Contemporary Russian Perceptions of Tsar Nicholas II

Cadra Peterson McDaniel
Texas A&M University—Central Texas

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russian citizens, historians, and leaders began to reconsider the Imperial era. In particular, these individuals sought to reexamine Tsar Nicholas II's actions and legacy outside a Marxist context, in which the tsar had been derided as an inept tyrant. Two specific topics that have been the subject of revision are Nicholas' abdication on March 2, 1917 (O.S.) and his death on July 16/17, 1918. Current Russian interpretations of these two aspects of his reign and life portray Nicholas as a hapless ruler who suffered a tragic death.

The contemporary view of Nicholas appears most readily as that of a martyr. Since July 1992, there has been a commemoration of the death of the tsar and his family in the city of Yekaterinburg, the location of their murders on July 16/17, 1918 (Bratchikov-Pogrebisskiy, "Last Tsar.") This commemoration also seems to have occurred in other cities, notably in 2018. During the author's visit to St. Petersburg in July of that year, she witnessed a portion of a procession of Russian citizens apparently singing hymns and carrying icons of the tsar and his family. These individuals seemed to be commemorating the 100th anniversary of the tsar's and his family's murder.[1] That same year, 2018, a public opinion poll conducted by the Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VCIOM) indicated that among the figures listed, which included Nicholas II, Josef Stalin, Vladimir Lenin, Alexander Kolchak, and Anton Denikin, 54% of respondents indicated that they sympathized with Nicholas, with Stalin receiving the next highest level of sympathy at 51%. As indicated by the poll's data, sympathy for the tsar has increased steadily from 42% in 2005 (Gilbert, "Nicholas II, Stalin and Lenin").[2]

Although there appears to be growing interest in and sympathy for Nicholas among the Russian public, this specific study focuses upon the construction of official narratives of the tsar found in Russian middle school and high school history textbooks—a topic that scholars apparently have not yet examined.[3] These history textbooks' interpretations are important because scholars have concluded that these textbook accounts can shape an individual's perception of past events and provide insight into a country's national identity (Aleksashkina and Zajda, 171–184; Wertsch, *How Nations Remember passim*; Peterson McDaniel *passim*; Zhao 99-112; Mujadžević, 293-302.) Frequently, individuals adopt the narrative learned and use it as a framework when describing or remembering the value of historical events. Individuals fashion their perceptions of the past using similar wording and structure that imitate that of the learned narrative (Wertsch, "The Narrative Organization," 122-130).

The authors of Soviet era textbooks (1950-1980s) tended to portray the tsar as an incompetent leader and to subordinate his abdication to the events that led to the February Revolution as well as to not mention in detail his subsequent execution. K. V. Bazilevich et al., in their 1952 textbook, and I. B. Berkhin and I. A. Fedosov in their 1982 textbook, recount that Nicholas ignored the Duma's pleas to make compromises with the people (Bazilevich, et al.132; Berkhin and Fedosov, 122). Bazilevich et al., declare that due to the role of the Petrograd Soviet, "[o]n 27 February (O.S.—added by the author) the revolution triumphed (Bazilevich et al., 133)." Amid these actions, Bazilevich et al. contend that "bourgeois Duma deputies and the leaders of the Mensheviks and SRs" (Socialist Revolutionaries) sought to save the monarchy by convincing Nicholas to create a government, comprised of the Duma members, which would act as the country's new authority" (Bazilevich et al., 133-135). The authors do not refer to the royal family's death in detail (Bazilevich et al., 218).

Berkhin and Fedosov provide a generally similar understanding of the events. Although there is no statement concerning the revolution's victory occurring on February 27 (O.S.), these authors continue the framing of the tsar's abdication in the context of class conflict. Specifically, these authors emphasize that bourgeois leaders unsuccessfully attempted to save the monarchy, which ended in March 1917 (Berkhin and Fedosov 126). Berkhin and Fedosov, in their discussion of the Russian Civil War, do not seem to address the tsar's and his family's death (Berkhin and Fedosov, 206-218).

The interpretations presented by these Soviet authors cast the tsar as an unresponsive leader who chose to ignore his subjects' plight. His abdication, according to both sets of authors, resulted from the failure of nefarious bourgeois political leaders' attempts to preserve the monarchy. Such narratives clearly reinforce the official Soviet view of history marred by class conflict. In the 1952 textbook, Bazilevich et al.'s decision to announce the revolution's victory on February 27 (O.S.) indicates that

even before Nicholas' abdication on March 2 (O.S.), he had become an inconsequential figure. Although Berkhin and Fedosov do not cite the revolution's victory as occurring on February 27 (O.S.), the fall of the monarchy is still presented as the outcome of the failed efforts of the bourgeoisie to thwart the people's calls for a revolution.

In neither textbook do the writers focus on the royal family's death. This stance appears to stem from the prevailing sentiment in the Soviet Union that the execution of the royal family was a subject that generally was not mentioned, and the burial site of the family's remains continued to be an official secret until the late 1980s (Marshall, "Russian Revival"; Montefiore, 647, 650-651). The reasons for this approach are not completely clear. Possible concerns may have been that the murdered family could act as a focal point for critics of the Soviet regime, which seems to have been a reason for their execution in 1918 (Montefiore, 637-643).[4] Moreover, after the tsar's abdication, he no longer needed to be considered as a factor in history; instead, he had been replaced by the Communist Party as the country's guiding power. Thus, Nicholas' and his family's death was not a central aspect of the historical record, and in its place would be a chronicle of the triumph of the Reds in the Civil War.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, textbook authors' descriptions of Nicholas' abdication underwent various transformations. Without the overarching Marxist framework for historical analysis, authors in the early post-Soviet era (1995-2013) began to incorporate elements absent from Soviet era explanations. Instead of the focus upon the triumph of the revolution, or the depiction of politicians' and other political groups' actions as nefarious machinations to preserve the monarchy, the narrative focused more on factors that led to Nicholas' abdication. In an early post-Soviet textbook, published in 1995, V. P. Ostrovskii and A. I. Utkin briefly note that once the tsar realized that his miliary commanders all favored abdication, he agreed to renounce the throne. These authors then restate Nicholas' views on the event as recorded in his diary—that he was surrounded by "treason, and cowardice, and deception" (Ostrovskii and Utkin, 125-126). There does not seem to be a detailed discussion of the tsar's or his family's execution though the execution is portrayed as a means to divide clearly Imperial Russia from Communist Russia (Ostrovskii and Utkin, 149-169, 175-178).

A few years later in 1998, the textbook authors A. A. Danilov and L. G. Kosulina adopted a different approach. Although these authors, too, offer a succinct version of Nicholas' abdication, instead of focusing upon the reasons for the tsar's action, they include excerpts from his abdication manifesto followed by the question that prompts students to explain what factors guided Nicholas' decision (Danilov and Kosulina, 1998, 88-89, 95-96.). Regarding the tsar's execution, Danilov and Kosulina state that the Ural Regional Soviet, with the approval of the Council of People's Commissars (Sovnarkom), carried out the murders. The authors explain that not only were Nicholas, his wife, and children executed, but also, these authors detail the deaths of other members of the imperial family. The death of the tsar and his family is described as "[o]ne of the ominous pages of the 'Red Terror'" (Danilov and Kosulina, 1998, 122).

Other accounts of the post-Soviet era, such as that from 2009 by A. A. Levandovskii, Iu. A. Shchetinov, and S. V. Mironenko, appear somewhat reminiscent of the Soviet era's focus on liberal politicians and their efforts to preserve the monarchy. Generally, these authors note that the revolutionary actions in Petrograd undermined liberal politicians who sought to transform Russia into a constitutional monarchy. Nicholas' decision to abdicate resulted from the revolutionary upheavals in the capital and the views of his military commanders (Levandovskii et al., 71-73). Later, as the authors discuss the strengthening of the Red forces, they insert a side discussion at the bottom of the page regarding the royal family's murder. To justify the family's death, the authors rely on an excerpt from the writings of Leon Trotsky, who explains that the execution aimed to destroy the hopes of the Bolsheviks' opponents as well as to demonstrate to "'one's own ranks'" that retreat was not an option. The Bolsheviks must continue until they reached either "'complete victory or complete death'" (Levandovskii et al., 114).

In contrast to this 2009 textbook, a 2012 textbook, authored by S. V. Perevezentsev and T. V. Perevezentseva, presents Nicholas as a sympathetic and isolated figure. These authors explain that military commanders echoed the Provisional Government's demand that the tsar abdicate (Perevezentsev and Perevezentseva, 79). Even other members of the imperial family from whom Nicholas sought assistance counseled him to renounce the throne. This isolation appears as the factor that prompted Nicholas' abdication, and Perevezentsev and Perevezentseva include the entry from Nicholas' diary in which he described being surrounding by "treason, and cowardice, and deception!" (Perevezentsev and Perevezentseva, 79). Regarding the tsar's death, a description of this event is in an inserted box within the section concerning the development of the one-party state and the Red Terror. In addition to noting the family's execution, the authors explain that in 2000, the Russian Orthodox Church canonized the royal family as martyrs (Perevezentsev and Perevezentseva, 99-100).

In contrast to this more detailed account, Iu. N. Lubchenkov and V. V. Mikhailov in their 2013 textbook provide a very condensed version of events. The authors explain that the frontline military commanders supported the tsar's abdication, which led to the tsar renouncing the

throne (Lubchenkov and Mikhailov, 50). Although this very short description provides little context regarding the tsar's decision, the authors provide excerpts from Nicholas' abdication manifesto with the questions asking the reader to explain the specific conditions that prompted Nicholas to abdicate and to ponder if other courses of action could have been possible (Lubchenkov and Mikhailov, 55-56). There is a brief mention of the royal family's death but no detailed discussion (Lubchenkov and Mikhailov, 62-63).

As evidenced from these various writers' approaches to the tsar's abdication and the royal family's death, Nicholas appears as a more central figure in these post-Soviet textbooks. For example, some authors note the tsar's response to the events surrounding his abdication, which humanize him, and which stand in opposition to the more negative portrayals of the Soviet era. Additionally, this focus on Nicholas most readily appears in the accounts that utilize excerpts from his abdication manifesto and that prompt students to then answer questions based on the text. By having students read the tsar's manifesto, they draw their own conclusions regarding the factors surrounding the event. Such an exercise causes students to consider the tsar's stated reasons for abdicating and to consider the challenges that he faced. These questions, furthermore, may be understood as a refutation of the Soviet era's characterization of Nicholas as a leader who disregarded his subjects' welfare, and these questions may be recognized as being reflective of the post-Soviet era's focus on historical inquiry concerning subjects not openly or frequently discussed in the Soviet era. The exception would be Levandovskii et al.'s explanation that seemingly indicates the continued importance of some aspects of Soviet interpretations.

Moreover, textbooks that contain an examination of the imperial family's death evidenced a break from the Soviet era. The inclusion of the family's murder, which is described as an "ominous" event or which ends with a mention of their canonization, may be recognized as attempts to begin to explore censored topics during the Soviet era and to begin to recognize the extent of the Red Terror while simultaneously providing a historical narrative that acknowledges the family's fate. Based on the comments of former Russian President Boris Yeltsin, regarding the guilt associated with the Romanovs' murders, the decision to address the royal family's death may be understood as a form of atonement for their execution.[5]

Although textbooks published from 1995-2013 evidnce more interest in the tsar's abdication and death, since 2014, the 100th anniversary of the outbreak of World War I, attention to the war and events in the very late Imperial era has increased within Russia. Concurrently, there have been efforts by leading Russian officials, including President Vladimir Putin, to develop a more unified and patriotic historical narrative.[6] An examination of textbooks published from 2014 to 2023 offers insight into the attempts to create this patriotic and more unified interpretation regarding Nicholas' abdication and death.

In a 2014 history textbook, A. A. Danilov, L. G. Kosulina, and M. Iu. Brandt record that telegrams sent by the leader of the Duma to military commanders raised the idea of the tsar's abdication. These commanders then reached an agreement that the best course of action was for Nicholas to abdicate (Danilov et al., 2014, 75). The authors recall that these commanders' stance stunned the tsar, who agreed to renounce the throne. Following this discussion are excerpts from the tsar's abdication manifesto and questions prompting the reader to note Nicholas' reasons for abdicating and asking the reader if the tsar's abdication could be characterized as voluntary (Danilov et al., 2014, 76.). Regarding the royal family's execution, the account is the same as that from Danilov's and Kosulina's 1998 textbook, which assigns blame to the Ural Regional Soviet who acted with the approval of the Council of People's Commissars (Sovnarkom) (Danilov et al., 2014, 112-113).

Other authors who rely on a previous edition of their work are A. A. Levandovskii, Iu. A. Shchetinov, and S. V. Mironenko whose 2015 textbook is very similar to their earlier 2009 edition. The authors generally left unchanged their contentions regarding the events leading to the tsar's abdication and death. These authors again note the role of some liberal politicians in seeking to preserve the monarchy, and these authors continue to utilize the writings of Trotsky to explain the reasons for the royal family's death (Levandovskii, et al., 2015, 71, 112-113).

In contrast to Levandovskii et al.'s focus on revolutionary events in Petrograd, O. V. Volobuev, S. P. Karpachev, and V. A. Klokov, in their 2021 textbook, present an analysis that recalls the tsar's actions and responses. These authors state that only at a meeting with frontline commanders did Nicholas learn of the Duma's and military leaders' resolve that he should abdicate and that frontline commanders shared this opinion (Volobuev, et al. 29). Moreover, the authors recount that Grand Duke Nicholas Nikolaevich urged the tsar to abdicate. Nicholas, "under pressure from all sides" chose to abdicate. The authors further selected a longer excerpt from Nicholas' diary for that day, which offers an extended version of Nicholas' response to the day's events: "At one at night I left Pskov with a heavy sense of what I had gone through. All around treason and cowardice and deception" (Volobuev et al., 29). At the end of the section, there are questions that ask the reader to consider the factors that guided Nicholas to abdicate and to examine the outcome of his decision (Volobuev et al., 29-30). In a subsequent section recounting the Russian Civil War and War Communism, the authors describe "complete terror"

as pervading the entire country. Amid this discussion, the authors then recall the execution of the imperial family in July 1918 (Volobuev, et al., 62, 72).

Volobuev's, Karpachev's, and Klokov's writing partly seems to serve as the basis for the narrative presented in the 2023 textbook authored by V. R. Medinskii and A. V. Torkunov. The emphasis is upon the sentiment among the Duma and military leaders that Nicholas should abdicate. With the frontline military commanders agreeing that the only course of action was for Nicholas to abdicate, the tsar, stunned, signed the abdication manifesto (Medinskii and Torkunov, 39). There is also the text of the abdication manifesto followed by questions such as asking the reader to note the tsar's motives for renouncing the throne and to note the factors that the tsar perceived as needed for governing Russia (Medinskii and Torkunov, 48-49). In a later examination concerning the Red and White Terror, Medinskii and Torkunov insert a discussion of Nicholas' and his family's death in a separate box distinct from the main text. Next to the text is a photograph of the Ipatiev House, the location of the family's imprisonment prior to their execution. The opening line of the paragraph describing the family's death begins with the phrase, "[o]ne of the most ominous pages of the Civil War…" (Medinskii and Torkunov, 105-106). Medinskii and Torkunov mention the imperial family's execution and then describe the fate of the Ipatiev House. The authors note that in the late 1970s, Soviet officials opted to destroy the house, and in its place, in 2003, there was built the Church on Blood in Honor of All the Saints Resplendent in the Russian Land (Medinskii and Torkunov, 105-106).

Efforts to develop a more unified narrative regarding Nicholas' abdication and death appear to be ongoing. The general trend is to note the agreement between the Duma and military leaders concerning the necessity of Nicholas' abdication. Another common theme is that these recent accounts, as with some earlier post-Soviet interpretations, humanize the tsar by emphasizing his shock at his military commanders' call for abdication; by quoting from his diary to demonstrate his feelings of betrayal; and/or by focusing on his motivations for abdicating, thereby, casting him as personable.

Although these more contemporary textbook authors generally provide a more humanized view of Nicholas, there still seems to be some uncertainty regarding the manner in which to address the tsar's and his family's murder. Among these varied accounts, Medinskii's and Torkunov's writings prove to be highly interesting. Because Medinskii is a close advisor to President Putin, the discussion found in this 2023 textbook may be reflective of the official view of the royal family's death. This narrative recognizes that the family died during the Civil War but does not assign the blame to the Reds or the Soviets. By using the general term, Civil War, the authors refrain from assigning blame for the family's death, which may be part of an official effort to unify disparate aspects of Russian history.[7] Moreover, the decision to conclude with a discussion of the Church on Blood in Honor of All the Saints shifts the focus from the execution to instead an acknowledgement of the family's legacy as revered saints among a nation of many holy martyrs, thereby ending the account of Russia's monarchy not with a violent execution but with a peaceful legacy.

Changing interpretations of Tsar Nicholas II's abdication and death have provided and continue to provide insight into the Soviet and post-Soviet Russian view of the tsar's legacy. This study allows for an understanding of the differing means of approaching the topic of a country's deposed ruler—a delicate and potentially explosive topic for any government in power. For contemporary Russia, authors' descriptions of Nicholas' abdication as well as his and his family's death may be understood as a means for the state to engage with the last tsar's apparent increasing popularity. This current interpretation aims in some ways to mirror the popular image of Nicholas and his family as hapless and even tragic figures, which in turn may reinforce subtly a patriotic narrative that portrays political and social unrest as leading to violent upheaval and needless deaths.

ENDNOTES

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[1] The author witnessed a portion of this procession near the Winter Palace in mid-July 2018. A photo accompanying Alexander Morozov's article, "Post-Soviet Russia Has Mixed Feelings for Tsar Nicholas II," shows a commemoration in Kiev in 2002.

[2] The original polling data did not seem to be vailable on VCIOM's website. However, an image of the poll, with data displayed in graph form, appears in Gilbert's article. According to polling data, for the other figures listed, respondents indicated sympathy at the following levels: Lenin received 49%, Kolchak received 36%, and Denikin received 30%.

[3] Textbooks used are for classes 9-11, which corresponds to middle school (class 9) and high school (classes 10 and 11). See International Education Guide. Although numerous English and Russian studies have recounted the tsar's abdication and the royal family's murder, it does not appear that scholars have yet to analyze the changing narrative concerning these two events as presented in Russian history textbooks. Examples of articles that examine Nicholas II's actions include: Sworakowski, "The Authorship of the Abdication Document of Nicholas II,"; Hemenway, "Nicholas in Hell,"; Monastyrev, "Otrechenie Nikolaia II,"; Tsvetkov, "Krushenie monarkhii."

[4] Apparently, the murdered royal family remained a source of concern for Soviet leaders. Stalin refused to allow individuals who participated in the murders to mention the family in memoirs, and Andropov ordered the destruction of the Ipatiev House because he believed it could be a symbol for "anti-Soviet circles in the West." See Montefiore, *The Romanovs*, 647, 650.

[5] For Yeltsin's specific comments, see Montefiore, *The Romanovs*, 651.

[6] For a discussion of these efforts, see Peterson McDaniel, "Russia's Proud Past"; "Informatsionno-metodicheskie materialy"; "Patrioticheskoe vospitanie obuchaiushchikhsia"; "Rol' vospitatelia"; Putin,"Otkrytie pamiatnika"; Putin, "Unveiling of a monument."

[7] For a discussion of these efforts, see Peterson McDaniel, "Russia's Proud Past"; "Informatsionno-metodicheskie materialy"; "Patrioticheskoe vospitanie obuchaiushchikhsia"; "Rol' vospitatelia."

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