

## Reexamining the Myth of the Last Tsar's Family as a Religious Resource

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- Abstract -

After the execution of the last Tsar Nikolay II and his family in July 1918, various legends have disturbed people to find historical “truth.” Even after several DNA tests, the Russian Orthodox Church hardly recognized their remains, which were found in a suburb of Yekaterinburg. Veneration of saints does not always accord with Church canon, the authoritative understandings of Orthodoxy, and standardized religious practices. When veneration begins among laypeople, it often takes on a character of spontaneous, non-elite and flexible piety, and local people play a significant role. The Church Canonization assumes to regulate a spontaneous, superstitious, local practice of veneration of saints. Not only veneration of local people, but also space of veneration itself has significance as a religious resource. The Russian laypeople traditionally have attached particular importance to the non-corruption of saint's body. An army of pilgrims visits the spaces where a saint was tortured, martyred, and his/her coffin was enshrined. I will examine secular and religious interests to the fate of the loyal family and speak to the meaning of their veneration in Yekaterinburg, which influences the mainstream of the ROC.

**Key words:** Nikolay II, Yekaterinburg, the Russian Orthodox Church,  
Veneration of Saints, Religious Resources

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у корня, под кедром, дорога,  
а в ней — император зарыт.  
Маяковский. «Император» (1928)

## 1. Modern Canonization and its Post-Soviet Revival

The Russian Church introduced the practice of canonization in the eleventh century. The first Russian saints were Boris and Gleb, the younger princes of Vladimir the Great, who Christianized the country Kievan *Rus'* in the year 988. The brothers were murdered by their elder brother for succession to the throne. Boris and Gleb are highly venerated as *strastoterptsy* (passion bearers), who allegedly faced their death in a Christ-like manner. There are only five cases of canonization of *strastoterpets* in the history of the Russian Church<sup>1)</sup>. They did not sacrifice their lives for their faith; however, they were murdered because of the malicious, selfish, and deceitful conspiracies of their political adversaries. Faced with physical and moral torture and death, *strastoterptsy* did not resist; they maintained humility and goodwill.

The latest *strastoterptsy* to be canonized are the last Russian Tsar Nikolay II and his family. They were canonized during the millennium prelate council of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) in August 2000. ROC canonized the loyal family only after a prolonged dispute and their canonization aroused considerable resonance. Unlike the *novomucheniki* (new martyrs) who were canonized in the millennium en masse, the Tsar and his family did not die for their faith. Thus, ROC ranked them as *strastoterptsy*<sup>2)</sup>. During the reign of Tsar Nikolay, the Russian society suffered bloodshed on the Khodinka field after his coronation and during the events of Bloody Sunday in 1905. Though the royal family was pious Christian in faith, their life history was

1) All the Russian *strastoterptsy* are royals: князья Борис и Глеб (+1015), Игорь Черниговский (+1147), Андрей Боголюбский (+1174), Михаил Тверской (+1319), and царевич Димитрий (+1591).

2) Митрополит Крутицкий и Коломенский Ювеналий (2000) “К прославлению Государя Императора Николая II и Царской семьи,” *Родная Кубань*, №. 4, С. 2-3.

unlike that of saints. Their close association with Grigori Rasputin led to serious consequences in their canonization. Besides, posthumous veneration of the loyal family often implies reactionary autocracy, anti-Semitic xenophobia, and the apocalyptic mission of sacred *Rus'*.

Most of the works on Saint Nikolay II focus on the contemporary heresy of *Tsarebozhie*, which idealized the theocracy of the Holy *Rus'*<sup>3)</sup>. According to the *Tsarebozhniki*, the royal family was murdered by Bolshevik Jews and Nikolay II atoned for the Russian people. In addition, they eagerly await the advent of the *griadushchii tsar'* (the future tsar) and the Day of Judgment.

The canonization of the royal family holds a multi-layered significance through the various memorials in contemporary Russia. After the October Revolution, the political and social situation did not allow the Russian Church to canonize saints during the early decades. The first canonization, after the Revolution, was celebrated in 1964; however, instead of Russia, it took place abroad. After the Revolution, Russian emigrants organized their own Church, which became independent from the Mother Church. The conditions of the Cold war created a complicated relationship between the Moscow Patriarchate and the émigré Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR). ROCOR remained intensely anti-Soviet and monarchist, and the Moscow Patriarchate (ROC) had no choice except following the Communist Party. Meanwhile ROCOR, unofficially, supported the believers of socialism in different ways. By canonizing the Russian saints, ROCOR aimed to uphold the faith of fellow believers and present their anti-Soviet historical perspective. In 1964, ROCOR made Ioann of Kronstadt (1829-1908) a saint. He was a popular clergy towards the end of the imperial era and was a notorious anti-Jewish monarchist of the Soviet regime. The most controversial act was when ROCOR canonized the last Tsar and his family along with their non-Orthodox servants in 1981 as martyrs, while the Soviet propaganda referred to the last Tsar as "Nikolay the Bloody." The veneration of the loyal

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3) Definition of *Tsarebozhie*, see А. И. Зыгмонт (2011) "О феномене «Царабожия» в современной религиозной культуре России," *Вестник РГГУ: Серия «Культурология. Искусствоведение. Музеология»*, № 11, С. 138-145.

family related with the monarchist, ultra-right, and anti-Semitic feelings among the émigré society.

The canonization that took place abroad made a huge impact on the dissident part of the Russian society through unofficial documents (*samizdat* and *tamizdat*). In this paper, I discuss two approaches to the myth of the last Tsar's family during the last decades of socialism. Extensive research and popular publications exist on the fate of the last Tsar's family and their execution. However, I do not aim to present the journey of their execution and burial. I have traced the development of the myth of the Tsar's family and the activities of people who are interested in this myth during the Soviet era. I believe that this will help us to understand the various outlooks of the Russian society towards Nikolay II.

Now, I will focus on Yekaterinburg, where the royal family spent their last days. Veneration of saints is not always in accord with the Church canon, the authoritative understandings of Orthodoxy, and standardized religious practices. When veneration begins among laypeople, it often takes on the character of spontaneous, non-elite, and flexible piety, and the local people play a significant role in the process. The Church Canonization aims to regulate the spontaneous, superstitious, and local practice of veneration of saints. I examine the secular and religious interests with regard to the fate of the loyal family and present the implications of their veneration in Yekaterinburg.

Besides the veneration itself, the site of veneration also holds significance as a religious resource. The Russian laypeople traditionally attached particular importance to the purity of the saint's body<sup>4</sup>). A group of pilgrims visited the site where the saint was tortured, martyred, and his/her coffin was enshrined. If the saint is prominent, then more crowd, prelate, politicians, journalists, artists, and others will visit the sacred site. Thus, such a site provides an economic advantage and a historical and cultural representation of the place.

The last loyal family was imprisoned in the Ipatiev House, which is

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4) See, Robert H. Greene (2004) *Bodies Like Bright Stars: Saints and Relics in Orthodox Russia*, DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, Ch. 1.

located in the central area of the city. After their assassination, the Bolsheviks moved their corpses to a suburban area to mask the incident. Political circumstances have not allowed an accurate identification of the site for decades. Thus, the government, ROC, scientific specialists, and journalists have disputed about the burial site and the authenticity of the exhumed corpses. Many influential prelates of the ROC and church media do not recognize the remains<sup>5)</sup> of the Romanovs, which were identified through DNA testing. Moreover, these remains were found in another location, which was inconsistent with the “sacred site” recognized by the Church. Why does the Church not recognize the site and remains that have historic and scientific evidence? I have analyzed the historical background of the secular and religious interests in the legend of the last Tsar in Yekaterinburg. In addition, I focus on the role of the local actors in the identification of the sacred sites.

## 2. Digging out the truth: Scientists' approach

During the night, between July 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup>, 1918, Nikolay II and his family and servants were shot in Ipatiev House at Yekaterinburg, the capital of the Red Ural. After the execution, the Bolsheviks immediately announced the death of the former Tsar. However, they had no reason to kill his wife, children, and servants. Therefore, they bore away the corpses and tried to hide them. Shortly after the execution, the White and Czechoslovakian army occupied Yekaterinburg, and the White investigators began to examine the murder. The investigation continued for almost a year, until the Red Army re-occupied the city on July 15<sup>th</sup>, 1919. The White investigators had searched the Ipatiev House, collected several testimonies, and interrogated the participants of the incident. Soon, they discovered a field named “the For

5) For example, the president of the Synod committee for canonization of saints, metropolitan Iuvenarii, does not confirm the authenticity of the Yekaterinburg remains. Митрополит Крутицкий и Коломенский Ювеналий (2000), 9.

Brothers” and abandoned mines called “*Ganina Yama* (Ganya’s pit),” where they unearthed burnt jewels, buttons and clothes, part of a finger, the carcass of a small dog, and other belongings of the royals<sup>6)</sup>. It was evident that the Bolsheviks had carried away the bodies of the Tsar’s family to 15 km north of the city and then destroyed them. However, the investigators were unable to find the corpses of the victims. The third and last White investigator, Nikolay Sokolov, continued to examine the incident and published his research in Europe in 1925. He claimed that the corpses were completely incinerated<sup>7)</sup>.

During the early decades of the October Revolution, the executioners were proud of their deeds and openly discussed their heroism. The chief executioner, Yakov Iurovsky, wrote a report about the execution and handed a copy of it to the famous Soviet historian, Mikhail Pokrovsky<sup>8)</sup>. Another leading participant, Petr Ermakov, insisted on his prominent role in the execution. He wrote a short biography and remembrance and repeatedly narrated the story in public; however, he was inebriated on the night of the execution. During the preparation of the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations of the October Revolution, in 1927, the participants of this “revolutionary” incident suggested publishing an anthology about the shooting; however, Stalin dismissed the idea and it was cast into darkness<sup>9)</sup>. Thereon, if any Soviet citizen expressed interest in the assassination and burial of the Imperial family in Sverdlovsk (the Soviet name of Yekaterinburg from 1924 to 1991), it led to dire consequences for his/her social life.

In contrast to the Soviet society, the Western mass media, literature, and movies continued to explore the fate of the Tsar’s family. Since the bodies had not been discovered, many people were suspicious about the murder of all the members of the imperial family. More than a hundred people claimed

6) Н. А. Соколов (1925) *Убийство царской семьи*, Берлин: Слово.

7) Н. А. Соколов (1925), 218.

8) His report was published by E. Radzinsky in 1989. See Э. С. Радзинский (1997) *Николай II: жизнь и смерть*, М.: Вагриус, С. 439-440.

9) Э. С. Радзинский (1997), 460. The remembrances were published as late as in 1991.

to be family members who had survived the assassination, including the famous Anna Anderson who fraudulently insisted that she was the youngest daughter, Anastasia. The alternative history was depicted in several movies and some journalists and imperial relevant believed these myths<sup>10</sup>).

In addition, not all Soviet citizens were indifferent to the fate of the Tsar's family. A sixteen-year-old boy, A. Avdonin, who was interested in the local history and geography read a book titled "The Last Days of Romanovs" written by P. Bykov, the first chairman of the Yekaterinburg Soviet (city council), in 1926<sup>11</sup>). Bykov described in detail the concealment of the corpses by the revolutionary heroes. Avdonin was convinced by Bykov's report and believed that the loyal corpses were in the suburban forest. At the same time, Avdonin devoted great attention to a poem of Vladimir Mayakovsky "the Emperor," which he produced after the expedition to the burial site with executors in 1928. Working as a geologist, Avdonin had the opportunity to meet the people who had visited the burial site immediately after the murder in the late twenties. Thus, through these materials, he had an estimate of the burial site in the middle of the 1960s. However, he did not dare to put his excavation plan into action. In August 1976, he acquired an important collaborator, scriptwriter and film director Geli Ryabov. To his surprise, Ryabov had sent him a proposal regarding the discovery of the site. Both of them were enthusiastic about revealing this secret page of Russian history. Avdonin was interested in uncovering the historical secret that occurred at the time of his birth, and the reason for Ryabov's enthusiasm is still unclear<sup>12</sup>). Earlier, Ryabov had worked as an investigator for the Minister of Internal Affairs USSR, Nikolay Shchelokov, and he had access to secret documents.

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10) For example, the BBC journalists, A. Summers and T. Mangold, published a serious monograph, alleging the survival of the Tsar's family. アンソニー・サマーズ、トム・マンゴールド (高橋正譯) 『ロマノフ家の最期』、中公文庫、1987年。

11) A. Н. Авдонин (2013) *Ганина яма: История поисков останков царской семьи*, Екатеринбург: Компания «Реал-Медиа», С. 114-125.

12) Nikolay Neuimin, a curator of the Historical and Archeological Museum of Ural highlighted this problem.

In the summer of 1979, they found the accurate burial site of the Tsar's family, "*Porosenkov log* (piglet's ravine)," which was located around seven kilometers away from *Ganina Yama*. They dug out three skulls and several bones. However, the Soviet political constitution did not permit them to publish their discovery. They preserved the findings and kept the discovery a secret from society until the time it would be less risky. It was as late as 1991 when the royal remains were officially discovered by the help of Avdonin's group.

### 3. "A Pitiful Tiny Corps of the Monarchists"

During the 1960s, under the influence of the "*ottepel*" (thaw), the local residents of Yekaterinburg secretly started to lay flowers and light candles every year on 16<sup>th</sup> July by the window of the Ipatiev House, where the Tsar's family were shot<sup>13</sup>). Some people even lead a pilgrimage to the Ipatiev House. Some Orthodox believers kept a portrait of the last Tsar and his family in their home iconostas<sup>14</sup>). Several years after their appointment as city priests, Nikolay Zatekin and Aleksandr Nikulin dared to visit *Ganina Yama* as their first religious procession<sup>15</sup>). The Soviet power began to observe the silent movement since they feared that people would get nostalgic for pre-Revolution Russia and get affected by the unfavorable influence of the "western monarchists." In 1975, the Soviet authority decided to demolish the Ipatiev House. It was finally bulldozed in 1977 despite the strong protests by

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13) В. В. Шитов (2013) *Дом Ипатьева: летописная хроника в документах и фотографиях (1877-1977)*, Екатеринбург; Челябинск: Автограф, С. 342-351; В. М. Слукин (1998) "Вознесенская горка," *Известия Уральского государственного университета*, № 9, <http://www.1723.ru/read/books/slukin.htm> (accessed on September 21, 2016).

14) Interview with Father Georgii (Orekanov) in Moscow (October 8, 2015) and S. N. Verkhovskaia in Yekaterinburg (October 14, 2015).

15) Interview with Father Aleksandr Nikulin in Yekaterinburg (March 3, 2016).

several Soviet citizens, including local historians, journalists, and members of the All-Russian Society for the Protection of Monuments of History and Culture<sup>16</sup>).

The hidden veneration for the Tsar became evident only after 1989. It was not an organization or an institutional Church, but rather individuals who took the initiative with respect to the veneration. The veneration spread beyond differences of denominations, such as ROC, ROCOR, and the Old Believers. Now, I will focus on Anatoly Verkhovsky, who organized the first memorial prayer on *Vosnesenskaya gorka*, the former site of the Ipatiev House. It is difficult to ascertain the beginning of his interest in the last Tsar. However, the canonization of the royal family by ROCOR in 1981 had a strong affection on him<sup>17</sup>). Verkhovsky mainly relied on the publication of emigrants for his research on the murder. Following the practice of the émigré Church, he held a group prayer on the evening of 16<sup>th</sup> July, 1989. He and his companions made amateur religious banners with a portrait of Nikolay II, St. Georgii, and St. Patriarch Germogen. They used a prayer book for the Tsar and new-martyrs, which was published in Jordanville NY, the center of ROCOR<sup>18</sup>). During this time, Verkhovsky was not in contact with ROCOR, and their prayer was not blessed by any religious organization. Although Verkhovsky's group was small and it did not appeal to the citizens to pray with them, there was a spontaneous gathering of almost a hundred people. The local police dissolved the public prayer and arrested eleven people including two teenagers, which coincided with the number of victims in the Ipatiev House in 1918. This accidental coincidence inspired Verkhovsky and his group. Finally, they were found to be innocent and acquitted. In February 1990, Verkhovsky organized the "*Obshchina Khram-na Krovi* (Community of the Church on Blood)," which aimed to build a Church on *Voznesenskaya*

16) А. Кузьмин (2004) *Царское место: Летопись почитания Святых Царственных Мучеников на Урале*, Екатеринбург (Privately printed material), С. 18-23.

17) Interview with Verkhovskii's wife Svetlana Verkhovskaia on October 14, 2015.

18) А. М. Верховский, *Хроника Вознесенской горки 1989-1994 гг.* (Privately printed material).

*gorka* and canonize the Tsar's family in their motherland. No clergy was part of the group, and none of its members was a churchgoer. When the group was planning to organize a *moleben* (service for saints) with the clergy for the next anniversary, they actively reached out to alternative churches who were not associated with the Moscow Patriarchate Church (ROC). They got an official blessing of patronage from the German émigré bishop, Mark, at the beginning of July 1990<sup>19</sup>). Meanwhile, the Cultural Committee of the Sverdlovsk Soviet decided to transfer *Vosnesenskaya gorka* to the Sverdlovsk diocese for the construction of a memorial monument. Verkhovsky perceived this decision to be a "serious defeat." He believed that if Nikolay and his family were not canonized by the Church, then their place of martyrdom would never be sacred. Thus, the Church would have no reason to build any chapels on the site. He continued to insist on the canonization of the Tsar's family by ROC.

On the anniversary in 1990, the Russian Orthodox Church sent clergies to hold a prayer for the Tsar and his family on the *Vosnesenskaya gorka*, and a ROCOR priest conducted the service in an apartment<sup>20</sup>). On the next anniversary, the ROC officially initiated the service. Besides local people, delegations from Moscow and other cities joined the service on the site of their assassination. Thus, Verkhovsky ended his conflict with the ROC since it had begun to recognize the significance of the "Tsar's days," the religious celebration of the date of the saints' death. Eventually, his "pitiful tiny corps of the monarchists" made peace with the mother Church.

In the tsar's days of 1993, after the service in Yekaterinburg, Verkhovsky and his group visited the *Ganina Yama* and built a memorial cross on the site where they believed the ashes of the royal family were scattered. At the same time, Verkhovsky began to have a strong commitment to the place. He never doubted the research of the White investigators on the destruction of the royal remains. Now, the "pitiful tiny corps of the monarchists" found

19) A. Кузьмин (2004), 29.

20) A. M. Верховский, *Хроника Вознесенской горки 1989-1994 гг.* At that time, the antagonistic relation between the ROC and ROCOR had not been resolved.

new opponents: Avdonin, Ryabov, and other secular organizations who claimed the “*porosenkov log*” as the authentic burial of the royal family. After DNA identification, the Russian state committee recommended the reburial of the royal remains in the Petro-Pavrovsk Cathedral in St. Petersburg. However, most prelates of the ROC did not support the results of the DNA testing. Reluctantly, ROC accepted the suggestion, and in 1988, the family were laid to rest in the traditional gravesite of the Russian Royals. However, no bishop participated in the *panikhida* (a service for deceased).

In 2000, the ROC canonized the royal family as *strastoterpsy* and constructed a monastery on the site of the *Ganina Yama*. Today, thousands of pilgrims visit the *Ganina Yama*, and not Petro-Pavrovsk Cathedral. Some clergies and laypeople recognize the authenticity of the remains. However, the most passionate admirers of Tsar-martyrs are those who consider the “discovery” as a Satanist conspiracy<sup>21</sup>). In 2007, a research group found the remains of Prince Aleksei and Princess Maria buried almost 70 meters far from the place founded in 1991. ROC never recognized the remains and they continue to be preserved in the safe of the state archive. If ROC recognizes the authenticity of royal remains, the Church might suffer from the schism and discredit by those who believe that *Ganina Yama* is a sacred and miraculous place. Thus, the contemporary leaders of the Russian church are struggling between science and faith.

#### 4. Conclusion

In Russian Orthodoxy, saints always play an important role for the commemoration of Russian history. Thus, the Church uses special terms, such as “memory,” “anniversary,” and “commemoration” for the veneration of

21) Radio studio “Russkaia Narodnaia Liniia” transferred a program titled “«Екатеринбургские останки»: история фальсификации” in September 24, 2015, [http://ruskline.ru/news\\_rl/2015/09/24/Yekaterinburgskie\\_ostanki\\_istoriya\\_falsifikacii/](http://ruskline.ru/news_rl/2015/09/24/Yekaterinburgskie_ostanki_istoriya_falsifikacii/) (accessed on September 21, 2016).

saints. In the contemporary Russian church, canonization and veneration of saints reflect the historical memory of Russian *narod*. The initiative of veneration mentioned below plays a more important role for the canonization of saints than ever before.

With respect to Nikolay the martyr, ROCOR initiated the veneration and canonization, which was taken over by a “pitiful tiny corps of the monarchist.” Soon ROC reframed the background. Nikolay and his family became *strastoterpsy*, a symbol of the pious Orthodox Russia. Now ROC is turning the mythical story into “real history” by constructing a church and monastery, publishing books and albums, and organizing pilgrimages. In addition, ROC studied the life histories of the loyal servants before their canonization. Ignoring the result of research, ROC continues to believe another legend, with monarchist ideas, which is based on Bolshevik historical materials. Today, it is quite difficult, even for the Moscow Patriarch, to override the *narod* versions of the stories of saints.

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## Резюме

**Повторное рассмотрение мифа о последней царской семье  
в качестве ресурса религиозности**

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После убийства царской семьи в июле 1918 года появились разные легендарные рассказы, мешающие достигнуть исторической правды. Даже после нескольких проверок ДНК Русская православная церковь едва признает останки, которые были обретены возле Екатеринбурга. Почитание святых не всегда совпадает с церковным каноном и нормализованной религиозной практикой. Обычно почитание начинается спонтанным образом без участия церковной элиты и по инициативе местных верующих. Таким образом, официальная канонизация является попыткой регулировать спонтанную, суеверную и наивную форму почитания. Не только местное почитание, но и само место играет значительную роль как «религиозный ресурс». Русский народ традиционно придает особую важность нетленным мощам, которые, по их мнению, являются самым ярким знаком чудотворной силы святого. Паломники толпами посещают святые места, где можно молиться перед мощами. В статье анализируется секулярный и религиозный поиск «истины» о судьбе царской семьи в Екатеринбурге, которые оказывают влияние на понимание их судьбы в общероссийском контексте.

**Ключевые слова:** Николай Второй, Екатеринбург, Русская православная церковь, почитание святых, религиозный ресурс

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