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The Last Coronation of a Russian Tsar



SEE PP

5-6

1300 people

trampled/crushed
during festivities

18 May 1896

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Coronation of Nicholas II

Mourning for Tsar Alexander III was over by autumn of 1895 and was replaced by the preparations for the **coronation** of the new Tsar. The ceremony of the Sacred **Coronation** was scheduled for May 1896. In accordance with the time-honored tradition, it was to take place in Moscow, the former capital, yet still pre-eminent city of Russia. The specially appointed **Coronation** Commission was assiduously preparing for grandiose festivities. Considerable sums were allotted for repairing and decorating palaces, imperial theaters and places for outdoor fetes and spectacles in Moscow. Banners and standards, the purples and the regalia, as well as liveries for top officials and vestments for dignitaries, garments for heralds and other vestments were to be specially made for the occasion.

The **coronation** gown of Tsarina Alexandra Feodorovna cost 4,920 rubles, with the other items prepared for her for the ceremonies amounting to 12,000 rubles. It is noteworthy, however, that the sums were only a tenth of the expenditure for her predecessor, Tsarina Maria Feodorovna, in 1883. The total sum allotted for the **Coronation** celebrations in 1896 amounted to 965,925 rubles, while the expenditure for the **Coronation** celebrations in 1883, when tsar Alexander III was crowned, totaled 2,715,704 rubles.

The most prominent artists and decorators were engaged in embellishing the palaces and streets of Moscow. Special coins and medals were minted to commemorate the Sacred **Coronation**. The Russian celebrities Vasilii Vasnetsov and Alexander Benoit designed watercolours for the menus of the festive meals. The composer Alexander Glazunov dedicated a cantata.

In early May 1896 hordes of people set out for Moscow searching eagerly for "bread and circuses." Everybody was looking forward to the arrival of the Imperial Couple. On Monday, May 6, 1896, Tsar Nicholas II and his consort, Tsarina Alexandra Feodorovna, arrived at the Petrovsky Palace, several miles outside Moscow. The next two days were devoted to the preparations for the Ceremonial Entry in the Kremlin. On the morning of May 9, cavalry and foot soldiers moved to music all over the city, lining the route for the Imperial procession.

His Imperial Majesty's Own Escort, the Horse-Guards, the Life-Guards Uhlan, Dragoon, Cuirassier, Hussar and Cossack squadrons and regiments, the grenadiers as well as riflemen, sappers and military schools' cadets, made up an impressive, picturesque throng, with horses, guns and all sorts of arms, all of them subject to strict regulations and discipline. Gathered under their regimental standards, these troops represented the pride and glory of the Russian Army.

The miles-long passage formed by the troops led to the centuries-old walls of the Kremlin. Deployed inside were the battalions of the Life Guards Semyonovsky and Preobrazhenskiy regiments, the first regiments of the regular Russian Army created by Peter the Great. Commanding the troops was Grand Duke Vladimir Alexandrovich.

Nicholas II's uncle. Nine shots from the guns of the Tainitskaya Tower rang out, and the bells of the Assumption Cathedral pealed. Not only the pavements, but the ledges and roofs of the houses were swarming with people, every pair of eyes fixed on the Triumphal Gates.

Suspense crept over the crowd as they waited expectantly for two hours for the imperial procession to appear.

At last the gun salute rang out from the Kremlin to herald the departure of the Tsar and the Tsarina from the Petrovsky Palace. Hardly had the sound of the guns receded than the bells of all the churches of Moscow joined in the joyous cacophony. The people, as one, uncovered their heads and devoutly crossed themselves. Tears sparkled in the eyes of many. From all the churches that the Tsar's procession passed on their journey to the Kremlin, the priests carrying crosses, icons and gonfalons in their hands, came out to give the Tsar their blessing for a just and long-lasting reign.

The stunning splendour of the Imperial procession unfolded gradually, new groups of participants, one after another, joining this magnificent train. Preceding the Imperial procession rode the cavalcade of fourteen gendarme officers. Following them were the four sotnias (Cossack squadrons) of His Imperial Majesty's Own Escort, dressed in red Circassian coats and trimmed with silver lace. Next came His Imperial Majesty's Life-Guards Cossacks and, after them, horsemen mounted on beautiful half-tamed steppe and mountain steeds. The riders were valiant, dashing Central Asiatic and Caucasian Dzhigits, wearing oriental robes and Circassian coats embroidered in gold and silver. They were followed by the representatives of all Cossack troops. Some of the grey-haired veterans brought their grandsons with them, the little chaps seated in the same saddles. The group of attendants of the Household, musicians and hunters of the Tsar's hunt were a no less admirable sight. In the rear of that part of the procession were the Horse-Guards squadron of the Life-Guards Cavalry regiment, the horsemen wearing helmets and cuirasses, with broadswords gleaming in their hands. And then His Majesty the Tsar appeared. As befitting the occasion, he rode escorted by his lavishly brilliant suite. The Tsar was mounted on the half-bred English horse Norma, a thirteen-year-old light-gray dapple mare. The most splendid part of the procession were the fourteen coaches and phaetons covered with gold leaf and velvet, the train drawn by six horse harnessed in tandem. Some of the coaches, in the style of Louis XV, dated back to the reign of Empress Catherine II and Emperor Paul I. The coaches were adorned with paintings by the famous artists Boucher, Watteau and Gravelot. The other carriages, austere and massive, yet even more luxurious, came from the XII century. Each of the horses, beautiful and graceful, with golden trappings, was led by an equerry.

The Dowager Tsarina, Maria Feodorovna, traveled in the golden carriage, the top of which was adorned with the Imperial Crown encrusted with precious stones. In the next carriage, a golden coach decorated with paintings, came the young Tsarina. The procession reached the Kremlin. Here, at the Chapel of Our Lady of Iver, the Tsar dismounted and helped his mother, and then Alexandra Feodorovna, out of their carriages. It was a tradition with all the Russian Tsars that their every entry to the Kremlin territory be marked by worship to the icon of the Blessed Virgin of Iver, one of the most revered icons in Moscow.

The icon was a replica of the icon kept in the Iver Monastery at Mount Athos, Greece, and it was brought to Russia in 1648. The Tsar, the Dowager Tsarina and the Tsarina attended the Assumption, the Archangel and the Annunciation Cathedrals, after which they proceeded to the Kremlin Palace. There they were to remain while the final preparations for the Sacred **Coronation** were being made, the ceremony fixed for May 14.

May 10 and 11 were days of ceremonial receptions for the ambassadors and envoys extraordinaire. On May 12, Trinity Sunday, the Banner of State was consecrated. On May 13, White Monday, the Imperial Regalia were delivered from the Armoury to the Throne Hall of the Kremlin Palace. The preparations were complete. The morning of **May 14, 1896**, dawned with a glorious sunrise over Moscow, glistening on the golden cupolas and crosses of Moscow's cathedrals. On all belfries of the city the bell-ringers held their bell-pulls awaiting the pre-arranged signal. Noiselessly, officials and their assistants carried the Imperial Regalia, the Chain of the Order of St. Andrew for Her Majesty the Tsarina, the Sword of State, the Banner of State, the State Seal, the Purple for His Majesty the Tsar, the Orb, the Sceptor, the Small Imperial Crown, the Great Imperial Crown all arranged in a strict order of succession towards the Assumption Cathedral. Silent and obeying barely audible commands, the aides de camp to the Tsar, the generals of the Suite and the Horse Guards troop lined up along the route, on both sides of the Imperial Regalia up to the Red Porch. The Hof-Marshal, the Hof Marshal in Chief and the Supreme Marshal, each with a mace in his hand, silently took their places. The canopy was carried up to the lower steps of the Red Porch. The tassels and the poles of the canopy were held by thirty two adjutant-generals, with their juniors at the poles.

"Escorted by the Minister of the War Office, the Minister of the Imperial Court, the Commander of the Imperial Residence, the Adjutant General of the Day, the orderly Major General of the Suite and the Commander of the Horse Guards regiment, the Tsar appears on the Porch. Following him, Tsarina Alexandra Feodorovna comes out accompanied by four ladies-in-waiting, maids of honor of the day. The Tsar and the Tsarina take their places under the canopy . . . "

" . . . The procession set out only at half past ten. Luckily, the weather was marvelous, and the Red Porch was a brilliant sight." Nicholas II would reflect in his diary. The silence is abruptly shattered by church bells heralding that the procession has started. The dignitaries come out to the parvis of the Assumption Cathedral to welcome the monarchs. Palladius, the Metropolitan of St. Petersburg, offers Their Majesties the Holy Cross for kissing, and Ioannakius, the Metropolitan of Kiev, sprinkles them with holy water. Having entered the Cathedral, the Tsar and the Tsarina perform the thrice-repeated worship and kissing of the holy icons, and then they ascend the steps of the dais in the center of the Cathedral. On the top of the dais there are thrones of the Tsars Michael Feodorovich (the first Tsar of the Romanov dynasty, who ascended the throne in 1613) and Ivan III (the Grand Duke of Moscow since 1462, who created the title of "Tsar of all the Russia's, in the 15th century). The Imperial Regalia are laced at their side. The Metropolitan of St. Petersburg suggests Nicholas II make his public confession, after which the Tsar is offered the Holy Book to read his prayer. The last word of the prayer uttered, the

Metropolitan solemnly enunciates: "The blessing of the Holy Spirit be with Thee. Amen."

"The Tsar takes off the chain of the Order of St. Andrew, and the Metropolitans of St. Petersburg and Kiev dress the Tsar with the Purple, with the diamond Chain of the Order of St. Andrew. His Majesty bows his head. The Metropolitan Palladius makes the sign of the cross over him, and laying his hands on the Tsar's head pronounces two prayers. Nicholas II orders the Imperial Crown be given to him. From the hands of the Metropolitan the Tsar accepts the Crown and places it on his own head.

"Then he order the other insignia be handed over to him. With the Scepter in his right hand and the Orb in his left, the Tsar sits down on the throne of Tsar Michael Feodorovich.

"A few moments later he rises to his feet, hands over the regalia to his attendants and summons the Tsarina. She kneels before the Tsar on a crimson cushion bordered with golden lace. He takes off his Crown and touches the Tsarina's head with it. Then the Small Crown, the Purple and the Chain of the Order of St. Andrew are handed over to the Tsar and one after the other he places the regalia on Alexandra Feodorovna.

"The Scepter and the Orb are in the Tsar's hands again. The Cathedral choir break into song, wishing the Tsar and Tsarina many years of life and reign, and the singing is accompanied by with the toll and a salute of 101 salvoes. The Tsar gives the Scepter to his attendants, genuflects and recites the established prayer. Then he rises to his feet, while the Metropolitan of St. Petersburg and all present at the ceremony, kneel down to supplicate their prayer on behalf of all the Russian people, and the choir sing: 'We Praise Thee, O God.'

"Then begins the Divine Liturgy—the Holy Unction of the Russian Monarchs. The Tsar, followed by the Tsarina, descends the dais. Pacing on the floor covered with crimson velvet bordered with golden lace, the Tsar, and after him the Tsarina, step for a moment on the golden brocade to be anointed with the holy myrrh, Metropolitan Palladius pronouncing: 'The Seal of the Gift of the Holy Spirit'. And the bells and a salute of 101 salvoes herald the perfection of the Unction. The Eucharist concludes the rite which originated in the historical depths of Orthodox Russia.

"The Tsar's train proceeds to the Archangel and the Annunciation Cathedrals. Having performed the appropriate rites there, the procession makes for the Red Porch. At the first step the Tsar and the Tsarina leave the canopy and enter the Palace." (Traditionally, for every **coronation** a set of new procedural instructions was drawn up. The Ministry of the Court described these procedures in "The Ceremony of the Holy **Coronation**" from which these extracts are taken). The Imperial couple needed some rest before the ceremonial meal in the Hall of Facets . . . That evening, tired yet utterly gratified, the Tsar would write in his diary: ". . . All that happened in the Assumption Cathedral, though it seems but a dream, is not to be forgotten for life!!!"

If only his diary would always contain such joyous entries . . . but on

the evening of May 18, a horrifying diary entry would pierce the pages: 'Till this day, thank God, everything has been going quite smoothly, but today a grave sin has befallen. The crowd who spent the night in the Khodynskoye Pole (meadow) pending the giving out of a dinner and a mug, pressed upon the wooden constructions, and there was a terrible jam, and it's dreadful to add, about 1300 people were trampled down! . . .

"A grave sin" Nicholas would take the blame upon his soul. So often somebody's death or suffering had cut short the serene sequence of bright and placid days. Nicholas II took it as a confirmation of his hard lot, his destiny from the very day of his birth May 6, 1868, the martyr St. Job's Day.

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