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The Unworthy Son:
the Life and Death of Tsarevich Alexei Petrovich

The eldest son of Peter the Great, Alexei Petrovich should, by all accounts, have inherited his father's crown as ruler of Russia, but Alexei's short and tragic life prevented this from ever occurring. Before the Tsarevich reached the age of thirty, he would be tortured and sentenced to death by his father, for allegedly trying to ferment rebellion against Peter's controversial rule. This act would not only mark the end of Alexei's life, but also would begin a number of problems for Peter and the Russian government, including problems of succession and others who opposed the Tsar. These issues would not be settled for many years after both Alexei's and Peter's deaths.

In February of 1690, during the first year of Peter the Great's marriage to Evdokia Lopukhina, the Tsarevich Alexei was born. By all accounts, Peter had very little interaction with Alexei during his early years. The arranged marriage between Peter and Evdokia was not a congenial match, and within months Peter began to neglect his wife, whom he had begun to detest.¹ This neglect would transfer over into his son as well, and for the first eight years of the Tsarevich's life, he grew up in his mother's care, rarely seen by Peter.² Although Peter initially celebrated the birth of his son,³ he was too busy with matters of the Great Embassy, the Azov campaigns, and other political issues to devote much time or care to his young son during these early years.⁴ In the year 1798, however, a revolt of the streltsy occurred, which forced Peter to quickly return to Russia from abroad. This revolt also spurred Peter to consolidate his power and

1 Constantine De Grunwald, Peter the Great, trans. Viola Garvin (England: Douglas Saunders with MacGibbon and Kee, 1956), 79.

2 Robert K. Massie, Peter the Great, His Life and World, (New York: Ballantine, 1981), 658.

3 Ibid., 657.

4 Ibid., 658.

take the education of his son in hand.⁵ The necessity of extreme brutality in putting down this rebellion forced Peter to consider how tenuous his reign really was, and solidified the need for a well-trained heir to his throne who could continue the reforms Peter had begun.

At this time, Evdokia was sent to a convent and forced to become a nun, surrendering the care of young Alexei to Peter's sister Natalia.⁶ At this time too Alexei's education changed, placed under tutors who could educate him in Western manners. During these years Alexei studied French, German, Latin, mathematics, history, geography, as well as other foreign and religious subjects.⁷ However, Peter distrusted these foreign tutors, and so placed his close adviser Alexander Menshikov in the position of official governor to the Tsarevich. Much like Peter, Menshikov was away with the army for long periods of time, and was rough towards the Tsarevich when they met. This created a schism with Alexei, and he came to regard both Menshikov and his father with some distaste.⁸

Peter's education of his heir was not limited solely to study. He desired his son to have personal experience with matters of governing, including war. In 1702, Peter took his son along with him to help defend the port city of Archangel from a rumored attack. The teenage Alexei would soon participate in other military conflicts, including the siege of Nyenskans when he was thirteen, and the storming of Narva when he was fourteen.⁹ These early expeditions, though they seemed to be beneficial in Peter's mind, proved detrimental to the Tsarevich's education in other matters, and his formal education from earlier seems to be generally ignored during this period. Even during Alexei's early years, Peter realized the differences between his son and him. In contrast to his father, Alexei "had no capacity for sustained activity and no inclination to turn his

5 Matthew S. Anderson, *Peter the Great*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978), 47.

6 Ibid.

7 Massie, 658.

8 Ibid., 659.

9 Ibid., 660.

bookish knowledge to any practical effect.”¹⁰ Seeing how different the two of them were, Peter continually pressed his son during these years towards taking more initiative and becoming the heir he desired. A letter he wrote during 1704, when Alexei was fourteen, demonstrates this. Peter writes: “I have taken you on this campaign to show you that I shirk neither trouble nor danger. I may die any day, but all the same you will have very little comfort if you do not follow my example.”¹¹ Later letters Peter would write to Alexei would be similar in manner, commanding his son to take an interest in matters of government and war.

Alexei at this time was also developing Orthodox religious tendencies, something else which put him at odds with Peter, who favored secular reforms over adherence to religious dogma. Alexei's religious training began at a very early age, as his mother Evdokia was also highly religious.¹² The trouble Peter saw in this was not in Alexei's religious beliefs, but that his Orthodoxy would adhere him to old Russian traditions, and therefore to the older Muscovite families who wished to roll back the many reforms Peter had made. If Peter allowed his son to cling to the ancient Russian traditions, he would take the chance that his many changes would be for nothing.¹³ Instead of trying to change his son's religion, however, Peter could see that Alexei received a real Western education, supplemented with a marriage to a Western bride, in the hopes that this would change his traditional tendencies.¹⁴

In 1710, when the Tsarevich was twenty, he was sent to Dresden both to study, and to meet his future bride. The woman Peter selected for his son was Charlotte of Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel, a German Princess. Peter hoped that by this exposure to the modern Western world, Alexei would come to accept his father's reforms and reject the old traditions. Alexei

10 B.H. Sumner, *Peter the Great and the Emergence of Russia*, (London: English UP, 1968), 100.

11 R. Nisbet Bain, *The First Romanovs, 1613 – 1725*, (New York: Russel and Russel, 1967), 342.

12 *Ibid.*, 341.

13 *Ibid.*, 343.

14 Massie, 662.

went along with this marriage, although he would have preferred to marry a Russian woman of the same orthodox faith.¹⁵ Alexei hoped that when Charlotte was brought back to Russia, she would accept the Orthodox faith out of her own free will.¹⁶ Alexei studied at Dresden until the marriage in October of 1711, and was soon afterwards taken away by his father in order to supervise Russian troops and defenses. This left the seventeen year old Charlotte with no choice but to travel to Russia on her own, without her husband to introduce her. This seems to have terrified her, and she did not arrive in St. Petersburg until 1713.¹⁷ At this time Alexei returned to Petersburg and his young wife, with no official positions given to him.¹⁸ Apparently his father had given up for the time being on the prospect of interesting Alexei in political affairs.

However, Alexei quickly became a symbol for the traditional Russia. Many Old Believers and opponents to the Tsar saw Alexei as a future Tsar who could undo all the reforms Peter had made.¹⁹ This was not intentional on Alexei's part. Constantin de Grunwald writes, "The Tsarevich became, quite without design, the man around whom all the discontented spirits of the Empire rallied."²⁰ Peter at least partially realized this, and knew that he could not leave his son unattended for very long. However, during the first few months after his return to Petersburg, Alexei's attitude towards his wife began to deteriorate. Sometimes when drunk he would treat her abusively, and would completely ignore Charlotte at other times.²¹ During this period Alexei also took on a mistress, the Finnish girl Afrosina. Although Alexei continued to neglect his wife, they did have two children, a daughter Natalya born in 1713, and a son Peter born in 1715. Within days of Peter's birth, however, Charlotte fell sick with fever and died soon

15 Bain, 345.

16 Ibid., 343.

17 Massie, 665.

18 Anderson, 148.

19 Ibid., 147.

20 Grunwald, 188.

21 Massie, 665.

after. A foreign minister living within Russia at the time describes the scene: “[Charlotte] embraced her two children in the most tender manner imaginable, almost melting away in tears, and delivered them to the Czarevitch, who took them in his arms, and carried them to his apartments, but never returned afterwards,”²² Clearly Alexei was not overly concerned with the death of his wife. Ironically, although Alexei loathed Peter for the treatment of his mother Evdokia, he ended up treating his own wife in much the same manner.

After the birth of Alexei's son, the relationship between Alexei and his father continued to deteriorate. After Charlotte's funeral, the Tsaritsa Catherine gave birth to a son of Peter's, also named Peter. Now, within a single week, Peter the Great had two more possible heirs to his throne, rendering Alexei's position far more unstable.²³ Peter issued Alexei an ultimatum, commanding him to mend his idle ways, with the threat of cutting him out of the succession. “I will have you to know that I will deprive you of the succession, as one may cut off a useless member.” Peter concludes in his letter: “I do not spare my own life for my country and the welfare of my people ... I would rather choose to transmit them to a worthy stranger, than to my own unworthy son.”²⁴

By Alexei's accounts to his father, he did not want any sort of political power. In a letter Alexei wrote to Peter as a reply to his previous letter, he states, “I do not think myself fit for the Government ... the sicknesses which I have undergone ... have rendered me incapable of governing so many nations; this requires a more vigorous man than I am,”²⁵ Although numerous old families would doubtlessly support Alexei if he took power, this thought seemed to be anathema to the young man. Alexei continues in his letter: “I do not aspire after you ... to the

²² Fredrick Charles Weber, The Present State of Russia vol 1, (1723; reprint, London: Frank Cass and Co, 1968), 107-108.

²³ Massie, 667.

²⁴ Letter from Peter the Great to Alexei, printed in F. C. Weber, The Present State of Russia vol 2, (1723; reprint, London: Frank Cass and Co, 1968) 101-102.

²⁵ Letter from Alexei to Peter the Great, printed in Weber, vol 2, 103.

succession of the Russian Crown, even if I had no brother as I have one at present, whom I pray God preserve,”²⁶ Even at this early point Alexei was willing to surrender his claim to the crown over to his newborn brother. Peter, however, felt that Alexei surrendering his claims to the throne were not good enough, and so commanded his son to either make himself worthy of the succession or become a monk.²⁷ Although Alexei did not like this option, he nevertheless accepted it. He wrote back to Peter, signifying that he would become a monk and renounce his claims to the Russian Crown. He writes succinctly, “I will embrace the monastical state, and desire your gracious consent for it.” Alexei signs this letter, “Your servant and unworthy son, Alexei.”²⁸

Here, Peter seemed to have second thoughts about his son's decision, and gave him an additional six months to decide, still hoping that Alexei would become the heir he wanted.²⁹ Hearing no answer from his son after seven months had passed, Peter sent another letter demanding Alexei's final decision. He stated that Alexei must either join him at Copenhagen in preparation for an invasion, or join a monastery and provide Peter the details of when it would occur.³⁰ Peter knew that Alexei was delaying his decision as much as possible, and concludes in his letter: “I absolutely will have you resolve on something, for otherwise I must judge, that you only seek to gain time to pass it in your usual idleness.”³¹ Now forced to make a decision to his father, Alexei decided instead to flee the country. He replied to Peter that he would be joining him in Copenhagen, and requested one thousand ducats from Peter's adviser Menshikov in order to pay for the trip. After borrowing some more money, Alexei, along with his mistress and servants, presumably towards Copenhagen. He did not take his two children with him. Alexei

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid., 105.

28 Letter from Alexei to Peter the Great, printed in Ibid., 106.

29 Massie, 678.

30 Ibid., 679.

31 Letter from Peter the Great to Alexei, printed in Weber, vol 2, 108.

never arrived at Copenhagen, having decided that Vienna would be the city he could flee to.³²

Alexei arrived in Vienna in November of 1716. He immediately prevailed upon Emperor Charles VI to protect him from his father.³³ Charles had no wish to get involved in the conflict between father and son, but also wanted to help Alexei, who was his brother-in-law, as both of them had married women of Brunswick-Wolfenbuttel.³⁴ Charles agreed to hide Alexei in the Austrian Empire, and kept the arrival of the Tsarevich a secret. Within days Alexei and his small party were transferred to the castle of Ehrenberg where they lived in secret for five months.³⁵ Soon, however, Peter discovered his son's absence, and sent two men to search for Alexei. By March of 1717, they tracked Alexei to the castle of Ehrenberg, and became sure that Charles VI was hiding the Tsarevich. After directly requesting that Charles return Alexei to his father, the emperor decided that he would move Alexei once more.³⁶ The Tsarevich moved out of the castle of Ehrenberg and eventually came to Naples. They were, however, followed, and once Alexei arrived at Naples, Peter was informed of his son's location.³⁷

Peter sent a diplomat, Peter Tolstoy, to the Emperor Charles VI and make Alexei return. This request for the Tsarevich's return was backed with the vague threat of military violence against the Austrian Empire.³⁸ Charles agreed to have Tolstoy meet with Alexei, and at the meeting Alexei received a letter from Peter, signifying that he would pardon Alexei's disobedience if he returned to Russia. If he did not return, Peter would declare him a traitor.³⁹ Still frightened by what his father might do, Alexei finally agreed to return, provided that he be allowed to live in peace in the country with his mistress Afrosina. Tolstoy agreed to this, and

32 Massie, 680.

33 Ibid., 681.

34 Jiri Louda, Lines of Succession, (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2002), 149.

35 Massie, 682.

36 Ibid., 684.

37 Ibid., 685.

38 Ibid., 686.

39 Weber, vol 2, 109.

wrote to Peter about Alexei's conditions. Peter also agreed, and Alexei began his return to Russia.⁴⁰

The Tsarevich returned to Moscow in February of 1718, and upon meeting his father and begging pardon for his crimes, the Tsar announced a new condition: that Alexei tell the complete truth about his past conduct and name all the people who were his accomplices.⁴¹ Peter wanted to know if any person was conspiring against his, conscious of the symbol Alexei had become of the traditional citizens who wanted to do away with his reforms. This, however, was different from Peter's earlier agreement of a complete pardon if Alexei returned to Russia. Alexei, however, agreed, and named only two people, Peter's ex-adviser Alexander Kikin and Alexei's valet, Ivan Afanasiev. This was not satisfactory to Peter, and he gave his son a list of seven questions to answer, warning Alexei that any omission would cost him the pardon.⁴² In response Alexei wrote a long account of his activities during the last few years, naming a number of people he had contact with. Alexei confirmed once more that the only two people had knowledge of his flight were Kikin and Afanasiev, making a special point to say that his mistress Afrosina was completely innocent.⁴³

Peter accepted this, and began to arrest many of the people who Alexei had mentioned, including Kikin and all of Alexei's servants.⁴⁴ Alexei was also forced to renounce his claims to the Crown, and declared his allegiance to his brother Peter. The arrests continued, and in late March of 1718 the executions began. Kikin was tortured and eventually beheaded, and a number of men who had been friendly to Alexei were publicly beaten.⁴⁵ Even after the initial executions, Peter was still suspicious of a possible plot against his rule. In April, Peter had Afrosina arrested,

40 Massie, 689.

41 Ibid., 693.

42 Ibid., 694.

43 Weber, vol 2, 117.

44 Massie, 695.

45 Ibid., 698.

soon after she arrived at St. Petersburg. Peter questioned Afrosina and she betrayed Alexei, saying to Peter that Alexei talked constantly about how he would undo the reforms Peter had made once he had taken power. Afrosina also revealed a number of letters Alexei wrote to the Emperor Charles complaining about his father and asking for his support.⁴⁶ These letters and condemnation by Afrosina were enough for Peter to question his son once more. Alexei initially denied that he ever sent the letters to the Emperor, but soon gave in and confessed that he had in fact sent them. This questioning resulted in Alexei stating that although he had no plans for rebellion against Peter, he would have joined in a rebellion if one had occurred.⁴⁷

This revelation moved Peter to more harsh measures against his son. Since Alexei had not confessed everything immediately upon his return as Peter had commanded, his pardon was now void and the Tsarevich could be prosecuted.⁴⁸ Alexei was arrested and two courts, ecclesiastical and secular, were convened to decide his fate. Peter initially asked the ecclesiastical court to advise him on what to do with Alexei. The court wrote a response in which they quoted extensively from both the Old and New Testament, saying that Peter had the authority to punish his son, but could also be merciful if he desired.⁴⁹ Unsatisfied by this, Peter turned to the secular court, ordering them to judge his son. Alexei was questioned once more, this time with torture. After two sessions of torture on June 19th and 24th, Alexei admitted that he wished for his father's death. This was sufficient for the court, and they ruled that Alexei should be executed. In their statement, the council writes; "How much more has such a design deserved to be punished with death?"⁵⁰

It fell to Peter to approve the death sentence of his son, and for a few days he hesitated to

46 Ibid., 700.

47 Ibid., 702..

48 Anderson, 153.

49 Massie., 703.

50 Manifesto of the Criminal Process Against the Czarevitch, printed in Weber, vol 2, 200.

do so. However, the matter was soon taken out of his hands, as on July 7th, “violent passions of the mind, and the terrors of death, had thrown the Czarevitch into an apoplectic fit,”⁵¹ The same day Alexei died. Two days later his body was lain in state, and on the 11th he was buried in the family vault.⁵² Although Peter expressed sorrow at the death of his son, the very next day he was rejoicing over the launching of a new ship.⁵³ Although a number of rumors began which stated that Alexei was poisoned or beaten to death by his father, it seems that the Tsarevich died as a result of the previous torture sessions, without any foul play by his father. If Peter was willing to put his son in a trial and have the results published⁵⁴, then it would have been a small matter to have his son executed. There is no reason for Peter to have Alexei killed by any surreptitious means instead.

The effects of Alexei's trial and execution sentence were immediate. By doing this, Peter saw that he would be able to suppress any possible rebellions of the old families by using his own son as an example. This is clear from the composition of the assembly that condemned Alexei to death. Of the one hundred and twenty six members, twenty two were of old Muscovite families and could be thought of as sympathizers to Alexei.⁵⁵ These men recognized immediately the great lengths which Peter would go to in order to remove any opposition to his rule, and so did not side with the Tsarevich. Peter demonstrated quite clearly that he would be willing to go to any length to suppress rebellion and assure that his reforms would remain in effect after his death. This did not signify the end of opposition, however, and small exhibitions of resistance continued through the final years in Peter's reign, spurred by a war with Persia in 1722 and expansion into Asia.⁵⁶ These people continued to regard Peter with suspicion, and the

51 Weber, vol 1, 228.

52 Ibid., 230.

53 Ibid., 231.

54 Ibid., 227.

55 Anderson, 154.

56 Ibid., 155.

indictment of Alexei only proved to many that Peter's rule would prove to be the destruction of Russia. However, knowing how Peter would brutally suppress any signs of rebellion, they were not nearly as vocal about it as before Alexei's death.

Alexei's effects on the succession were also profound, if only by his absence. By rights Alexei should have been heir; after he was forced to renounce the throne Peter's other son, only a newborn, was declared the successor. However, this son died early on, leaving the succession undecided at the time of Peter's death in 1725. This allowed Peter's second wife Catherine to become Empress of Russia, followed later by three other female rulers, Peter's niece Anne in 1730, his daughter Elizabeth in 1741, and Catherine II in 1762.⁵⁷ Alexei's absence from the succession enabled these three women to take power. Alexei's son Peter II did become Emperor in 1727, but his rule only lasted for three years.

The tragic story of Alexei gives a vivid picture of the climate of Russia during the rule of Peter the Great. Peter made a number of large reforms, and desired an heir who would continue his legacy. Alexei proved to be the opposite of his father, and illustrates the opposition that Peter encountered. The tortured relationship between father and son would result in the death sentence of Alexei and the alteration of Russian succession for years to come.

⁵⁷ Louda, 204.