

THE ROMANOVS REVISITED: THE REIMAGINING OF THE ROMANOVS WITHIN “RUSSIA MY HISTORY” HISTORY PARKS

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This article analyzes the Romanov exhibit at the Rossiia—Moia istoria (Russia My History) history parks. Using existing work on the development and curation of these history parks, I explore the rehabilitated view of the Romanov past that this exhibit presents. I do so by examining the narratives and imagery used in the exhibit and exploring what the rehabilitation of the Romanov dynasty demonstrates regarding Russia’s view of its past and how the Romanovs are being brought back into the fold of Russian cultural and collective memory. I demonstrate how the exhibit presents narratives that give more prominent roles to historical figures who have been overlooked in cultural memory, while also using deliberate imagery and narrative techniques to foster senses of irredentism and loss that coincide with contemporary domestic and foreign policy of the Russian government. This article primarily focuses on Peter I, Nicholas I, Alexander III, and Nicholas II to identify what relation they have to the present and how their narratives are being propagated within the exhibit.

Keywords: Politics of History; Irredentism; Past; Romanovs; Putin; Rehabilitation

The Romanov dynasty is a period of Russia’s past that looms large, and, given the quest of President Vladimir Putin’s regime to create an official view of Russia’s history, the question of what relationship the dynasty has with the present-day Russia is a complex one. Olga Malinova (2014) has pointed to an “à la carte” fashion with which history is being used to forge a new historical narrative that characterizes the Russian Federation as the successor of both the Soviet Union and the Russian Empire to support Putin’s view of the country being the inheritor of 1,000 years of history.¹ In the context of Malinova’s “à la carte” metaphor, the rehabilitation of the Romanov dynasty is undoubtedly a main course.

This article examines the Romanov multimedia exhibit at the Russia My History history parks and focuses on the Russia My History pavilion in Moscow’s VDNKh (Exhibition of Achievements of National Economy). In particular, I will explore how the Romanovs are presented in order to foster a view of the past conducive to the aims of the Putinist regime. I argue that the Romanov exhibit demonstrates a comprehensive rehabilitation and reimagination of the Romanov past intended to present a holistic view

¹ “Transcript of the Inauguration of Vladimir Putin as President of Russia,” May 7, 2004, website of the President of Russia, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/48210>.

of both the imperial epoch and the Romanov dynasty. This rehabilitation takes the form of three central narratives. The first is an irredentist view of the Russian Empire, which uses latent sentiments of nostalgia associated with irredentism's desire to reclaim lost territory to present Russia as having a legacy of militarism and status of an international superpower. The second creates a new constellation of the Romanov dynasty, displaying the Romanovs as a single entity while also promoting certain tsars to a more prominent position in historical memory due to their achievements. Finally, the third narrative creates a critical point of engagement between the public and the Romanov past; it fosters a sense of loss for Russia's heritage that coincided with the end of the dynasty. The importance of the Romanov exhibit is in its ability to demonstrate how the past is being conceptualized in Russia through the Russia My History parks.

In order to explore the Romanov exhibit, I analyze the texts presented within the information boards as well as in the booklets available for purchase at the gift shop (*Interesting Facts*, *Take History with You*, and *Quotes*) that replicate the information presented throughout the exhibit and create narratives around each tsar. Placing this examination in concert with secondary literature on the development of the Russia My History parks, I am able to demonstrate the importance of this exhibit as part of a wider attempt by certain cultural elites to thematically foster a conducive view of Russia's imperial past. During visits to the exhibit in Moscow (in June 2018 and June and August 2019), I took field notes detailing the layout of the exhibit, the spatial differences in the rooms for each tsar on display, lighting, imagery, and narratives and quotes accented in each room. I also took photographs of each room and texts on display in order to study the presentation of the information given to the public. I used these photographs alongside field notes to analyze the exhibit's visuals that detail the achievements of each emperor.

RUSSIA MY HISTORY PARKS AND THE POLITICIZATION OF THE EXHIBIT

The present Romanov exhibit was first displayed in 2013 to mark the 400-year jubilee of the founding of the House of Romanov (Klimenko 2020). The initial exhibit was created by the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and hosted in the Moscow Manège, an exhibition hall located to the west of the Kremlin and adjacent to Red Square. The success and warm public reception of the exhibit contributed to the development, starting in 2016, of the larger Russia My History project as part of the 2030 Strategy of National Cultural Policy, receiving endorsement from the Russian Ministry of Science and Higher Education as a tool for teaching (Zabalueva 2017). As Ekaterina Klimenko (2020) has noted, the ROC and the Russian state were key actors in conceiving the history parks in order to "forge an 'official' vision of Russian history" (2020:73). Growing out of church-backed history exhibits in Moscow, the history parks are now located in several cities across Russia, including Moscow, Saint Petersburg, and Yekaterinburg. The parks have the specific didactic design of an educational resource for teachers, students, and the wider Russian population to inform them of Russia's history.

In presenting itself as a history park, the Russia My History complex distinguishes itself from a museum due to its sole use of interactive screens, maps, and texts to disseminate its narratives. There are no artifacts. Instead, the multimedia exhibits rely solely on texts displayed on interactive screens and boards, with the option of an audio guide or guided tour for larger groups. Importantly, as Klimenko has noted, the “exhibitions are on display, but without exhibits” (2020:76). This reduces the possibility of viewers’ interpretation straying away from the themes presented in each exhibit (Ravelli 2006). As Sharon MacDonald (1998) has stated, removing artifacts and increasing reliance on multimedia texts allow for the politicization of the exhibit to occur: when artifacts are absent, objective fact is solely interpreted and digested through the presented narratives. As Olga Zabalueva argues, because of the removal of artifacts, Russia My History parks stop being museums, as there is no public discourse; instead the exhibits are designed to “implement current policies (specifically the state’s imposed narrative on national history)” (2017:42). As such, the exhibit becomes a didactic tool that furthers the narratives that benefit the exhibit’s curators and financiers through presenting an approved range of values, practices, and narrative (Luke 2002).

With the politicization of the exhibit, we can argue for a more direct relationship between the curators and audience, as their role as “normative agents” is heightened (Luke 2002:3). The information presented to the public has an increasingly didactic function, as it is solely through texts that the audience is able to internalize what is displayed to them. It is especially so because the exhibits at Russia My History are presented solely in the Russian language, making it an almost exclusive tool of engagement between the Russian public and those who fund the parks. In his analysis of the Russia My History parks, Ivan Kurilla has pointed to the ambiguous nature of diving the provenance of the curation of the exhibits due to their seemingly anonymous authorship (Kurilla, Ivanov, and Selin 2018). However, I argue that the narratives constructed and presented in the exhibit are by the benefactors who financially support the organizational structure of the project, namely the Humanitarian Project Fund, and organizations and their members that have contributed to the wider project of crafting a new national history, such as the Institute of History of the Russian Academy of Sciences, the Russian State University for the Humanities, and the State Archive of Russian Federation (Klimenko 2020:76). The erection of the permanent Russia My History pavilion in Moscow’s VDNKh park in 2015, costing 1.4 billion rubles (approximately 22 million US dollars),² was enabled by the Humanitarian Project Fund (HPF, *Fond gumanitarnykh proektov*), a fund created to develop and promote the historical and cultural knowledge of Russia, signaling the Russian state’s backing for the project and those involved in it. The HPF itself receives funding from the Russian Ministry of Culture, the ROC, and private donors. As Kurilla argues, interviews and scholarly articles circumnavigate the ambiguity of the curation of the various exhibits in the history park, pointing to central involvement of figures from the ROC like Metropolitan Tikhon (Kurilla et al. 2018). Indeed, the development of the project

² “Chto takoe Fond gumanitarnykh proektov,” *Kommersant Vlast'*, February 11, 2017, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3214624>.

from the exhibits originally organized by the ROC adds credence to the assertion that the curators (and it is unclear who exactly they are) have strong links with the ROC and, by extension, with other institutions, such as the Ministries of Culture and Education, which are integral to the Russian state and are taking part in a broader attempt to formulate a state-sanctioned interpretation of Russia's past.

As stated, the exhibition titled *The Romanovs* first opened in 2013 at the Moscow Manège before becoming one of the main exhibits for the Russia My History history parks. The exhibit in the VDNKh pavilion opened in 2015 and is comprised of 14 multimedia rooms and 5 video rooms. Each room is dedicated to one emperor, or in some cases two, with displays detailing the main achievements of their reign through consoles and information boards, as well as pictures and select quotes. The video rooms sporadically break up the flow of rooms and address periods of history like the Industrial Revolution that span more than one emperor's reign. The exhibit follows a temporal trajectory designed to take the visitor through the 304-year reign of the Romanov dynasty one monarch at a time and eliminate any possibility for the viewer to choose what they are ingesting. Each room starts with a map of the Russian Empire during the rule of the respective emperor. This map is followed by large projections of the room's tsar, surrounded by a collage of imagery linked to the key aspects of their reign—wars, cultural developments, or technological innovations. Around the periphery of each room are select quotes from historical and contemporary persons, such as writers, politicians, or commentators, that inform interpretations of that tsar. Each room has interactive consoles that detail each emperor's reign. At various intervals there are interactive billboards that present specific points of cultural or intellectual life of Russia in that epoch. Those considered titans, such as Peter I and Alexander I, have entire rooms dedicated to them, while "lesser" emperors like Peter III share a room with their successors. The open-plan layout fundamentally creates a sense of fluid movement within the exhibition, allowing the dynasty itself to be considered and interpreted as a single entity.

As a result, we are able to understand how the presentation of the Romanovs in the exhibit and its central themes of irredentism, a new constellation, and a lost era are the design of those central actors who fund it. The disuse of artifacts and reliance on interactive multimedia allow the narratives crafted by these actors to be clearly presented and disseminated to a Russian-speaking public. Thus, the exhibit's didactic function as a tool for teaching is even more apparent, allowing the exhibit to represent the interpretation of the past that has been deemed conducive to the benefactors of the Humanitarian Project Fund.

AN IRREDENTIST PERSPECTIVE

The Russian Empire was one of the largest empires the world has seen, covering approximately 17 percent of the world's total landmass in a continuous stretch from Warsaw to Vladivostok and dominating a huge portion of any world map. The empire was carved out through the continuous expansion of Russia's borders by each of its emperors, through direct territorial conquest or through diplomatic maneuvering, pushing the expanse of the empire in every direction of the compass.

Large boards displayed in each room trace the border of the empire at the time of the tsar's reign. They are purely territorial maps, showing the expanse of the empire and nothing more. Each map not only shows the border but also provides a clear designation of territory gained (in green) and territory lost (in red). Underneath the maps, population growth and cities established during each reign are presented (see figures 1 and 2). On first inspection, it is unsurprising to have such a presentation at the start of each new tsar's reign. Empire, by definition, requires the conquering of other lands. The Romanovs were the head and driving force behind the Russian Empire; a map of each of their territorial exploits is a simple and physical manifestation of their achievements (see figure 1). Importantly, these maps lack nuance and detail. They condense cataclysmic events and historical developments into simple brush strokes of color on each map. Emphasis is placed on the constant growth of Russia in territory and population size. This creates a clear, nostalgic representation of what once was, of what lands and size Russia once possessed during its imperial past. There is a sense of almost God-given right and drive to the empire's expansion. The accumulation of territory is presented solely as a narrative of continuous expansions with no opposing forces or complicating factors such as wars, diplomacy, or cultural developments. Any attempt to compare a contemporary map of Russia and its neighbors would show loss of the country's size and, by extension, population. Crucially, this creates an irredentist view of the past in the treatment of the very existence of the Russian Empire. This view is achieved by equating success of a tsar with territorial expansion and population increase. The constant growth of Russia's territory and population fosters a view of an ever-expanding and unchallenged growth of the country; the lands that constitute the empire are integral to the very existence of Russia. Therefore, the narrative presented is that territorial expansion and population increase are fundamental for a leader of Russia to be considered successful.



Figure 1. Map of the Russian Empire during the reign of Peter I (scan from *Voz'mi istoriiu s soboi* 2017:15)



Figure 2. Map of the Russian Empire during the reign of Alexander II (scan from *Voz'mi istoriiu s soboi* 2017:33)

Irredentism as a political and cultural principle has long been present in world politics, informing a nation's identity and its relationship to the past (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008:3). As a facet of nationalistic politics that pervades all societies, irredentism is the belief that there is a lost land of an idealized past centered upon a nominal ethnos and cultural norms. Fundamentally, an irredentist view of the past rests on a latent nostalgia for past greatness. An irredentist view of the past is a potent force for the conceptualization of identity, as it places history front and center as the basis for a national identity (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008:3; Brubaker 2017:365). In striving towards an unattainable, idealized past, the collective conception of history is informed by a sense of having been wronged. Thus, when dealing with a problem, public interest shifts from those in power to external or internal forces that stand between the public and its collective, romanticized view of the past. Irredentism is also a potent force within a domestic sphere as it can be used to legitimize more confrontational international policy decisions through presenting a narrative of the nation reclaiming past glory. Indeed, if we look to the politics of Russia, both domestic and international, there has been a clear narrative of the country returning to the status of a major world power. The incursion into Georgia in 2008 and annexation of Crimea in 2014 were shrouded in narratives that sought to legitimize and popularize these developments with a narrative of historical justice. They were framed through official narratives of reunification with lands that are integral to Russia. However, much emphasis in this justification was placed on the territorial integrity of the USSR and the impacts of its collapse on the lands of Russia. Although

this loss of territory is deeply felt by those who had lived under the zenith of the Soviet Union, it is arguably not as “marketable” to those born after the collapse of the USSR. Instead, a longer historical tradition of a greater Russia is needed in order to portray a truly lost past in which both the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union were first-rate powers, meaning that the contemporary Russian Federation must be considered on the same level as its predecessors. Therefore, in order to leverage irredentist sentiment to its advantage, the Putinist regime must widen its people’s collective memories to include the expansive drive of the Russian Empire beyond the present borders of Russia.

Irredentism, with its focus on the lost territory, evokes a strong sense of patriotic and militaristic achievement. Even before entering the exhibit’s pavilion, viewers are confronted with the overwhelming sense of nostalgic patriotism. On the glass facade that makes its exterior is a portrait of Alexander III with his well-known aphorism “Russia has only two allies: her army and her navy,” emblazoned beneath his portrait (see figure 3). It is a clear signal of how visitors should judge and gauge the dynasty—through its military prowess. This interpretation finds its basis in the lasting myths surrounding Peter I, who established the modern Russian empire, built the modern navy, defeated Sweden, and founded the new capital of Saint Petersburg. The centerpiece of the room dedicated to Peter I is a naval simulation that visitors can engage with by controlling various ships designed by Peter. The myth of Peter “the modernizer” and “shipbuilder” is one that has endured for centuries and transcended nations. What this myth does is create a view of Russia as a legitimate maritime power, with a long history of dominance in the Baltic and Black Seas, marking them as historically in Russia’s sphere of influence. It places pride in the military of Russia in a more overtly patriotic interpretation of irredentism as it points to a period when Russia first began its climb to superpower status in the European system. Perpetuation of this myth is accompanied by the continued focus on wars and military expansion throughout the exhibit. Each tsar’s primary board depicts either a war or military development that occurred during their reign. Even wars that were not successful are depicted, as is the case of Nicholas I and the Crimean War. The causes for Russia’s defeat (which happened despite considerable heroism of the Russian army) are not presented; instead the information accentuates the causes for the war, primarily the protection of Christians in the Levant, which was under the rule of the Ottoman Empire at the time. As a result, the exhibition creates the view of Russia as having not only historical legitimacy at the top table of global politics but also a strong military. It creates a historical precedence and legitimacy for the effort to take Russia back to its superpower status that has defined much of Putin’s recent tenure in power.



Figure 3. Photograph of the outside of the Russia My History Pavilion, VDNKh, Moscow, showing Alexander III and his quote “Russia has only two allies: her army and her navy” (photo by author, 2019)

As I have noted, creating an irredentist view of the past involves some nominal understanding and promotion of a central ethnos. Within the confines of the exhibition and the use of the maps, the focus on population increase presented in green drives to this simple interpretation of a Russia growing in size alongside its population. There is no acknowledgement of the empire’s multiracial population; instead the viewer only sees changes in population’s size, which implies that it is a single group—an ethnic Russian group. As the head of the dynasty, and by extension Russia, each tsar is therefore representative of the Russian ethnicity, unequivocally conflating the empire with the Russian ethnicity. The lands conquered in Siberia, Central Asia, Eastern Europe, and the Caucasus are shown as simply incorporated into the empire, without acknowledgement of their peoples, cultures, or ethnicities. Such a depiction, if left unchallenged, creates an image of the Russian Empire as a monoethnic empire of ethnic Russians. It is a Russo-centric worldview that harkens to a populist, irredentist view of the past. This historical narrative proves conducive to the present, as it mirrors contemporaneous developments within Russia that present the country as an ethnically and culturally homogenous state.

A NEW CONSTELLATION

As I have stated, the primary goal of the Romanov exhibit is to provide a point of engagement for the Russian public with their former ruling dynasty. The image used in the exhibit’s publicity materials and prominently displayed as you enter the VDNKh pavilion is one of the entire dynasty, with the tsars and tsarinas standing in echelon

against the background of a brooding sky (see figure 4). Such an image does two things for our interpretation of the Romanovs: First, it portrays each tsar as a distinct actor within the dynasty in an almost soap opera-like configuration; it presents the Romanov dynasty as an ensemble cast who represent the dynasty as a whole. Secondly, it shows each member of the dynasty as open for re-evaluation and reconceptualization. Hence, we are able to identify a second important motif of this exhibit. The reformation of the Romanov constellation injects new life into the Russian pantheon of heroes. By restructuring this heroic lexicon, those aligned with the Putinist regime rehabilitate a Russian historical identity better suited to their objectives.



Figure 4. The Romanov dynasty in echelon form, used in promotional materials (scan from *Voz'mi istoriiu s soboi* 2017:1)

As with any monarchical periodization of the past, some figures are highlighted more than others. Often this rests on the monarch's abilities to create and forge cults of personality during their reigns. In addition, heroic acts or cultural developments contribute to the monarch's legacies. The monarch can be seen as instrumental to particular events fundamentally tied to national identity. They are used as cultural signals to symbolize what is important to the present and act as physical manifestations of an epoch. Other monarchs, although celebrated and memorialized, can fall to a second tier or are erased entirely if their narrative is not conducive to the wants and needs of the present regime. Although such figures are active and alive in the cultural memory of a nation, they simply have not been deployed to the same effect as those from the top tier, as their achievements are not seen as useable to the present day. Importantly, having such heroes in a country's pantheon informs the national identity. It is from such figures and their achievements that a country can define and derive a nation's cultural memory, as they become the foundational narrative on which identity is built.

If we look at the collective portrait of the Romanov dynasty used in the publicity materials, we can see a physical manifestation of Russia's pantheon of heroes. This is dependent on presenting the dynasty as a single entity. This collective portrait creates a sense of historical legitimacy for the exhibit as *all* of the Romanov emperors, not just its more prominent members, are seen to be part of the dynasty. This presentation of a single entity allows the viewer to see the Romanov past in a more engaging manner. It invites speculation over what is to be presented in the exhibit, which narratives will be accentuated and which will not. It creates the dynasty as a focal point, a living history as the emperors are present as almost superhuman characters for the viewer to engage with.

There are two conceptualizations of the Romanovs at play: Russian and Western. In the Western conceptualization and mythologization of the Russian emperors, the prime contenders for the top tier of the Romanovs include Peter I, Catherine II, Alexander I, Alexander II, and Nicholas II. These figures have long been the points of engagement for foreign academics, as well as Russian scholars and the public. As I have noted, the myth of Peter I as the founder of the Russian Empire has been long engrained into our shared cultural memory. Such a narrative creates the foundational myth of the Russian Empire and, thus, of modern Russia, as well as presents the moment at which Russia joined the European system. Catherine II, like Peter I, ascribed the moniker "the Great," is celebrated for her attempts to bring the enlightenment to Russia, her support of the arts, and expansion of the Russian Empire. Alexander I is famed for his defeat of Napoleon and the liberation of Europe, while Alexander II is hailed as the tsar-liberator who was murdered by radicals despite his attempts at reform. Finally, as an antecedent to the foundation of the Soviet Union, the narratives that surround Nicholas II look to focus our interpretation of his reign as a fateful end to a period of grandeur and glory that would never be seen again (*Voz'mi istorii s soboi* 2017:40–43). This aggregate view is one of great figures in Russian history, who strove to take the country increasingly closer into the European orbit, towards the European conception of modernity and enlightenment. In this Western configuration the more autocratic rulers, with more Slavophile and nationalistic tendencies, are left out of this constellation as they do not aid in the crafting and developing of Russia on the path to European-style modernity.

The Russia My History exhibit brings the emperors Nicholas I and Alexander III to the fore. On the other hand, it plays down the achievements of more liberal monarchs such as Alexander II and Catherine II. The exhibit does not deny the achievements of the established liberal monarchs, nor their status as greats of history, but rather gives equal emphasis to other emperors in a way that nullifies their achievements. This ultimately allows for a new constellation of the dynasty to emerge, as the more conservative emperors take central roles in the achievements of the dynasty.

As the "gendarme of Europe," Nicholas I has long been seen as a reactionary, coming to the throne in the turmoil of the 1825 Decembrist Revolt. The treatment of Nicholas I in the exhibit focuses around his determination to forge a more Russo-centric nation, with the principle of *narodnost'* at the fore of his paternalistic politics. This Russo-centric view is furthered through focus on Nicholas I's achievements

of modernizing the Russia he inherited. The interactive section of the display communicates his achievements of building the first railroads of Russia, bringing the telegraph to the country, and establishing the New Hermitage, the first public art museum in Russia built specifically for that purpose. In focusing on these points of modernization, the narrative evokes that which surround Peter I—that only through a tsar, a strong leader, modernization can come and take place in Russia—while also demonstrating that there are others that are equal to Peter I. This is crucial in formulation of a conducive to the present historical narrative, as it underscores the need to have a singular leader to drive Russia towards modernity.

Not only are Nicholas's cultural achievements promoted, but so too is the established notion of him as a strong and capable leader. Of the several quotes that frame Nicholas and his achievements in the exhibit, it is the quote by the great Russian poet Alexander Pushkin that is arguably the most striking and indicative of the tsar's importance and the manner in which we should interpret him.

I simply fell in love with him:
He cheerfully and honestly rules us
He suddenly revived Russia
With war, by hopes, through labors.³

The quote is taken from Pushkin's poem "To Friends," written in 1828. The way the quote is used in the exhibit does not relay the poem's original critical sentiment about Nicholas I and his regime or the fact that the poem was banned from publication. Instead, the final lines of the quote suggest a very positive nature of Nicholas's rule: war, hope, and toil. They imply that there are three key virtues that define how Russia should be ruled and, by extension, how its people should relate to its leaders. The quote evokes a narrative similar to that through which the audience engages with previous tsars, while also suggesting what should be more important and pertinent for those who visit the exhibit: the sense that Nicholas created a unique path for Russia that was not derived from a European model. There is a clear emphasis on this alternative path, in which the individual strong leader of Russia sits at the helm. Thus, the replication of this narrative throughout the exhibit presents a view of the past in which Russia has always been strong, militaristic, and unyielding in its history. This continuity is extended to the present day, fostering the same narratives of stability and strong leadership that imbue Putin's leadership.

This idea that a strong leader is needed for Russia is furthered by the exhibit's narratives about Alexander III. Again, the exhibit focuses on Alexander III expanding Russia's railways and galleries, linking him to his grandfather Nicholas I and to Peter I. However, there is an added motif in the presentation of Alexander's rule, that of protectionism in Russia's economy and international affairs. His placement at the center of the Union of the Three Emperors, an alliance between Austria-Hungary, Prussia (later Germany), and Russia in the 1870s, quite clearly echoes conservative

³ "Ego ia prosto poliubil / On bodro, chestno pravil nami; / Rossiu vdrug on ozhivil / Voinoi, nadezdami, trudami" (translation by author).

view of Alexander as the center of foreign policy and the ultimate *mirotvorets* (peacemaker) at that time. Presenting this view alongside the focus on his economic protectionism, the exhibit furthers a narrative of Russia succeeding solely due to the stewardship of a strong, capable leader (Rossiia—Moia istoriia, *Voz'mi istoriiu s soboi* 2017:33–35). The leader must be tempered and put forward Russia's interest, no matter the cost to the leader or country, through innovation, protectionism, and foreign policy.

This leads to the question of the presentation of women as rulers within the exhibit. Four members of the Romanov dynasty were women, and their reigns covered the majority of the last three quarters of the eighteenth century. Similar to the tsars, the exhibit depicts the tsarinas as the embodiment of Russia: strong and capable leaders whose dynamism advanced Russia's interests. Their successes with respect to cultural and military developments at the time are in keeping with their male counterparts. Tsarinas and tsars alike made compelling strides in the theaters of culture and war on behalf of the nation. Like their male counterparts, each empress's room displays the same territorial map of the Russian Empire. Conquest and military prowess continues to define their reigns, be it the "victorious wars" and the "reconstruction of the army and navy" under Empress Anna or the country's roles as the "guardian of the balance of power in Europe" under Empress Elizabeth. However, there is variation in their presentation through the subtle incorporation of male advisers, masquerade balls, and favorites during the reign of each empress. While the central importance of the empresses as autocrats is not denied, the mention of other actors with roles in government or of more frivolous aspects of their reign creates a distinction from their male counterparts, presenting a narrative that the paternal leadership that Russia needs can only be truly given by a male emperor.

Fundamentally, this treatment of women creates a narrative that centers on autocratic leadership as a defining characteristic of Russia. The emulation of strong, militaristic leadership that permeates the exhibition of the male tsars is replicated with the tsarinas. It creates a historical point of view in which current Russia's leadership by the Putinist regime is comparable in its actions to the leadership of the Romanov dynasty. It demonstrates the replicable style of leadership that has defined Russia since the empire's conception, presenting strong singular leadership as an ingrained norm of Russian cultural and political life.

A LOST ERA

There remains an inherent issue for any exhibit engaging with the Romanov dynasty: the manner in which the dynasty came to an end. Although scholars such as Wendy Slater (2007) have noted the considerable influx in interest and engagement with the Romanov dynasty since the collapse of the USSR, the relevance of the dynasty to modern-day Russia can appear lacking. This stems from the Soviet presentation of the 1917 Revolution and end of the Russian Empire, which problematized the dynasty as the central antagonists to the foundation of the USSR. In placing the historical year zero at 1917, the narrative of rupture created by the revolution imbued cultural

memory of the dynasty through the Soviet period, lasting, arguably, to this day. To speak of the dynasty's successes beckons mention of its ultimate failure—its collapse.

However, interpretations of the Romanov dynasty are not driven solely by the state, Slater (2007) argues drawing attention to the varying representations that have emerged both inside and outside of Russia regarding Nicholas II since his death in 1918. Indeed, events such as his canonization by the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia in 1981 and the ROC in Russia in 2000 allowed for the mythologization of and re-engagement with Nicholas to occur. Nicholas's canonization allowed his elevation to a new status: from an abject failure and ruthless autocrat to a man of piety who was devoted to his family. The establishment of a more tempered view of the tsar and his role in history was achieved by publicizing imagery and articles in the popular Russian press and academia that were taken from the tsar's private collection of photos, journals, and film footage (Wortman 2006:377). Indeed, since the fall of the Soviet Union, there has been a steady increase of interest in the last Romanov tsar, his downfall, and the events that surrounded it. While at no point is Nicholas's lack of achievement denied, the rehabilitated narrative has increasingly presented him as a country-esque squire who was simply not the right man for the job of leading the empire. Much of this drive to rehabilitate the tsar that predates the current Romanov exhibit can be seen as the efforts of the ROC and actors close to it to use Nicholas's canonization as an entry point into a wider rehabilitation of Russia's imperial past. The fact that the ROC, alongside the Russian state, is a key contributor and backer to the Russia My History project suggests that this reconstructed view of Nicholas is becoming an increasingly accepted interpretation.

It is this restructured depiction we can, therefore, find imbuing the treatment of Nicholas II and his reign in the exhibit. Fundamentally, the Romanov exhibit promotes the view of Nicholas as a family man, unfortunately unable to keep up with events that unfurled during his reign. Like for all tsars in the exhibit, Nicholas's main information board features his portrait in its very center. However, unlike all the other tsars in the exhibit, Nicholas is joined in his portrait by his son, Tsarevitch Alexei (see figure 5). This addition is of great importance as it creates the tangible sentiment of a lost past—and lost future. It humanizes Nicholas as a family man, a distinction that is not afforded to any other tsar. Rather than portraying him as some sort of mythological creature, the exhibit pictures the tsar as human, a man lost in history, and with him—a lost Russia. This is further entrenched by the use of a quote from the tsarevitch: "when I become tsar, there will not be any poor people nor unhappy people. I want everyone to be happy." Including such a quote is truly important for the exhibit's mission as it highlights the idea of a lost future that the tsarevitch would have ushered in.

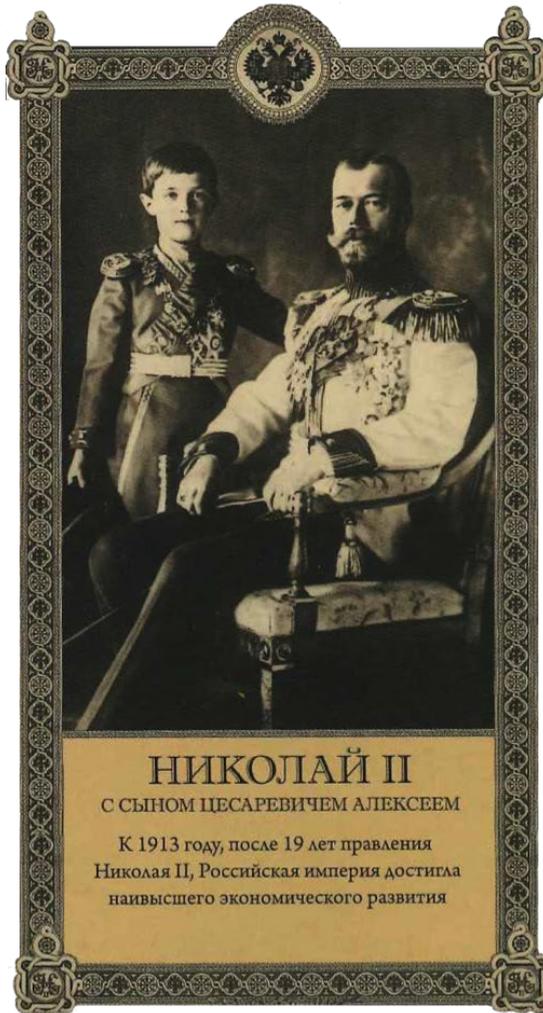


Figure 5. Portrait of Nicholas II with his son, Tsarevitch Alexei (scan from *Voz'mi istorii s soboi* 2017:41)

However, there is an inherent issue with Nicholas's narrative—the Revolution and its role as the foundational myth of the USSR and, by extension, of the modern Russian Federation. It brought about the end of the Romanovs and, with them, of the empire. Despite this complication, the events in Russia after the 1905 Revolution, First World War, and the lead-up to the revolutions of 1917 are not denied at all. Instead, Nicholas is not presented as an active player in the circumstances that brought about the end of the empire. The imagery used on the screens in the exhibit for this revolutionary period is noticeably darker, more dramatic and creates, in keeping with the historic facts, a sense of turmoil and revolt. Yet, Nicholas II is not portrayed as an active figure in this narrative. Instead he is passively mentioned as a mere factual point. The board that presents the “architects of the Russian revolutions” is dark, almost burnt in appearance, with six groups identified as the cause for the Revolution: opposition in the army,

an elite plot, opposition in the Duma, socialist revolutionary terrorists, the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party, and project “Ukraine” (an alleged plot to split Ukraine and Russia by unleashing foreign-backed nationalist forces).



Figure 6. Architects of the Russian revolutions (scan from *Voz'mi istorii s soboi* 2017:42)

At no point is Nicholas presented on the board, which suggests that these activities developed independent of him and not in relation to his reign. For each of the revolution's architects, Nicholas and his reign are not mentioned, but the focus is instead on the actors of each contributing factor of the revolution. This is a stark difference from the treatment of other tsars, who are placed at the very heart of all the main events that are presented in their respective rooms of the exhibit. Coupled with the portrait of Nicholas depicted again with the infant Tsarevich Alexei titled “The Tragic Circumstance of Nicholas II’s Rule,” this furthers the narrative of the tsar as a man who was simply outstripped by the events of history. With such a representation, the death of Nicholas creates a historical bridge between the exhibit’s visitor, Russia, and the Romanovs. It was not Nicholas’s inept rule that led to his destruction but forces beyond his control. As such, a period of Russian history, culture, and identity has been lost and must be reclaimed by the visitor as they leave the exhibit.

CONCLUSION

This article sought to reveal the primary themes through which the Russia My History parks are presenting an official rendering of the Romanov past that is conducive to the Putinist regime. The selection of narratives and deployment of imagery and facts create for the viewers an engaging, convincing narrative that conveys the relatability and importance of the exhibit’s subject to the present, bringing the past to life. It is an important project that demonstrates the desire of the political center of Russia’s political power to find historical continuity, legitimation, and popularity for the in-

cumbent regime. The continued use in the exhibit of wars, modernization, and strong leadership replicates the narratives surrounding the Putinist political machinery and its relationship to the Russian population. The narratives presented continually put forward themes in which the viewer is to find commonalities with the present leadership of Russia, fostering a point of view that Russia has always been ruled in a similar manner, from the beginning of the Romanov epoch to the present day.

The noticeable use of irredentine imagery that flows through the exhibit fosters a view of the past that focuses on a strong leader as the only person capable of ruling Russia. It creates a narrative that is simple to digest and that leads to finding commonalities with the present day, which allows the audience to see a historical precedent of strong leadership at the helm of Russia. Relating territorial expansion and military glory to the image of Russia as a superpower, historical legitimacy is found for the more confrontational policies that Putin has pursued in recent years. It creates a historical precedent on which to evaluate the country's success through a narrow lens, with clear criterion that can be used both for the past and the present.

The reconfiguration of the Romanov dynasty, through the elevation of figures such as Alexander III and Nicholas I, allows for a wider basis of popularization and legitimation, as the pantheon of national Russian heroes is expanded. In turn, Alexander III and Nicholas I further the "great man" theory that is already dominant and justifies the experiences of the Romanov dynasty, carefully crafting a message of proximity between the previous rulers of Russia and its present leader. The reconfiguration forms a narrative that rests on one person as the embodiment of Russia itself, personifying its will and destiny. Fundamentally, it extends the idea of a singular strong hand directing Russia, providing legitimacy to the current political establishment of Russia that itself shares this view.

In order to bridge the gulf between the 1917 Revolution, Russia's Soviet past, and Russia's present incarnation, Nicholas II is treated as a sanguine figure representative of lost grandeur and power. The exhibit encourages the viewer to find and create conscious historical links between the past and present that are ultimately based not in rupture but in continuity. It allows for the Romanovs and empire to be seen as both a separate entity, distant from the modern Russia, yet, crucially, at the same time, an inherent part of the fabric that makes up the Russia of today.

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ВОЗВРАЩЕНИЕ РОМАНОВЫХ: ПЕРЕОСМЫСЛЕНИЕ РОМАНОВЫХ В ИСТОРИЧЕСКИХ ПАРКАХ «РОССИЯ – МОЯ ИСТОРИЯ»

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В статье рассматривается экспозиция о династии Романовых в исторических парках «Россия – моя история». Используя существующие работы по развитию и кураторству этих исторических парков, я изучаю представленный на выставке реабилитированный взгляд на прошлое Романовых. Для достижения этой цели я исследую используемые в экспозиции нарративы и образы, изучаю то, что реабилитация династии Романовых может сказать в отношении современного взгляда России на свое прошлое, а также то, как Романовы возвращаются в лоно русской культурной и коллективной памяти. Я показываю, как представленные на выставке нарративы придают более заметную роль историческим фигурам, ранее вытесненным из культурной памяти, а также намеренно используют определенные образы и нарративные методы для выстраивания ирредентизма и чувства потери, совпадающих с современными внутри- и внешнеполитическим курсами российского правительства. В этой статье рассматриваются в первую очередь такие фигуры, как Петр I, Николай I, Александр III и Николай II, исследуется, какое отношение они имеют к современности России и каким образом нарративы каждого из них представлены в рамках экспозиции.

Ключевые слова: политика истории; ирредентизм; прошлое; Романовы; Путин; реабилитация