrow of James II by William and Mary, backed by Parliament, came to be called the “Glorious Revolution,” probably because of its parallels to the Restoration. But notice that the Glorious Revolution merely describes one monarch being deposed by another. The system of government and the laws in England were not changed; only the sovereign was. In modern terms, we might be tempted to call the Glorious Revolution more of a *coup d’etat*.

And that brings us to the American Revolution, 88 years later. The Americans were calling what they were doing a “revolution” even before the Declaration of Independence was adopted. But just what did they mean when they said that? They were surely thinking of the Glorious Revolution, because in 1776, that was the historical event the word “revolution” was most commonly used to describe. The American Revolution does kind of resemble the Glorious Revolution in some respects. It was not the deposing of one sovereign for another, but it was the deposing of a monarch in favor of a republican government in which the people were sovereign and their will expressed through the legislatures of the thirteen new states and, after the ratification of the Constitution, the federal government. And, like the Glorious Revolution, the American Revolution did not change the system of government or the laws of the thirteen colonies; it changed the theory of who was sovereign. Laws that were on the books in 1776 were still enforced afterward, until they were changed individually, by legislative or judicial action.

So you see, neither the Restoration, nor the Glorious Revolution, nor even the American Revolution is a truly comfortable fit with what we normally think of when we hear the word “revolution.” A real “revolution,” as we use the term today, is the violent overthrow of not just one ruler but of an entire system of laws and government, and its replacement with something wholly new. To find the word “revolution” being used in that sense, we have to move on to the French Revolution. Now here is where the word really earns its reputation. It was bloody and violent and what came out of it was a system of government and a nation utterly transformed.

As you get closer to our own era, you will find the word “revolution” employed to describe a revolution in thinking, ideas that change society with no implication of bloodshed. The Sexual Revolution and the Reagan Revolution would be a couple of examples. Also, in our day, we use the word “revolutionary” to describe an idea or innovation that has the potential to change society.

The first usage of that word “revolutionary” as a noun to mean “a person who foments revolution” does not appear until the middle of the 19th century, just after the revolutions of 1848 and in the era of Karl Marx. Pipes argues that it is only here in the second half of the 19th century that we first see what he calls “professional revolutionaries,” by which he means people who have studied past revolutions and have dedicated years of their lives to apply that learning to foment future revolutions. Pipes makes the further claim that the Russian Revolution of 1917 is the first revolution actually engineered by professional revolutionaries.

I’m not sure I agree 100% with that. There’s no question that aspiring revolutionaries existed by the beginning of the twentieth century, and there’s no question that Marx, who predicted a socialist revolution he deemed inevitable, has something to do with inspiring them. There’s also no question that revolutionaries like Trotsky and Lenin were involved in the later stages of the Russian Revolution, but I do think it’s open to debate to what degree the revolution was engineered versus a spontaneous series of events.

In this podcast, we’ve already covered two events that I’ve called “revolutions.” Those are the Russian Revolution of 1905 and the Mexican Revolution. The Mexican Revolution is a complicated story. It’s more of a coup, then a countercoup, then a civil war, then a revolution. The Russian Revolution of 1905 is more like a pure, French-style revolution, except that it was shorter, less violent, but also led only to a few tepid reforms, reforms that the Emperor and his monarchist supporters spent the next ten years backtracking on. As for the Russian Revolution of 1917...well, fasten your seat belts, because we’re about to find out.

I want to begin this story by taking you back now to episode 116. That was in mid-1915, when the Germans were on the offensive on the Eastern Front. I mentioned in passing, back in that episode, that a coalition of political parties in the Duma in mid-1915 banded together to demand a greater say in government policy. So let me begin here and let me unpack that statement a little bit.

That German offensive forced the Russian Army to withdraw 150 miles into Russian territory. Now, the political scene in Petrograd had been relatively quiet in the early months of the war. There was the expected talk about all political parties banding together to fight the enemy, just as we have seen in the other Great War combatants. But with the reversals of 1915, the consensus began to break down. News of heavy casualties, and of soldiers fighting without rifles and the sight of huge numbers of refugees heading eastward worried everyone, understandably.

The Duma had been in recess since the end of February 1915, before the bad news started flooding in. Duma members began agitating for the Emperor to call the Duma back into session to deal with the bad news, and the Emperor, no fan of the Duma, dragged his feet for a while before agreeing, reluctantly. In June, he ordered the Duma brought back into session on August 1, which as it happens was the first anniversary of the war.

I should take a moment here to acknowledge that the Russian Empire used the Julian calendar, not the Gregorian calendar, which was and is more common. In 1915, the Julian calendar was 13 days behind the Gregorian calendar, so officially the opening of the Duma was scheduled for July 19, which is August 1 on the Gregorian calendar. On this podcast, I'm going to stick to the Gregorian calendar for all the dates, because I'm thinking most of you use it. I know I do, and I think that makes it easier for both of us if we all just stay on the same page. But be aware that the Julian calendar is lurking behind the curtains, and you will sometimes find sources on the Russian Revolution that give conflicting dates, because of the difference between the Julian and Gregorian calendars. So keep that in mind.

The Emperor's declaration left the members of the Duma about six weeks to confer among themselves about what they were going to say and do when the Duma finally met. Now, the Duma had very little real power. It could not appoint or dismiss government ministers—only the Emperor could do that. It had no control over the military—that was strictly in the Emperor's purview, just like in Germany. But the Duma had budget powers, which it could use to put pressure on the government. Perhaps most important, debates in the Duma could not be censored, so anything said in the Duma could be printed in the newspapers, and Duma speeches often attracted a lot of public attention. This gave the members an incentive to use strong and fiery language and appeal to public opinion in their debates. Most elected officials like public attention. They like being talked about.

Over the past ten years, since the Revolution of 1905, the Emperor has been trying to weaken the Duma and maintain as much of his personal control over the Empire as he could possibly manage. Again, naturally, the Duma took an adversarial position. They wanted the Duma to have more power, and members often sought ways to use what powers the body already had to gain even more. Since they saw themselves as the elected representatives of the voting public, they regarded it as more proper and more democratic for more power to be vested in the Duma, although we should keep in mind here that voting rights are restrictive in Russia, and the electorate that votes isn't necessarily reflective of the opinion of the broader Russian public. Still, it's better than letting one man rule everything and answer to no one, isn't it?

During the run-up to the August 1915 meeting of the Duma, members of the third-largest party in the Duma, the Progressive Party, sensed an opportunity. It sure looked like the Emperor's ministers were bungling the war, and that the Duma was going to be asked for more money and more support to turn around Russia's deteriorating position. It therefore made political sense for the Duma to use this opportunity to ask for something in return, specifically, the thing that the Duma wants most: the power to approve or veto ministerial appointments.

Actually, the Duma would have wanted the power to appoint ministers itself, like the British Parliament or the French Chamber of Deputies. But if it couldn't have that, the members at least wanted the power to confirm or reject the Emperor's appointments, in the same way that the

United States President appoints cabinet secretaries, but those appointments are then subject to confirmation in the US Senate.

The Progressive Party, which, as I said, was the third-largest party in the Duma, was able to persuade the number two party, the Constitutional Democratic Party, nicknamed the *Kadets*, because that's what the initials KD sound like in Russian, to sign onto this idea. They then won over much of the more conservative Octobrist Party, the largest party in the Duma, named for the Emperor's October Manifesto, the Imperial decree from back in 1905 that created the Duma in the first place, episode 34, as well as some members of the Social Democratic Party and the Labor Party. This coalition would come to be known as the Progressive Bloc, and it included enough members to make a working majority in the Duma.

The stated goal of the Progressive Bloc was to bring about a "government enjoying public confidence." To that end, they issued a nine-point reform program. Key demands were that government ministers be drawn from the membership of the Duma and subject to its approval. And since this was a coalition of parties, it's no surprise that some of the key policy goals of the main parties in the Bloc appeared among the nine points, including the freeing of political prisoners, the end of laws restricting the rights of Jews and Muslims and other religious minorities, greater autonomy for Poland and Finland, and the end of restrictions on trade unions and peasant groups.

As the Duma convened and debate was getting under way, the Russian Army was withdrawing from Warsaw, one of the Empire's largest and most important cities, abandoning it to the Germans. This created a sense of crisis in the Duma. The government asked the Duma for additional support for the war effort, but the Progressive Bloc was telling them that its support came with strings attached. The reforms they were demanding were very reasonable, moderate liberal policies. Most of us looking back on this moment from the perspective of the 21st century would regard these demands as the bare minimum human decency requires, not as anything so radical or extreme as to be a deal breaker.

But the Duma members were walking a delicate line here. It was the war emergency that had brought the Duma into session, and that emergency was supposed to be the focus of their efforts. It wouldn't do the Duma, or the Progressive Bloc, any good at all if they are seen as holding the fate of the Empire hostage in return for an unrelated agenda of political reforms. Unpatriotic is never a good look on an elected official. So in order to finesse this problem, and link together the government's requests for new support and the Bloc's demands for political reforms, the Bloc made the argument that since the existing political system had produced incompetent and corrupt leaders, and it was these leaders who had brought Russia to the edge of ruin, if you want to turn the Motherland's fortunes around, you have to begin by reforming the system that selects her leaders.

One of the principal figures of the Duma debates of August 1915 was the left-leaning firebrand, Alexander Kerensky. Kerensky was at this moment 34 years old. He had graduated from law school just as the Russo-Japanese War had broken out, and he made a name for himself as a lawyer by defending opposition leaders against charges related to their activities during the Revolution of 1905. This made Kerensky a well known and admired figure among democratic political activists in Russia. This was his first term in the Duma; he had been elected as a member of the Labor Party, the fifth-largest party in the Duma with only ten seats. The Labor Party was more moderate than the Social Democratic Party, the number four party in the Duma, but these two parties frequently collaborated, especially on issues related to the working class and labor unions.

Kerensky denounced the government vociferously in his speeches, which were circulated in the press and gave voice to a lot of the doubts many Russians had about the conduct of the war.

Now as I said, none of this seems terribly radical to us, but it certainly did to the conservative monarchists in Russia at the time. To them, it was obvious that giving the Duma any power at all had been a huge mistake; now all those weaselly little lawyers and politicians are interested in is leveraging the little bit of power they already have to get more, and they are perfectly willing to take advantage of a national emergency in order to get it, the future of the Empire be damned. To these conservatives, the argument that more democracy would strengthen the war effort was a ludicrous bit of up-is-down and black-is-white propaganda, since to them it was already obvious that the little bit of democracy Russia already had in place was openly and unashamedly being used to undermine the war effort.

But then, a strange and unexpected twist in the story. Eight of Emperor Nikolai's ministers actually endorsed the Progressive Bloc program. More even than that, they seconded the suggestion that a newer and more democratically appointed Council of Ministers was just what the country needed to turn things around. And even more than that, they all offered to resign, in order to make way for their new, democratically selected, successors.

You can wonder whether this was a case of noble leaders sacrificing for the good of the nation or rats deserting a sinking ship. But either way, this moment, right here, is a key moment in the history of the Russian Empire. There is something close to a national consensus emerging in favor of moving the country away from the personal rule of the Emperor toward a scheme of constitutional monarchy, even if the difficult questions of exactly how we're going to balance the traditional powers of the Emperor against those of the electorate and its representatives in the Duma are being kicked down the road.

It was up to the Emperor to make the next move. The Duma and the Council of Ministers had done everything possible to smooth the way for him and minimize any sense that the Emperor was losing face by signing away so many of his own powers. Consider that even his own advisors, whom he himself appointed, endorsed the move as the best way to win the war. To give

Imperial assent at this moment could be framed as an act of patriotism and generosity, aimed at bringing the nation together in order to win the great struggle against our common enemy, the German Kaiser and his armies.

Here is Imperial Russia's last, best chance to reform itself into a modern constitutional state. But will Emperor Nikolai have the wisdom to seize this great opportunity?

Ha, ha. I'm being disingenuous in even asking the question, because you already know the answer. I told you in episode 116. Emperor Nikolai prorogued the Duma, meaning he dismissed them and sent them home. He then followed up on this maneuver by taking personal command of the Russian Army and heading off to Stavka headquarters in Mogilev.

[music: Rimsky-Korsakov, *Russian Easter Festival Overture*]

Faced with the prospect of a liberalized Russia, Nikolai moved as firmly and decisively as one could imagine against it. What was he thinking? I told you all the way back in episode 1 that Nikolai's one real conviction in life was that it was his right and duty to hand over to his heir, the *tsetsarevich*, Alexei Nikolaevich, all the powers and privileges that his father, Emperor Alexander III, had handed to him. That still stands as the best explanation I can offer.

You should take note that these two actions—proroguing the Duma and taking personal command of the Russian military—are of one piece. The complaint of the Duma was that the government ministers overseeing the war effort were crooked and incompetent. The Duma's solution was to give itself a voice in choosing the ministers. The Emperor rejected the proposed solution, but in his own way, he heard and addressed the complaint. If you don't like the people I appoint to fight the war, he is saying, then fine, I'll conduct the war myself. In Nikolai's mind, he was divinely chosen to lead Russia. He was only human, and in choosing his ministers capable of error. But God Almighty does not make mistakes. Surely the one person who cannot fail to lead Mother Russia to victory is the one God Himself appointed to the task.

No one other than the Emperor thought that this was a good idea. Unless you want to count God. Oh, and of course the Empress Alexandra. And the Empress's favorite holy man, Grigori Rasputin, who by now is becoming the third most powerful figure in Russia, after the Imperial couple. That's because, once Nikolai is at the front, Alexandra will essentially be ruling Russia herself in his name, making her the most powerful woman in Russia since Catherine the Great. Those are not my words, by the way, those are hers. But although Alexandra was very powerful, she was also very, very suspicious. She trusted no one in Russian government. Not the Duma, not even Nikolai's own ministers. She saw plots everywhere. The only person she truly trusted, apart from her husband, was Rasputin.

And so we come again to this bizarre and yet compelling figure. Rasputin has the Empress Alexandra entirely convinced that he alone held the key to keeping the Crown Prince, Alexei, alive and well. How he did this is an open question, since his private communications with the

Imperial family are not available to us. If you want to tell me he really was a holy man who could call upon the power of the Almighty in a way that most people can't, well I won't argue with you. (I may have lots of questions, though.)

Putting aside the possibility of divine intervention, coincidence or luck may have had something to do with it. Don't discount the placebo effect on the judgment of two parents who wanted very much to see their only son survive and thrive and grow up to be Nikolai's successor, and were willing to do whatever it took to make it so. Another possibility that can't be overlooked is that Rasputin was a gifted con artist, who knew what the Imperial couple wanted to hear and had no qualms about saying it, whatever it might be.

I can't help but think that one key piece of evidence exists that tends to support the "con artist" theory. It is that Rasputin repeatedly told Nikolai and Alexandra not to trust the people around them. The Russian public, the ordinary peasant stock that still made up over 80% of the population of the country, they adored the Imperial couple. Rasputin assured them of that over and over again. And since Rasputin sometimes, you know, went home and actually mingled with the peasants, since he was the only one of the peasant class permitted to get anywhere near a Romanov, well, there was at least a superficial plausibility to the claim that Rasputin was giving them a direct line to the common folk that no one else in the government would or could.

As for everyone else in the government, Rasputin kept telling Alexandra that they were all out to "get" her and her husband. All this agitation in the Duma was just a ruse, concocted by power hungry politicians. Don't trust them. Don't trust these ministers. Notice how quickly they side with the Duma. Don't trust the aristocracy. They're plotting against you, too. Even the Grand Duke Nikolai, the Emperor's cousin and until now the commander of the Russian Army, he was deliberately losing battles as part of an elaborate scheme to take the crown for himself.

This is classic con man stuff. You win your mark's trust by telling them that everyone else is out to get them. By this time, Rasputin had been sitting in on high level government meetings alongside Nikolai and Alexandra. The Duma and the Council of Ministers found the presence of this gangly, scruffy, uneducated, fast-talking peasant offensive and complained to the Emperor. The Emperor told them all that Rasputin's presence was a family matter.

And so it was. Rasputin was one of the few people who knew about the Crown Prince's condition, and that alone would have made it dangerous to alienate him. Who knows what he might say, or who he might talk to, if he decided the Romanovs had treated him unfairly? To Rasputin's credit, he did keep the secret close, which no doubt helped him earn the confidence of the Imperial family.

I've shared with you before that I am the father of disabled sons myself, and so I feel like I have some personal insight into what Nikolai and Alexandra must have been feeling. It's a natural reaction of a parent to respond to the seeming unfairness of your child having a disability by wanting to do everything in your power to make sure that the quality of your child's life is as

good as you can make it otherwise, and I can't help but think that Nikolai's determination not to give up his inherited power as Autocrat of All the Russias stemmed at least in part from a feeling that life had already cheated Alexei and his father was not going to compound the unfairness by surrendering his son's inheritance to a bunch of nasty lawyers in the Duma. The only thing worse than being a Russian Emperor with hemophilia, Nikolai must have thought, was being a private citizen with hemophilia who spends his days living modestly and cursing the father who let him down.

And thus, not only did the Emperor prorogue the Duma, not only did he leave for Stavka headquarters to take personal command of the Army, but within the next six weeks, he dismissed every one of his ministers who had offered to resign in favor of a replacement selected by the Duma or had questioned the wisdom of Nikolai taking personal command of the Army.

Out of some combination perhaps of their own stubbornness and of their taking to heart Rasputin's warnings not to trust those around them, the Imperial couple now decided that the most important qualification in a minister was an unswerving, unquestioning loyalty to the Emperor.

But from the point of view of virtually anyone in Russia *outside* the Imperial family, all of this looks very hard to understand. The Emperor's strange and rash decisions defied logic, along with his angry refusal to discuss exactly who this Rasputin character was and why every Imperial decision now seemed to come down with Rasputin's fingerprints on it. It was easy to speculate that Rasputin had some mysterious and inexplicable hold over the Imperial couple. And in a sense, it was true; he did.

Sentiment grew that Russia's *real* political problem was the undue influence Rasputin appeared to have over the Emperor, and especially over the Empress. Some whispered that he was working for the Germans. Rumors flew of hypnosis and black magic and of a sexual relationship between Rasputin and Alexandra. That was why Rasputin had sent the Emperor to the front, you see. There's no evidence that was true, by the way. By all accounts, Alexandra only met with Rasputin when others were present, in accord with the social norms of the time. Rasputin did have a reputation as a lecher and a seducer of women, although whether that was truth or a politically convenient rumor is hard to suss out. At least one doctor is supposed to have declared that Rasputin was impotent, so make of all this what you will.

Likewise, there's no evidence Rasputin was actually any kind of German agent, though he had opposed the war from the beginning, cautioning repeatedly that it would be bad for Russia and disastrous for the Romanovs. At the time, some saw this as evidence of treason, though from our perspective today, it looks more like prescience.

One of the new ministers the Emperor appointed, Alexei Khvostov, minister of the interior, who, ironically, got the job on Rasputin's recommendation, became convinced that Rasputin was a

German agent, and he offered the head of Rasputin's security detail 200,000 rubles to kill him, but the plot was uncovered and Khvostov dismissed.

All this unrest and suspicion might have come to a head as early as the autumn of 1915, but as you know, the German Chief of Staff, Erich von Falkenhayn, chose this moment to order a halt to the German eastward advance. Falkenhayn felt that the German Army had bitten off as much as it could chew, for the time being anyway, and he may have been right, but his decision had the unintended effect of buying the Russian Emperor some time to consolidate his position in the wake of his dramatic refusal to cut a deal with the Duma.

For the next year and a half, Nikolai would govern Russia mostly *in absentia* from Stavka headquarters. He handed over control in Petrograd to his wife, the Empress, which meant more influence than ever for Rasputin. The Emperor still had the final say on all the Empress's decisions, but most of what he knew of what was going on back in Petrograd he got from his wife's letters.

With the Imperial couple's increasing distrust of anyone outside their personal circle, government ministers were being sacked at an alarming rate over trivial offenses. The only qualification the Imperials cared about now was unquestioning obedience. Hence, this was the period of what one Duma member denounced as "ministerial leapfrog."

The Imperials went through three foreign ministers, three war ministers, three transport ministers, four agriculture ministers, four prime ministers, and a whopping five ministers of the interior over a period of eighteen months. I should note in passing that one of the ministers sacked during this period was the foreign minister and friend of the podcast, Sergei Sazonov, who was a crucial figure during the July Crisis. Remember the July Crisis? Good times.

The kinds of people who survived this kind of turnover tended to be incompetents whose only real skill was toadying, but to be fair, even a competent minister needs some time to learn the ropes, and no one was being given any time to learn the ropes.

All this turmoil in the highest levels of the Russian government was worrisome to her allies Britain and France. Also, the kind of conservative, monarchical absolutists that the Emperor and Empress were now turning to as their ministers were also the sorts of people more likely to want to cut a deal with the Kaiser and end the war, something the Allies feared greatly. Part of the reason for Lord Kitchener's trip to Russia, which was cut short when his ship was sunk, was to sound out the Russian government and give them a pep talk on the importance of staying in the war.

Then came the Brusilov Offensive, and suddenly the Russian Army was on the move. But as you'll recall, and with the benefit of hindsight, most of Brusilov's gains came in the first couple of weeks. The rest of the year saw bloody fighting for little additional advantage. It also saw the

entry of Romania into the war, but alas for Russia, Romania quickly developed into more of a liability than anything else.

On November 14, the Duma was called back into session to debate next year's budget. The Prime Minister was by this time a man named Boris Stürmer, a 68-year old nonentity that the French Ambassador, Maurice Paléologue, described as "worse than a mediocrity—a third-rate intellect, mean spirit, low character, doubtful honesty, no experience, and no idea of state business." Stürmer was appointed prime minister in February. In March he added the post of interior minister after Khvostov was dismissed for trying to kill Rasputin. In July, he added the post of foreign minister after Sazonov was dismissed. So three crucial portfolios in the hands of a man no one respected.

The Duma was furious. They had made their case for why the Duma should have a role in appointing ministers. Not only had the Emperor brushed them aside, it now seemed as if he was taunting them by making the appointments of ministers into some kind of game. If it was the Emperor. Perhaps it was the Empress. She was a German, after all. And behind her stands Rasputin.

The easy way to attack the government was to attack Stürmer. And the easy way to attack Stürmer was on his German name and ethnicity. And brother, did they ever. The first to speak was Kerensky, who ripped into the government, calling them "hired killers," "cowards," and "men suspected of treason." He accused the government of selling out the country and identified Rasputin by name as the mastermind of this conspiracy of treason. So intemperate was his speech that he was rebuked by the chair.

Still, everyone knew Kerensky was a hothead. More shocking was the next speech, by Pavel Nikolaevich Milyukov, the founder and leader of the Kadets, the Constitutional Democratic Party, the second largest in the Duma. He was known for his lawyerly moderation, but now he attacked the government in a speech hardly less fiery than Kerensky's, a speech that probably remains to this day the most famous ever made in the Russian Duma. I read an excerpt from it at the top of the episode. He began by asserting that "we have lost faith that the government can lead us to victory." And he would end with a long list of accusations against Stürmer and his ministers.

That speech marks a turning point. It was printed and circulated across Russia and inflamed passions everywhere. The Emperor, who was growing increasingly weary of the restive Duma, dismissed Stürmer on November 21 and appointed the liberal Alexander Fyodorovich Trepov. The following day, Trepov went to speak to the Duma, but he was shouted down for some forty minutes before the members quieted down enough to let him speak. His message was conciliatory. He pledged to work in cooperation with the Duma, but the Duma wasn't having it.

By this time, rumors began to circulate widely of a plot to assassinate Rasputin. Trepov, apparently agreeing with the end, if not the means, offered Rasputin himself a 200,000 ruble

payoff in exchange for leaving the capital and having no further contact with the Romanovs. Rasputin refused the bribe and told the Empress all about it. Alexandra flew into a rage, calling Russia's new prime minister a liar and saying he deserved to be hanged. For her, this was just one more bit of evidence that everyone in Russian government was out to get the Imperial family.

There was in fact an active plot to assassinate Rasputin in the works. One of its architects was the 29-year old Prince Felix Felixovich Yusupov, an Oxford-educated aristocrat from a very wealthy family, said to have been richer than the Romanovs themselves. The prince was the Emperor's nephew by marriage. He explained his motives this way: "[The Empress's] spiritual balance depends entirely on Rasputin; the instant he is gone, it will disintegrate. And once [the Emperor] has been freed of his wife's and Rasputin's influence, everything will change: he will turn into a good constitutional monarch." Among others, Yusupov recruited the Grand Duke Dmitri, the Emperor's blood nephew, a Romanov himself, and therefore immune from criminal prosecution. It was hoped that the inclusion of a Romanov in the conspiracy would help prove that their intentions were noble. They meant to support the Emperor and the dynasty, not to overthrow them.

By December 29, when the Duma recessed for the Christmas holiday, the plan was set. (Remember that by the Julian calendar it is still only December 16.) Yusupov had made Rasputin's acquaintance, consulted with him on a minor medical problem, then invited Rasputin to visit Yusupov's palace in Petrograd that night at midnight, dangling as bait the opportunity to meet Yusupov's wife, the Emperor's niece.

Rasputin was known to enjoy the company of young ladies, and he took the bait, arriving at the palace at midnight, dressed to the nines in his best silk peasant shirt and velvet pants, gifts from the Empress Alexandra. He was escorted to a room in the basement. A gramophone was playing "Yankee Doodle," of all things, and he was asked to wait there until Mrs. Yusupov was ready. Actually, she was aware of the plot but refused to be a part of it, and had left town for the day.

Rasputin was offered Madeira wine and chocolate pastries while he waited. Again, his taste for Madeira was well known. Both the wine and the pastries were laced with cyanide. Apparently, though, Rasputin had only one glass of wine and declined the pastries, and so he didn't get a lethal dose of the poison, though he did begin to complain that he wasn't feeling well. Yusupov stalled him for two hours, then went upstairs in an agitated state to ask his fellow conspirators what to do. It seems the prince was by this time ready to give credence to the idea that Rasputin was in some way God's favorite, since it seemed he couldn't be killed by conventional means.

Grand Duke Dmitri suggested sending Rasputin home and trying again some other time, but Yusupov refused to entertain that idea. Once he collected himself, he returned to the basement room with a concealed pistol, then invited Rasputin to look over a crucifix in the room. As Rasputin leaned over to examine the crucifix, Yusupov shot him in the back.

Rasputin fell to the floor, apparently dead, but when the prince knelt to examine the body more closely, Rasputin's eyes opened and he grabbed Yusupov. The terrified Yusupov broke free and fled the house with Rasputin in pursuit, but one of the other conspirators followed and shot Rasputin again. Rasputin fell, and was shot a third time in the forehead, and then stabbed a few times, just to make sure. The conspirators then bound the corpse in chains to weigh it down and threw it into the river.

The murder of Grigori Rasputin was in some sense the first shot of the Russian Revolution. And please note that the first shot was fired not by an anarchist, not by a socialist or a Bolshevik, not by a liberal democrat, but by a wealthy aristocrat, a conservative upholder of the status quo. When even the most conservative elements in society are feeling a need to resort to violence and lawlessness, you know that something is very wrong in Imperial Russia.

But that is a story for another episode. We'll have to stop there for today. Thank you for listening, and thank you to Craig for making a donation, and thank you, Rob, for becoming a patron of the podcast. You know, with the holidays coming up, a donation or a patronage makes the ideal Christmas present, for me, and is a gift sure to be appreciated. By me. A rating and review at the iTunes store also makes a great gift, one you can be sure will never be returned or exchanged.

And I hope you'll join me next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we continue the story of events in Russia following the murder of Grigori Rasputin. Also keep in mind that this is the Turnip Winter, which is causing food shortages in Russia just as it is in Germany. What will come of all this? Now is the winter of Russia's discontent, next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. The murder of Rasputin was and is a shocking event, but it should be noted that political violence has been endemic in Russia for decades now. You'll recall me mentioning in this podcast the assassinations of the Emperor Alexander II and the prime minister Piotr Stolypin as two examples. They, along with Rasputin, are the most prominent victims of political murder, but murders of lower level figures have been commonplace in Russia for some time now. It is estimated that on average there were as many as one thousand political killings per year in Russia during the reign of Nikolai II, violence committed both by the regime's supporters and its opponents. And at this point in our narrative, political violence in Russia is not winding down. Quite the contrary; I am sorry to say, it is just getting started.

[music: Closing War Theme]