



Pointing Fingers

The Revolutionary Game of Choice

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The fall of the tsarist regime in 1917 created a situation of financial, political, and geographic loss for the Russian nobility. While many members of the class fled their homes as a result of the events that ensued in 1917, some left St. Petersburg even before the fall of the tsarist regime and obtained an outsider's perspective on the revolutionary events. Among them were Grand Duke Dmitry Pavlovich and Prince Felix Yussoupov, exiled to Persia and Ukraine, respectively, on January 3rd, 1917 for the murder of Rasputin. ^[1, Chapter XXIV] On April 23rd of that year, Grand Duke Dmitry Pavlovich wrote a letter to Prince Yussoupov, offering the perspective of a stakeholder exiled by the past government and not welcome by the new one. As powerless men often do, in his letter, the Duke writes to the Prince not to discuss the future of the situation, but rather to point fingers for the fall of autocracy leading to the loss experienced by the nobility. While he believed the superstition that Nicholas's rule was cursed from the start with a rumored drop of blood that fell on Tsarina's ermine coat prior to the coronation ceremony, the April 23rd letter and supporting accounts of Prince Yussoupov in his memoir *Lost Splendor* acknowledge Rasputin's mysticism, the Tsarina's participation in politics, Nicholas II's weakness and incompetence, Lenin's radicalism, and the general immaturity of the population as the main contributing factors to the fall of the nobility and autocracy.

Background and Biases

It is important to note the backgrounds of and relationship between the authors of the April 23rd letter and *Lost Splendor*.

Dmitry Pavlovich owed his noble status to a line of Romanov Dukes and grew up in the favour of his cousin, tsar Nicholas II and his wife Alexandra. Despite the luxury that surrounded the duke, from birth he was acquainted with death and exile through family members and was primarily raised by Grand Duchess Ella who later became an outspoken critic of Rasputin, perhaps playing into Dmitry's decision to participate in his murder in 1916. ^[7]

Prince Yussoupov came from a line that acquired wealth during the conquest of Siberia and, unlike the Duke, was surrounded by a loving family growing up. He was hopelessly spoiled by his mother with luxury and attention from birth. ^[6]

According to *Lost Splendor*, the Duke and the Prince – old friends, partners in crime and conversationalists, became especially close in 1912. Their familiarity developed smoothly with the exception of episodes of jealousy over the Tsar’s attention and a “temporary eclipse” due to Tsar’s and Tsarina’s disapproval of their relations. ^[1, Chapter X] They communicated on countless occasions and both plotted the murder of Rasputin, the famous Russian monk who became influential in the imperial court as a result of his rumored supernatural control over the Tsarevich’s hemophilia. ^[5]

The letter written by the Duke on April 23rd to the Prince was thus an account for a friend by a friend - politically cautious and reserved due to police oversight of the mail, but an open and honest summary of his views. On the other hand, *Lost Splendor* was a work of personal recollection written to present the author, already convinced of his superiority through his mother’s upbringing, in the best possible light and written long after the events of 1917 occurred.

Both the authors were exiled by Nicholas II for the murder of Rasputin. Even though they carried bitterness for the punishment into 1917, they were still noble, and their personal interests aligned with the autocracy and not the new government. They were biased against the last ruler of the Romanov Dynasty, but not against imperial rule as a concept, whereas they perceived the revolutionary regime as trampling on their status and taking away their lands. Prince Yussupov’s subsequent escape to France and Dmitry Pavlovich’s flight to England in later years is proof of the revolutionary disfavor on their lifestyle. ^{[6] [7]}

In the crumbling of the dynasty, the Duke's and the Prince's search for blame began prior to 1917, as Dmitry Pavlovich's April 23rd letter briefly indicates, saying that they "visualized"



the "possibility of [events]," ^[2] prior to their occurrence. According to *Lost Splendor*, that visualization dated at least as far back as fall of 1916 when "Dmitri made no secret of the fact that the idea of killing Rasputin had haunted him." ^[1, Chapter XXII]

Grigory Efimovich Rasputin was born in Siberia into a family of a peasants and was summoned to the royal palace to help alleviate the Tsarevich's hemophilia in 1908. As a result of his medical and spiritual success, he gained influence with Nicholas II and Alexandra. Rasputin was talked about as an almost demonic influence on the dynasty in the circle of the nobles, due to his influence over the rulers. ^[5] According to the Prince's memoir, the nobles suspected "that drugs administered to the Tsar" on Rasputin's orders "were paralyzing his will power, and were given with this intention." ^[1, Chapter XXII] Whether or not those accounts are true, Rasputin did exercise certain influence over the royal family and peasantry and Nicholas II often made use of his advice in political matters. Nobles observed the relationship with jealousy. ^[5]

They looked down upon the valued peasant and at the same time feared the mystic's influence and often wished for his disappearance. Additionally, *The Rasputin File* by Edvard Razinsky, an analysis of Grand Duke Nikolai Mikhailovich's diary excerpts and Yusoupov's post-Paris accounts, reveals the possibility of a homosexual attraction between Rasputin and Yussupov. ^[8, "Carnal Passion"] The possible developments of their personal relations as well as the Prince's desire to overrepresent his noble qualities biased *Lost Splendor* to favour the writer's perspective. However, the fact remains that the aforementioned sentiments led to the conspiracy against Rasputin's life, two of the three direct participants being the Grand Duke Dmitry and Prince Felix Yussupov.

The Second One Blamed: Tsarina Alexandra

Following the murder and in the absence of the Nicholas II, Tsarina Alexandra issued an unofficial order for the house arrest of Duke Dmitry shortly after December 29th, 1916, ordering him “not leave his palace” As Yussupov saw it, this kind of decision made the nobility lose its trust in the ruling family. According to him, Grand Duke Nicholas Mikhailovich “warned [them] that the Tsarina, convinced of [their] complicity in Rasputin’s assassination, demanded that [they] be shot at once.” [1, Chapter XXIV]

In the letter Dmitry sent to Yussoupov on April 23rd 1917, he writes that the “final catastrophe has been brought about by the wilful [sic] and short-sighted obstinacy of a woman,” [2] referring to the Tsarina’s failure to make, from his point of view, correct decisions on domestic policy. (In 1915 when Nicholas II took command of the Army, the tsarina heavily relied on Rasputin’s guidance in politics, dismissing ministers and other royals in decision-making.) [9] Rumors of her affair with Rasputin and pro-German views circulated, further soiling her reputation among the nobility, as Yussoupov and Dmitry noted in their exchange. [4] *Lost Splendor* presents the idea circulating amidst the Grand Dukes that the tsarina should be “shut up in a convent” due to her behavior. [1] However, she was not the only royal under their eyes’ scrutiny.



On January 1st, 1917, upon the Tsar's return to Tsarskoe Selo, "General Maximovitch came to notify the Grand Duke Dmitri – this time in the Emperor's name – that he was to consider himself under arrest in his palace" for the murder of Rasputin, as Yussoupov writes in *Lost Splendor*. [1, Chapter XXIV] Guards were sent to keep Dmitry Pavlovich prisoner in his own home, thereby increasing the nobles' general discontent with the tsar. "The future of the country and of the dynasty depended on the decisions taken by the Emperor in the days to come," and the decision to arrest Dmitri did not align with the interests of his noble supporters who saw it as "a step against a member of the Imperial family." [1, Chapter XXIV]



In his memoir Yussoupov noted that prior to the Duke's palace imprisonment, regiments urged Dmitry to overturn the crown and take the reins of imperial rule. Other Grand Dukes also believed that Russia could be saved "by a change of rulers."

In the letter Dmitri sent to Yussupov, the Duke refers to Nicholas II as "the power that has exiled" him, expressing detachment from the now fallen tsar. [2]

Loyalties to individuals aside, in their letter and memoir the Grand Duke and Prince continue to show their preference for the tsarist regime and loyalty to the dynasty as a whole. Even though Dmitry explains that he wrote a letter to Petrograd, expressing his a "willingness to support the Provisional Government" if he could improve his situation, he still regrets that the revolution "swept away Tsarskoe [the imperial residence] and all of us [nobles] at one stroke," and that the "name of Romanov" has become "a synonym for every kind of filth and indecency." [2]

Pinning Down the Fault: Lenin, Radicalism, and the “dual power”

On March 2nd, the tsar abdicated the throne and the formation of the Provisional Government was announced, while the Petrograd Soviet was already in session. “Dual power” replaced the crown to the drums of Order Number One passed a day earlier in the name of Petrograd Soviet. Order Number One reformed the army with soldier committees, abolishing saluting and disciplinary measures, and handing policy control over military forces to the Soviet, thus reinforcing its power. ^[10]

In his April 23rd letter, Dmitry criticizes these army reforms on the grounds that depriving leaders of titles undermines “the unity of the army,” a sure sign of the country’s strength. ^[2] Yussoupov agrees in his memoir that “abolishing saluting” and empowering “the soldiers to choose their own officers” “meant the end of all military discipline.” ^[1, Chapter XXV] Moreover, writing to the Prince, Dmitry explicitly blames Lenin and his revolutionary ideas for poor outcomes in World War I without mentioning any fault on the part of the tsar. According to him, so-called “‘fighters for liberty’ like Lenin and company” have destroyed the discipline of the Russian Army which even originally “could never boast of particularly strict discipline.” ^[2] He claims Russia is not only weakened, but also embarrassed in the eyes of the Allies. “What have they done with our army?” he complains. ^[2]

Because of the disagreement with the new regime and lingering memories of “delightful” times during tsarist rule, the exiled Dmitry notes that he does not want to take “the first opportunity of racing back,” nor to imply “too precipitate an acceptance of the Provisional Government” and what he viewed to be a catastrophic disintegration of the empire. ^[2]



Spreading the Blame: The Russian People

As the hand ran out of fingers to point, another notable assignment of blame in this exchange is handed to the general population of Russia, the peasants, the workers, and the protesters – those without rank or title. To Yussupov in March of 1917, “it was obvious that the people has all lost their heads,” while Dmitry was of the aligned opinion when writing his letter in April, that Russians interpreted “liberty as meaning the right to do anything that comes into” their heads, rather immaturity. [1, Chapter XXV] [2] Perhaps insensitive to the needs of the Russian people and perhaps outraged by the apparent lack of loyalty to the tsarist regime, the two friends judged the protestors on the streets of St. Petersburg and pitied Russia’s fate.

Lost Splendor

The April 23rd exchange between Prince Felix Yussoupov and Duke Dmitry Pavlovich captures their state during exile and “the loss of splendor.” Prior to the events of 1917, the Grand Duke reminisces about his “beautiful lounge with the grey divan and the tiger skin;” the “accompaniment of ... guitars;” the palaces and receptions and great company all of which they had to trade in “as one must live somehow.” [2] In 1917 the nobility witnessed their lifestyle being taken away and their role in the process being minimized. Most, like the Duke and the Prince, were powerless to change the course of events leading to the Lost Splendor and Soviet Power marching hand in hand into the new century of Russian politics abolishing nobility in its entirety.

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