

**The History of the Twentieth Century**  
**Episode 28**  
**“What Is Going to Happen to Me?”**  
**Transcript**

[music: Fanfare]

On Sunday, March 13, 1881, the 12-year-old Nikolai, the future Russian Emperor, was having lunch with his younger brother Georgi when they heard an explosion. Soon afterward, a servant arrived with instructions to take them to the Winter Palace. When they arrived, they were brought to the emperor's study. Nikolai's grandfather lay dying, his body torn apart by a bomb. The crown prince, Alexander, presented Nikolai to the emperor, saying, “see, papa, your sunshine is here”. Nikolai then watched as his grandfather died, the victim of an assassination.

We can only speculate about what effect this experience would have on both these men, but it must have been profound. And what effect it would have in turn on the nation over which these two men would exert absolute power, that also must have been profound.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 28. What Is Going to Happen to Me?

Last week, we looked at Russian history up to the assassination of Alexander II. I'd like to continue with the story of Russia today, and look at the reign of his successor, Alexander III, with a special emphasis on the coming of age of his son Nikolai, destined to become the next Russian Emperor, and doomed to be the last.

Following the assassination, the emperor's second son succeeded him as Alexander III. I say second son because the late emperor had sired an older son, Nikolai, who was originally the heir apparent, or *tsesarevich*, as it was known in Russia. Nikolai was born in 1843, appeared to be in good health, and was prepared from childhood to become the next emperor. At the age of 20, Nikolai became engaged to Princess Dagmar of Denmark. Dagmar's father, King Christian IX, had a pretty good run of luck at placing his children in positions of power. His eldest son would succeed him as the King of Denmark, his eldest daughter married Queen Victoria's eldest son, the Prince of Wales and future Edward VII. His second son would become the King of Greece, and his second daughter, Dagmar, was betrothed to Nikolai and was destined to become the Empress of Russia. He had a third daughter who married the Crown Prince of Hanover, and would have become Queen of Hanover, except that that job was eliminated upon German unification. So if it weren't for that, the King of Denmark just might have sired a full house – queens over kings.

Anyway, Princess Dagmar almost missed out on becoming empress. In the winter of 1864-65, Tsesarevich Nikolai was touring the Riviera (because hey, if you were a rich Russian and it was winter, that's what you would be doing too), when he began experiencing neck and back pain, which was at first attributed to injuries he had sustained in a wrestling match. The pain was actually meningitis, and perhaps he contracted it during that wrestling match. Nikolai would die in Nice in April 1865, at the age of 21, a development that was devastating to the imperial family.

It was widely reported that on his deathbed, Nikolai expressed as his dying wish that his little brother Alexander should marry Dagmar. That sounds suspiciously like a posthumous deathbed wish, if you know what I mean, but in the end she did indeed marry the new tsesarevich after he turned 21 the following year. Alexander and Dagmar, who took the name Maria Feodorovna when she converted from Lutheranism to Russian Orthodoxy, would have a total of four sons and two daughters. Their first child was Nikolai, the future emperor, born in 1868 on the feast day of Job. You can make of that what you will.

Royalty in general during this period tended to have lonely childhoods. They grew up in sheltered surroundings and seldom saw anyone other than family members and carefully selected and trusted caretakers, tutors and servants. Because hey, what better way to raise someone who is someday going to rule a large and diverse multiethnic empire with over 100 million citizens, am I right?

Nikolai's father, the future Emperor Alexander III, was a huge man, 6'1" with a big bushy beard, and he was a stern but loving father. Nikolai adored him. Alexander III, in contrast to his more cosmopolitan father, was suspicious of foreigners, and a firm believer in the superiority of everything Russian. Big, bushy beards were very Russian. In the Russian view, God and men wore beards; women and devils did not. He had little education, and saw little use for it. He was a powerful man who would bend the silverware at the dinner table for the entertainment of foreign guests. He might also have been making some subtle political point about the strength of the Russian Empire.

Nikolai, by contrast, was a slight and quiet child who would grow to be 5'6". Although Russia was generally hostile toward Britain at this time, it was fashionable among Russian aristocracy to raise their children in the traditional English fashion, which included a traditional English nanny, and so it was with Nikolai. He learned English alongside Russian in early childhood, and spoke it very well.

Alexander III was regarded as a man of the people, because of his simple tastes and his peasant shirts. But this idea's a bit absurd; no aristocracy in Europe was as rich and opulent as the Russian aristocracy. The men were finely dressed, the women were covered in diamonds and pearls. At Christmastime, the imperial family had six Christmas trees, one for each family member. Even the British royals managed to make do with just one. Every summer, the family would vacation with mom's family in Denmark, and they would take with them 100 servants, plus their security detail and 20 railway cars' worth of baggage.

No one in the imperial family ever got within spitting distance of a commoner. Nikolai grew up in an imperial palace with 900 rooms, although most of these were empty and unused. I imagine they made quite a playground for Nikolai and his brothers and sisters back then, although they also liked to sit on the balcony at the Winter Palace and look out at the streets of St. Petersburg, gawking at those extraordinary novelties: the ordinary people of the city. The only commoners they saw up close were soldiers, who always saluted and cheered the emperor with enthusiasm, and their loyal servants, all 15,000 of them, spread over the Romanovs' various estates. And even they could hardly be counted as common people – most of them came from families that had been serving the Romanovs for generations.

So as far as the children of the imperial family could tell, ordinary Russians just loved them. At least, all the ordinary Russians they ever saw. The children were not educated in politics or public affairs.

The new emperor, Alexander III, interpreted the multiple assassination attempts on his father as evidence that his father's liberalizing reforms were creating chaos in Russia. He clamped down hard. Russia was Russian. There was no need to import crazy and destabilizing foreign ideas. Russia was an aristocracy. Russia was Orthodox. And Russia didn't give a damn about how the rest of the world did things. He reversed his father's reforms, stripped power from the *zemstvos*, enforced censorship on the Russian press, and applied his father's policy of repression against the Poles to other ethnic groups, like the Finns and the Muslims of the Caucasus. There was official government discrimination against all religions other than Orthodoxy, with a special hostility toward Jews, were excluded from educational opportunities, subjected to arbitrary uprooting and relocation, and brutal state violence.

All this repression, of course, had the effect of making Russia less stable in the long run, although at the time, many saw Alexander's policies as a necessary evil, given the turmoil and the political violence of the age. Russian peasants were poorly educated and gullible, according to this view, and therefore easily swayed by political agitators – hence the need for a strong, autocratic government.

Alexander III's Russian nationalism made him suspicious of foreign powers. Britain was viewed as a rival, if not an outright enemy, as was Austria. Many Europeans, especially Britons, looked in turn upon Russia as a backward and illiterate country of millions of peasant farmers ruled by an extravagant aristocracy, a nation tainted by Asian-influenced corruption and tyranny, a barbaric place where life was cheap. And Russia's ruthless new emperor did nothing to soften their opinion.

And then there was Germany. Russia and Germany had many close ties. Many aristocratic and upper-class Russian families had German relations. Some of them had German names. For generations, the imperial family had looked to Germany to find wives for its men, as the British royal family was also doing. By this time, both of these families were really more German than anything else. Germans, traditionally, were more scientifically and culturally advanced, and the Russians were accustomed to borrowing their art and their music. But Russia was the muscle in the relationship. When Napoleon had come calling, it was Russian soldiers, not German ones, that had sent him back to France with his tail between his legs.

But German unification had changed this dynamic. There was now a powerful German state on Russia's doorstep. And Russia's increasing rivalry with Austria over the Balkans strained its relationship with Germany as well. Otto von Bismarck wanted good relations with both powers, but when push came to shove, he and everyone else in Germany understood that Austria came first.

Most foreign investment capital in Russia was German. The development of Russian industry and railroads depended on foreign capital. Russia was primarily an agricultural economy, and agricultural exports were important to its balance of trade.

And that brings us to the subject of tariffs. And I can already see your eyes glazing over, even though this is a podcast, because tariffs are the most boring subject imaginable, with the possible exception of fishing rights. But pay attention, because this is important. As we have already seen, at this time most national governments got most of their revenue from tariffs. But tariffs are complicated for three reasons. First of all, they are tax revenue, so they determine the size of the national budget. In this era, everyone was on the gold standard, which meant that in the long run, national budgets had to be balanced. National governments could, and did, go into debt in the short term, usually during an emergency, but in the long run these debts had to be paid, or else you risked foreign military intervention, as we have also seen.

Tariffs also affected domestic economic policy. Tariffs were frequently used to protect the domestic economy from foreign competition by raising the price of imports to make them uncompetitive. Tariffs were not a flat tax on all imports. Countries could, and did, tailor their tariffs to encourage import of goods the government wanted to import, say, raw materials for your domestic manufacturing industry, or to discourage imports from competitors, or from certain disfavored nations.

Which brings us to the third point: Tariffs could be used to reward or punish foreign countries by opening or closing your domestic market to imports from that country. So every time a government makes a tariff decision, it has implications in all three of these areas: Government revenue, economic policy, and foreign relations.

By the late 19th century, the traditional landed aristocracies of Europe, who were used to making money the old-fashioned way (by owning huge tracts of land and charging 10,000 people rent to live on it), began losing ground to people making money in more modern ways: Manufacturing, commerce, professional services. And modern technology was making agriculture more efficient, lowering prices and squeezing the aristocrats' profit margins. Now, here's where Russia fits into all this: As the huge Russian territory finally gets railroads, it becomes easier and cheaper to ship agricultural products abroad, particularly to Germany, which is right next door and is experiencing a population boom. But the German aristocrats in rural eastern Germany, places like East Prussia, were losing markets for their own produce to cheap Russian imports.

Now, you may be thinking: Who cares? So what if some stuffy German aristocrats in monocles and top hats aren't as rich as they used to be? Well, that's a good question, but this is imperial Germany, a country run by aristocrats. When the Prussians squawked, the Kaiser's government listened, and new and higher tariffs against Russian agricultural produce were enacted. And overnight, Germany stopped being a major Russian export market. As trade barriers rose, the flow of German investment capital to Russia dried up. And this is an important and neglected reason why Germany and Russia went from being allies to enemies over this period. So, you see? Tariffs, you need to pay attention to them.

Not that I'm saying that the Great War was caused by misguided German tariff policies driven by greedy and shortsighted Prussian aristocrats who cared more about their own bottom lines than they did about the future of their country – but I'm not *not* saying it, either.

This combination of military rivalry in the Balkans, economic conflict between Russia and Germany, and Alexander's visceral dislike of Germans contributed to the falling-out between the two powers that took place during this period. But when German investment capital disappeared, French investment capital began to turn up to replace it. Hmm, this could be the start of something.

[music: Tchaikovsky, *String Quartet No. 1*]

In 1884, Nikolai turned 16, and there was a public coming-of-age ceremony that involved him swearing loyalty to his father the emperor. For the occasion, the German government sent the 25-year-old Prince Wilhelm, grandson of the then-Kaiser Wilhelm I and future Kaiser Wilhelm II, to represent Germany. Wilhelm and Nikolai were second cousins once removed. This was a big moment for young Prince Wilhelm, stepping onto the world stage on his own for the first time. He carried with him a letter from Chancellor Bismarck, addressed to Emperor Alexander, in which Bismarck proposed renewing the Three Emperors' League.

Nothing came of Bismarck's letter, but believe it or not (and I'm as surprised as anybody), in spite of Alexander III's hostility toward Germany and things German, the graceful and energetic young Wilhelm charmed the pants off the Russian Emperor, and Alexander seemed to make quite the impression on Wilhelm in return. The huge, bearlike Russian Emperor with his unapologetic claim of autocratic power struck a chord with young Wilhelm. His visit was a huge success, and the way the two imperials hit it off was the talk of foreign ministries around Europe. Wilhelm returned to Germany, where everyone lavished praise on his newly-discovered diplomatic skill. Unfortunately, all this seems to have gone to Wilhelm's head. He got the idea that now he's a master diplomat, and no matter how many diplomatic failures he had in the future, he would never forget that shining moment of glory, and never stopped believing that he was an uncommonly talented international negotiator.

It started almost as soon as Wilhelm got back to Berlin. The prince began to exchange letters with the Russian Emperor, but he didn't see any reason to inform the German Foreign Ministry what he was up to. He sent letter after letter describing underhanded English plots against Russia, which he would later confess was intended to provoke a war between Germany's rivals. It didn't take Alexander long to see through all this. When they met again in 1886, Wilhelm embarrassed himself by fawning all over the emperor, and told him several times that Russia had a right to Constantinople and urged him to invade Turkey. The emperor tartly replied that if Russia decided to take Constantinople, it would not need German permission.

And so, in honor of this transparently manipulative diplomacy that displayed a kind of glaringly obvious deviousness of the sort seldom ever seen in diplomatic circles, I would like to award this week's Kaiser Wilhelm II Award for Making an Ass out of Yourself to... Kaiser Wilhelm II.

Anyway, getting back to the tsesarevich. Nikolai was an indifferent student. That didn't bother his father, who felt that his own lack of education wasn't holding him back from anything, so it wouldn't be any problem for Nikolai, either. Even one of Nikolai's teachers told him that the mysterious forces emanating during the sacrament of taking the oath on the day of the coronation provided all the practical data required. If the emperor was ordained by God, in other words, it stood to reason that God would make sure his chosen emperor knew how to do the job.

His mother felt that all a monarch needed to know to rule Russia was a few foreign languages, good manners and court etiquette, and a deep understanding of the rituals of the Russian Orthodox Church. Converts, they're all the same. And that was Nikolai's education in a nutshell: He was devoutly religious and gentlemanly to a fault.

A few months after his coming of age, Nikolai attended the wedding of his uncle, Grand Duke Sergei, the emperor's younger brother and confidant. Grand Duke Sergei would be an important figure in both the reigns of Alexander III and Nikolai II. Which is unfortunate, because Grand Duke Sergei was a harsh, narrow-minded, violent reactionary, even by the standards of 19th century Russian aristocracy, and that's really saying something.

But for right now, the important point is that Sergei married Princess Elizabeth of Hesse, one of Queen Victoria's many grandchildren. At the wedding, 16-year-old Nikolai met the bride's younger sister, 12-year-old Princess Alix. They hit it off, and teenaged Nikolai wrote in his diary that he was in love. And yeah, it's questionable how seriously you should take the diary writings of a 16-year-old, but in this case, it sounds prophetic. When he was 17, Nikolai went off to serve in the army. Like his cousin Wilhelm, Nikolai found in the army the happiness that had eluded him during his childhood. Like Wilhelm, Nikolai was placed as an officer in an elite unit where the other officers were all sons of aristocrats who had everything they wanted, took for granted their own innate superiority, and were thrilled that they could now count the tsesarevich as one of their friends.

This wasn't exactly bootcamp. Yes, they had to go to drill sometimes, but other days they might sleep in, then have afternoon tea with a grand duchess loaded down with diamonds and pearls, then attend an evening reception possibly followed by a trip to the ballet. Or they might spend their evening at the barracks, getting drunk on champagne, then taking off all their clothes and running around outside in the middle of the night, pretending to be wolves.

I should say a word about ballet here. One of Russia's best-kept secrets at this time was the Imperial Ballet. Russia has some of the best ballet in the world, and hardly anyone outside the country knows it. Even Alexander III, the bushy-bearded emperor in the peasant shirt, patronized the ballet. The rest of Europe is in for a big surprise when they find out what Russian ballet looks like, but that's a story for a future episode.

The Imperial Ballet School Trained the greatest dancers in the Empire, and they received regular physical examinations. Which is a polite way of saying they were checked regularly for venereal disease, because the Imperial Ballet School might as well have been called the Imperial Brothel. Aristocrats who had no interest in ballet found the school a useful place to acquire mistresses – or misters, as the case may be. We really need to come up with a word for that. In exchange for the companionship of the dancer, the aristocrat was expected to serve as the dancer's patron and help advance their career. That was the way it was done in old St. Petersburg.

The custom around this time among Russian aristocracy was that it was the responsibility of a father to... how shall I put this – relieve his son of the burden of his virginity. But where do you find a suitable girl for this purpose? If you are among the highest-ranking aristocracy, the ones who live in St. Petersburg, and especially if you are the emperor, the place you go to find a girl is the Imperial Ballet School. And that's what Alexander did. He selected a ballet dancer for his son, an ethnic Pole named Mathilde Kschessinkaya. She was thrilled to be chosen for the tsesarevich, of course. Imagine what having connections with the Romanovs is going to do for her career. But the shy and religious Nikolai didn't feel quite ready for this step. No matter, Mathilde was nothing if not persistent. It took her two years to get into Nikolai's bed, but she managed it, and it made her the top ballet dancer in Russia.

Nikolai had a dress uniform for every regiment in the Russian Army, and over time, he would acquire uniforms for units in other countries. This was a customary gift that royalty of one country would award to family and friends from other countries during this age, an honorary appointment in some elite military unit of the donors' country. They all indulged in this, and Nikolai loved the uniforms more than most, although it will probably not surprise you if I tell you that the royal who loved his uniforms most of all was Kaiser Wilhelm II.

In 1889, Grand Duke Sergei and his wife invited his sister-in-law, the now 16-year-old Alix, to come to St. Petersburg for a few weeks during the winter social season. They did this with a conscious intent of fixing her up with Nikolai. And it worked like a charm. It turned out Nikolai was as smitten with her at 20 as he was when he was 16. In 1890, Nikolai went on a grand tour of Asia. He visited Egypt, and India, where he hunted tigers, and Singapore and Bangkok and Japan. Russia was building its armed forces in the far east, and the visit of the tsesarevich looked like a good way to build friendly relations. Nikolai visited Japan accompanied by the Russian Pacific Fleet, which was based at Vladivostok. To the shock and horror of the Japanese, one of the police officers escorting Nikolai attacked him with a saber. The first swing cut a 4-inch gash on Nikolai's forehead, and he would have a scar there for the rest of his life. The second swing was parried by Prince George of Greece, Nikolai's cousin, who was accompanying him on the trip.

No one knows the motive for the attack, but the Japanese government went into crisis mode, worried that the Russians would use the incident as an excuse to make war on Japan. But the Russian government took the incident in stride, and Nikolai's injury was not life-threatening. He retired to one of the ships of the Pacific Fleet, and the Meiji Emperor took the unprecedented step of paying a call upon the tsesarevich while he was aboard a foreign military vessel.

Nikolai cut short his tour after this incident, although he did accompany the Pacific Fleet back to Vladivostok as planned, for a ceremony marking the beginning of construction on the Trans-Siberian Railroad, which was a huge project to build a continuous rail line all the way from European Russia to its new holdings on the Pacific Ocean. Nikolai would be the first member of the imperial family to visit Russia's lonely Pacific outpost, and as a result of this visit, he would become enthusiastic about the construction of the rail line.

When he returned to St. Petersburg, the emperor's finance minister, Sergei Witte, who was one of the most able ministers to serve Alexander III, and would be again for the future Nikolai II, suggested to the emperor that it was time his 23-year-old son began to get involved in state affairs, and that chairing the committee in charge of the Trans-Siberian Railway project might be a good place for him to start. The 46-year-old emperor told Witte: "He's nothing more than a child. His judgement is infantile. How can he be president of a committee?"

Gee, thanks dad, I love you too.

They did begin sending Nikolai briefing papers on matters of state. He grumbled that no one could possibly keep up with so much material, and most of it went into the fireplace unread.

By now, Nikolai was confiding to his diary that he wanted to marry Alix of Hesse. But there were a couple of problems with this idea. One was that Alix's grandmother, Queen Victoria, was dead-set against it. Victoria didn't like Russia very much, and she worried that in view of all the political violence there, becoming a Romanov might, shall we say, be hazardous to Alix's health. Foreshadow much? Victoria wanted Alix to come to Britain and marry one of the British royals.



The second problem was that Nikolai's parents didn't like Alix very much, and would not give him permission to propose to her. Grand Duke Sergei and his wife, who were still pulling for Princess Alix, would work on them about that.

She was not easy to like. Princess Alix Viktoria Helene Luise Beatrix of Hesse was born on June 6, 1872. Her father was the grand duke, her mother was Princess Alice, daughter of Queen Victoria. Alix was the sixth of seven children. She was raised Lutheran. She had an older brother who was hemophiliac and would die after a fall at the age of two and a half. I have a feeling that might be important, too.

She lost her mother and her younger sister to a diphtheria epidemic when she was six years old. After the death of her mother, Queen Victoria took a strong interest in her and her siblings, and secured English governesses for them. But dead mother plus absent father often leads to unhappy childhood. She grew up devoutly religious, but gloomy and mistrustful of strangers. One of her cousins reportedly said to her: "Alix, you always play at being sorrowful. One day, the Almighty might send you some real crushing sorrows, and then what are you going to do?" In other words, she was "emo" before emo was cool.

By 1893, though, Nikolai's parents had been persuaded, and he travelled to Berlin to attend the wedding of Kaiser Wilhelm's little sister, knowing that Alix would be there, and prepared to pop the question. But Berlin would prove to be an unhappy visit on both accounts. First, Alix would turn him down, on the grounds that she could not in good conscience abandon Lutheranism for Russian Orthodoxy. Second, Kaiser Wilhelm, aware that a Franco-Russian alliance is in the works, would buttonhole his cousin with a long, anti-French harangue and send him home with a paper making the case for why Russia should join the Triple Alliance. Kaiser Wilhelm interpreted Nikolai's gentlemanly demeanor as evidence that his top-notch diplomatic skills were working their usual magic. Actually, Nikolai was just being polite, and was completely unpersuaded by the Kaiser's arguments. But this would not stop Wilhelm from spending the next 15 years trying to persuade Emperor Nikolai to break his alliance with the French.

A few months later, Nikolai would travel to Britain for the wedding of his cousin George, son of the Prince of Wales and future King George V. Everyone remarked on how much family resemblance there was between Nikolai and George, so much so that Nikolai started grumbling about it, although he couldn't have been too unhappy with the comparison, because he started wearing a neatly-trimmed Van Dyke beard, just like George. Nikolai hit it off with his English relations, most spectacularly with Queen Victoria herself, who was much impressed by Nikolai's impeccable manners and his nearly perfect English. So even as Britain and Russia were rattling sabers over Russian soldiers moving toward Afghanistan, the queen awarded Nikolai the Order of the Garter, and she softened her stance against the marriage.

The following year, 1894, there was another royal marriage. This time, it was Alix's brother Ernst Nikolai went to the wedding, and there was as much buzz about the Nikolai and Alix drama, how he had proposed to her once before and how she turned him down and what would happen when they met again, as there was about the actual bride and groom. Alix's German relatives and her British relatives both pressed her to say yes. Her British relatives thought that she was throwing away a golden opportunity to improve Anglo-Russian relations. Her German relatives thought she was throwing away a golden opportunity to improve Russo-German relations. Her sister, the grand duchess, told her that Lutheranism and Russian Orthodoxy actually had quite a lot in common. And Kaiser Wilhelm himself pressed her to say yes. Typically, Wilhelm would later claim full credit for bringing the couple together.

In the end, Alix said yes. Queen Victoria was "thunderstruck" (her word) but decided it was for the best, and instructed Nikolai to start calling her "Granny". At about this same time, William Le Queux, the British novelist who would 13 years later write *The Invasion of 1910*, a novel depicting a German invasion of England that I described back in episode 2, would in this year (1894) publish a novel entitled *The Great War in England* describing a Russian invasion of England. Sign of the times.

But just weeks after Nikolai and Alix were betrothed, the Russian Emperor fell ill. He had been sent to the imperial estate in the Crimea and was tended to by the best doctors available, but it was to no avail. In October, Nikolai sent for his fiancée, knowing that his father's end was near. When she arrived, the gravely ill emperor was so weak he could hardly get out of bed, but insisted on getting up and putting on a full dress uniform so he could greet her properly. He died after a painful and lingering illness on November 1 at the age of 49.

[music: Tchaikovsky, *String Quartet No. 1*]

Nikolai took the oath that same day, but the promised divine inspiration apparently didn't come, for Nikolai blurted out: "What is going to happen to me... to all Russia? I never wanted to become czar... I know nothing of the business of ruling." The following day, Alix was received into the Russian Orthodox Church, as Alexandra Feodorovna.

The dead emperor's remains, along with the new emperor and his entourage, returned to St. Petersburg by train. Tens of thousands of Russian soldiers lined the tracks over every one of the 1,200 miles of this journey. Because of all the political violence in Russia, this was now standard procedure whenever the imperial family traveled by train.

61 royals came to St. Petersburg for the funeral, making it the biggest royal event ever held on Russian soil. A week later, Nikolai and Alexandra were married. The bride's dress was so full of gold and silver and diamonds that it required eight pages to carry it for her. That's Russian aristocracy for you.

At Windsor Palace the night before, Queen Victoria wrote, perhaps prophetically: "Tomorrow morning, poor dear Alicky's fate will be sealed. No two people were ever more devoted as she and he are and that is the one consolation I have, for otherwise, the dangers and responsibilities fill me with anxiety..."

As for Alexandra, she said that the wedding “seems to be a mere continuation of the masses for the dead, with this difference; that now I wore a white dress instead of a black one.”

We’ll have to stop there for today, but I hope you’ll join me next week on *The History of the Twentieth Century* as we take a look at the new Russian Emperor’s first major foreign policy initiative. And you aren’t gonna believe what it is. That’s next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. Nikolai had his formal coronation in May 1896. A few days later, as was the custom at the time, a huge outdoor feast was held in a field outside Moscow, where a free meal and a commemorative cup were offered to every Muscovite as a gift from the emperor. Sadly, the event was poorly planned. Excavation work in the field was not filled in as it should have been, and the police presence, about 1,800, was inadequate for a crowd some estimate to have been as large as half a million. Rumors spread that there was not enough food for everyone, which started a rush, which became a stampede. People were trampled to death, or fell into the excavations and suffocated. Over a thousand died, and an equal number were seriously injured. That night, the emperor attended a ball at the French embassy, either because he was unaware of the scope of the tragedy, or perhaps because he was advised to attend anyway for the sake of maintaining Russia’s all-important alliance with France.

The person in charge of organizing the feast was none other than Nikolai’s uncle, the Grand Duke Sergei. This is the same Sergei who was married to Alexandra’s sister. He was Governor-General of Moscow at this time. Instead of a punishment or a reprimand, Sergei was given command of a Moscow military district, effectively a promotion. This combination of a tragedy, plus Nikolai partying with the French as if nothing had happened, plus the man responsible for the tragedy being promoted instead of reprimanded, cast a shadow over the new emperor’s reign, and the common people of Moscow long remembered what they took as Nikolai’s cavalier attitude toward the loss of so many lives. That’s one more bad omen, if you’re still counting.

[music: Closing Theme]