

## William Tyler | Towards the Abyss Alexander III, 1881–1894

– Welcome to everyone. It is warm here in Southern Britain today. And so I'm here in, as it were, my normal, in my normal plumage, rather than dressing up poshly for you all. But also for all the American friends who tune in, or Zoom in to the talks, just to prove that even Englishmen can talk without wearing a tie. And so I'm laid back this evening. Now I'm going to start as I've started the last few weeks, by reading what I put on my blog and what is going to go on the website for lockdown, which is a little synopsis of the talk, just to sort of break the ice. And tonight's talk, or today's talk, it's tonight here in Britain, "Towards the Abyss." And it's the reign of Czar Alexander III, who came to the throne in 1881 and died of natural causes in 1894. The reign, you will recall from the last time we met, began in bloodshed. Alexander III's father, Alexander II, was assassinated and assassinated by homegrown terrorists. Alexander III, now the czar, his reflex action was to retreat into a policy of repression. But the question at the time was, could such a policy work in the late 19th century? As ideas from democracy to Marxism began to circulate in Russia, let alone nationalist sentiments amongst some of Russia's subject peoples, in particular Poles and Ukrainians. But for the length of this reign, 1881 to '94, Alexander's policy of repression did keep revolution at bay. There were even signs of progress on the industrial and infrastructure fronts. But underneath those, or underneath what we might call outward normality, revolution was brewing in Russia. Alexander himself based his policies on three pillars. The pillars of autocracy, Russian nationalism, and Orthodoxy. But as the historian Orlando Figes has said in his book on the Russian Revolution, "They proved to be unstable pillars." Because autocracy, Romanov style, was deeply at variance with contemporary European culture. Russian nationalism ignored the other nationalisms within the state, such as that of Poland and Ukraine. And Russian Orthodoxy led to the persecution of other Christian faiths, but in particular, led to a violent outburst of antisemitic pogroms. Change was in the air in these last two decades of the 19th century, and there was a feeling in Russia, even within the Romanov family themselves, that revolution couldn't be far off. And when the czar died at the relatively young age of 49 to be succeeded by his rather wimpish son, to be honest, Nicholas II, then revolution seemed even nearer than ever. So that's my way of introduction and break the ice.

So let's begin at the very beginning. I finished my talk last time with the assassination of Alexander II. And thus we begin the story today of the accession of his son, Alexander III. Alexander III was a giant of a man. He stood six foot four and reminded people of Peter the Great, but probably only in terms of his strength and autocracy, but not of political skill. He was almost devoid of political skill, was Alexander. He was six foot four, as I say, and he was very strong with it. He did party tricks to impress his guests or his court or

wherever he was in Russia. He would bend iron poker. He would tear up packs of cards. And at dinner parties, he had the rather, well, it would've been quite frightening experience for those dining with him, of picking up a fork or a spoon and tying it in a knot. Simon Sebag Montefiore, in his book on the Romanovs, comments of Alexander III briefly, but in this way: "Alexander III was nicknamed 'The Colossus.' He was the sort of czar who always knew who he was and what he wanted. No small qualities in a leader." Well that's true, but in Alexander's case, what he wanted was way out of date, even for Russia in the 1880s. And you might think saying all of that, that you would imagine Alexander III to be an old man. Indeed, all the pictures or photographs even that we have of him show him with a long beard, very Russian in style, but that was a pose he struck. He was actually only 36 years of age when he came to the throne. A young man. Younger, for example, than the present Duke of Cambridge here in Britain by four years. He's 36. He should have been bouncing with modern ideas, but he wasn't. Russia, you see, didn't need a poker-bending young autocrat. What Russia and the Romanov Dynasty needed most was a young, liberal reformer who would build on the progress made under his father, Alexander II. Halting progress as we saw last week, but progress nonetheless. And had he taken a progressive liberal stance, then he might have taken Russia into the 20th century as a more democratic state, and thus a state with firmer foundations as a constitutional monarchy than he was able to. And of course, as he was only 36 in 1881, there was every chance of him living into, living into the 20th century. And it's always worth recalling, that it's a very short space of time between his death in 1894 and the coming of the revolution in 1917. Usually, the revolution seems to me to be taught in schools, colleges, and universities as beginning with the reign of Nicholas II. But we've seen already, we've seen already since the time right back in 1825 of discontent in Russia with the Romanov autocracy.

By 1881, it is, frankly, in my opinion, it was already impossible to turn the clock backwards to the sort of autocracy that Alexander III favoured. And he had an advantage in his wife. In fact, although they did not marry for love, it was an unusual royal marriage in the sense that it was, in its essence, a love match. He married a princess of Denmark, called Dagmar. When she came to Russia, she adopted Russian Orthodoxy, and she adopted the name, Maria. And so she becomes the Empress or Czarina Maria. But as Princess Dagmar of Denmark, she had a sister, Princess Alexandra of Denmark. And Princess Alexandra married the Prince of Wales, later King Edward VII, and she herself became the much loved in Britain, Queen Alexandra. What a different life those two women lived. Simply whom they were married off to. As an example of how much Alexander III and his wife were in love, or how much he was in love with her, but also with a political message of the gulf in Russia in the last two decades of the 19th century between the extremely rich and the extremely poor, was that the czar commissioned for his wife to one Easter a bejewelled egg. And he got a Baltic German jeweller living and working in St. Petersburg to produce this

extraordinary objet d'art for his wife. And the jeweler's name, as you well know, was Peter Carl Fabergé. And Fabergé went on producing eggs for the royal family right through to the revolution. The production of these vastly expensive and, yes, extraordinarily beautiful objets d'art, was, to me, a symbol of the massive gulf between rich and poor in pre-revolutionary Russia. They had no practical purpose whatsoever. Something to put on the sideboard, and as my mother used to say, "Yet another thing that I've got to dust." Nothing, to me, symbolises the way that the Romanov family was so out of touch with ordinary Russians. It's amazing, even in democracies, how leaders can be out of touch. We've only this week heard that the British Prime Minister intended to build a £150,000 tree house in his official residence at Chequers, with security built in for his son. Very Romanov. And very unacceptable to most British people in a time when there is a major crisis in terms of food costs, the costs of living, in general. And it again betrays how rulers, even democratic ones, like Johnson, can find themselves totally out of step with the feelings of the country.

Now, in a democracy, we can vote to get rid of a prime minister or a president who's out of touch, but of course, in Russia, they had no chance of voting Alexander out. And the only recourse is, in the end, revolution, or in the short term, as with his father, assassination. Alexander III, as an autocrat both by education and by personality, interpreted the assassination of his father as due to his father's liberalism, which he saw as weakness. Thus, from the very start of his reign, Alexander turned to repression to deal with the rising political ferment in Russia that stretched from constitutional democracy to Marxism. And additionally, of course, he had to face, as I've already said, a rise in nationalism in places like the Baltic countries, in Finland, as well as in Poland and in Ukraine. I'm going to introduce you to a advisor to both Alexander II, Alexander III, and Nicholas II. His name was Konstantin, and this is a dreadful Russian name for me to pronounce, Pobedonostsev. Pob, Pobedonostsev. And Pobedonostsev was an arch conservative and reactionary, but remained a deeply religious man. The year before Alexander II was assassinated and Alexander III came to the throne, he had become Chief Procurator of The Holy Synod. Now you will remember that under Peter the Great, the Orthodox Church was, in modern parlance, nationalised and a civil servant or courtier, one and the same, was put in charge of the church as the Chief Procurator and carried far more weight than the patriarch. In other words, the church was controlled by the czar through a civil servant. And a few days after the assassination of Alexander II and Alexander III had come to the throne, Pobedonostsev wrote a letter to Alexander III. And in that letter, he wrote a classic piece of autocracy and indeed arrogance. He wrote to the czar, "If they begin to sing the old siren song, that it is necessary to be calm and to continue in the liberal direction, that it is necessary to yield to so-called public opinion. For God's sake, Your Majesty, do not believe and do not listen. It will be the ruin of Russia and of you. This is as clear as day to me. It is necessary to end at once now

all the talk about freedom of the press, about popular meetings, about a representative assembly," i.e., a parliament, "These are all lies spoken by superficial and weak people. It is absolutely essential to reject them for the good of true people." Wow. What a dreadful, dreadful analysis of Russian society in the 1880s. Totally, completely, 100% wrong. And realised as wrong by many of the rising intellectual and middle classes of Russia. But not by the czar and the nobility. They preferred, although they wouldn't have thought of it in that way, to go down with a sinking ship, which of course they did in 1917 revolution. This was entirely misguided policy that doesn't even date back to the 18th century, but dates back to the 17th century Europe and certainly not the last decade, but one of the 19th century. The czar saw himself as appointed by God. The divine right of kings were back to the, in Britain, were back to Charles I's political philosophy. Appointed by God. And it was the Russian Orthodox Church, which was Alexander's powerful and client ally. The link between czarism and Orthodoxy was underlined by Alexander's nationalism, itself founded on Russian Orthodoxy. Just look at Putin today. Putin's involvement with the Russian Orthodox Church. They are feeding off each other. The Russian Orthodox Church off Putin, Putin off the Russian Orthodox Church. The Russian Orthodox Church off Alexander III, Alexander III off the Russian Orthodox Church.

After his coronation, which took place later in 1883 when he crowned himself "Czar of all the Russians," Simon Seabag Montefiore, using partly Alexander III's own words, writes this. "The czar said of his coronation day, 'This was the happiest day of my life.'" And Montefiore says, "And he treated the ritual as a credo for autocracy. 'This great event,' the czar explained afterwards to his wife, 'amazed and showed morally tainted Europe, amazed and showed morally tainted Europe that Russia is the most holy Orthodox Russia as it was under the Muscovite czars and will be forever.'" That could be Putin, couldn't it? "The morally tainted Europe." That's how Putin sees us. And America. "The morally tainted Europe and America," Putin would say. "Against the most holy Orthodox Russia." That's Alexander III at his coronation in 1883, but it could be Putin giving a television broadcast in June, 2022. I'm going to read an account of an event that happened and draw some conclusions from that event because I believe this tells us a great deal about this czar and about his attitudes. And we will see the problems that Russia faced in this extract.

This is Simon Seabag Montefiore writing of an incident that occurred in, obviously, in Alexander III's reign. "On the 17th of October, 1888, the czar and his family were on a train back from the Crimea." And you remember the aristocracy spent time in the Crimea, at the palace of Livadia. It was where the Russian elite went for their holidays by the Black Sea. And one of the reasons, of course, that Putin wanted the Crimea in 2014, and himself has got, by all accounts, a massive palace there. "On the 17th of October, 1888, the czar and his family were on a train back from Crimea when he received the

director of the Southwestern Railway, a man called Sergei Witte." W-I-double-T-E. Now, we shall meet Witte next week in the reign of Nicholas II, when he isn't the director of the railway, but he's actually prime minister. Prime minister of Russia. "The czar complained a bit that the train was going too slowly. 'Is this railway run by Yids?' said the czar. Witte, an engineer, contradicted the czar, explaining that the trains were being driven too fast, but Alexander ordered his train to accelerate." His son, Nicholas, later Nicholas II, after the tragedy that then unfolded, wrote to his uncle. He said, "At midday we were just finishing breakfast when suddenly we felt a strong jolt, then another much stronger and everything started to crash, then we were thrown out of our chairs. The table just flew over my head and was gone. I'll never forget the smash. I closed my eyes and lay expecting to die. I saw a light and climbed out and pulled out my sister. I thought with horror about Mama and Papa and what divine joy when I saw them standing on the roof of the former dining car." Now Montefiore writes, "23 were dead, and the czar helped rescue the wounded by lifting up the roof of the carriage." Remember, bending pokers, twisting forks and spoons into knots? "And he helped rescue the wounded by lifting up the roof of the carriage. A child was screaming, 'Now they'll murder us all!'" And the child that shouted out was Olga, sister to Nicholas, daughter of Alexander III. She thought it was a terrorist attack. It wasn't. It was a simple railway accident caused by the czar. "As a result of this, Alexander promoted Witte. "He was summoned to St. Petersburg," says Montefiore, "where Alexander, wary of the Jewish railway moguls, asked Witte, 'Are you a friend of Jews?' Witte replied that it was not possible, that if it was not possible to drown them all in the Black Sea, they should at least be treated as humans. The czar seemed satisfied and appointed him Communications Minister." Now what does that tell us about Russia? It tells us that Alexander III was autocratic and stupid and would not take the advice about the speed of the train and caused the accident. It shows us the strength of the czar in holding up the roof of the carriage. It shows us Alexander's personal antisemitism shared by vast swathes of the Russian aristocracy, indeed by the middle classes, like Witte. And it also shows us with little Olga's comment that some in the family at least believe they were living on borrowed time, on the edge of a revolutionary precipice. "Now," she said, "they'll murder us all." That one story seems to me to encapsulate Russia in the 1880s and early 1890s. Now, I'm not going to say very much about the antisemitic pogroms during the reign of Alexander III. Not because they aren't important, obviously, and not because they aren't significant, which of course they are. Or indeed not because they weren't dreadful, which they were in every way you can imagine. But simply because Trudy is giving a lecture tomorrow, which will go into greater depth about Russian Jews at this very period before the revolution of 1917. Not only do I not want to steal her thunder, but I'm not as well equipped to deal with the issue as she is. But I cannot leave it. I just can't leave it. It just seems to me impossible not to say. So I decided to do two things. First of all, to take the

magazine that we've been using about the Romanovs and to read you one paragraph. "Promotion of the Orthodox Church led to the persecution of other faiths, and no group in Czarist Russia was singled out more than the Jews." Just what I've said just now. "Alexander III, like most Russians at the time, harboured strong antisemitic prejudices. He derided them as Yids." Again, we've seen that. "Seizing on the irrational and untrue idea that Jews had been responsible for his father's assassination, he issued the infamous May Laws in 1882. These narrowed the pale of settlement," where Jews could live, "forbade Jews from owning mortgages or purchasing property, rendering thousands of them homeless, and imposed travel restrictions that made it impossible to conduct business or even visit relatives. Measures over the next few years dismissed Jewish officials from bureaucratic or government posts without pensions unless they converted to Orthodoxy, barred Jews from the legal profession without special permission from the Ministry of Justice, banned them from military schools and academies, and imposed heavy taxes on kosher meats and even on synagogues. Despite international outcry, most of these laws remained in place until 1914." It's not as though internationally there were no other signs of antisemitism in Western Europe, but so appalling were the pogroms within Russia itself that Western European countries did complain. Russia is— It would be nice to say that Russia was entirely out of step, but we all know what they didn't know. That the Holocaust is to come, in Germany. But this is a period of deep antisemitism.

There's one more thing I want to say about Jews because it links to revolution. Many Jews were involved in revolutionary activities and indeed in Marxism. And I also want to link Jewish views of a nation state, Zionism, with the nationalistic views of Poles and Ukrainians. And in that fantastically good book, "A People's Tragedy" by Orlando Figes, F-I-G-E-S, it's all in my book, this. In this book, Orlando Figes draws this out, I think, beautifully. Alexander, remember, is a nationalist, a Russian nationalist. And so Figes writes, "There was nothing new in the policy of Russification. It had always been the central aim of the czarist imperial philosophy to assimilate the non-Russian peoples into the Russian cult from political system to turn them into true Christians, loyal subjects and good Russians." Now, the Russians failed to do this. The same happens in the Empire of the United States. But in America, all those who came from the old world to the new were not only embraced by America, but turned into Americans. But there was no persecution of minority nationalities or persecution of particular religions. And America did not suffer as Russia did from these deep divisions. Okay, I know before all the Americans listening go mad at me, I know the divisions today, but that had nothing to do with 19th century and 20th century immigration from Europe. Yes, we had, of course, the American Civil War in the 1860s, but that's in the past, 20, 40 years in the past. And of course, we didn't have the situation we have today. That's another story. But for the purposes of this story, you can see that Russia failed badly where America succeeded well. And I may have mentioned it to you before

because I think it's a fantastic book, "The Education of Hyman Kaplan" by Leo Rosten, which is the story of a Jewish immigrant into America who wishes to be more American than the Americans. It's extraordinarily funny, and it's a classic. If you haven't read it, well shame on you. You must read it. "The Education of Hyman Kaplan" by Leo Rosten. Figes goes on to say, "There was an ethnic hierarchy. Not just a social one in Russia." Not just the rich and the poor, but there was an ethnic one. "At the top were Russians and Baltic Germans. Below them were Poles, Ukrainians, Georgians, Armenians." And at the bottom, Jews. So this is a very stratified society in numerous ways. He goes on to say, this is Figes goes on to say, "Hardly surprising then that such a large and prominent part in the revolutionary movement in Russia should have been played by Jews. Even Witt," whom we've just mentioned, and I said was going to become prime minister, "Even Witt, speaking in the wake of a pogrom in 1903 was forced to admit that if the Jews comprised about 50% of the membership in the revolutionary parties, then this was the fault of our government. The Jews are too oppressed." And Witt, himself, was an antisemite, but he could see how dangerous that was to the regime. Plus, the fact, of course, when they could, many Jews left Russia, and some of you who are British and American listening to this talk may indeed have Russian ancestry from the late 19th century, when your people left for Britain and for America. And the ones that remained, many of them, many of them turned revolutionary; and some of them, Marxist. There's something else. Figes said, "There was also a large Zionist movement, which the czarist regime had allowed to grow after the early 1880s because it advocated Jewish immigration in response to the pogroms." In other words, this was a way of getting rid of Jews who wanted to go voluntarily. "But it was banned in 1903 on the grounds that, inside Russia, it served as a vehicle for Jewish nationalism."

So Zionism was at first welcomed, get rid of the Jews, then banned because it was a threat to Russian nationalism. And this sense of Jewish nationalism fits in to those other parts of the Empire of Russia that had nationalistic feelings. Okay, the Jewish national feeling in setting up a Jewish homeland, a Zion, is different than Poles who want an independent Poland, Ukrainians who want an independent Ukraine, Finland who want an independent Finland, and the Baltic states, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, who want independence, too. But it all is in this huge revolutionary mix. It's being mixed up in this mixing bowl of peoples and religions. And the one enemy is the autocracy of the czar, the courtiers and the nobility. This is a society which, not only in retrospect, but many thought at the time, could not go on. It was reaching a point of crisis. Now, we know that that point of crisis came in the middle of a world war, in 1917. Alexander and those around him did not know that. Of course they didn't. In that piece I read by Figes, he ends by saying this. "Russification of schools, in particular, in short, the whole of the czarist empire was ripe for collapse on the eve of the revolution in 1905." That was a failed revolution. "Its peoples wanted to escape."

Jews wanted out of Russia in terms of Zionism, to Zion, to The Holy Land, or in terms of Britain or America. I love the Jewish story that the ones, the Jews who remained in Britain- All my Jewish friends in Britain, they know me, so they don't mind me saying it. Or it is said that many Jews who stayed in Britain were conned into believing they'd already reached America. Only the bright ones actually reached- I'm not getting into that. But I love the story. But the truth is you, you'll now remember, the truth is that Jews wanted out, but so did German Baltics want out. So did Finns want out. So did Poles want out. So did Ukrainians want out. But the really determined wanted to stay. They wanted to stay to overturn the regime. And the Jews that stayed, many of them who were Jews by birth were not Jewish by faith, and switched from Judaism to Marxism, and accepted Marxism as the new religion, that would bring at long last a voice for ordinary people. So the whole of the reign of Alexander III, looking back from today, looks like, well, a missed opportunity to build on the work of his liberal father. Going down whatever sort of analogies you want to make, reaching a crossroads and taking the wrong course that in the end, would lead to the abyss. And not to the promised land of a democratic Russia. However you want to describe it, this is another turning point in Russian history. And as I've already said, Putin isn't the opposite of Alexander III. Putin is, in fact, a 21st century equivalent of Alexander III, in my view, or at least I would be prepared to argue that. And we've been arguing that sort of point all through. You have to make up your own minds what you think about how the past relates to the present. But you've heard me say, and I wouldn't say it if I didn't believe it. That I believe that the Russian history is, and the Russian myths about themselves, are what leads Putin onwards. And I think you can see it in this reign. Interestingly, this reign doesn't get much attention if you do a traditional school or university course on Russia.

But I think, and that's why I gave a whole talk to Alexander III, I think it's actually rather important. Now, I've given a very negative view, and I think a correct one, but I've got to ameliorate that negativism somehow by saying that, in fact, there were some improvements. There were infrastructure improvements, in particular, in transport, roads, bridges, and most notably, in railways. Especially the Trans-Siberian Railway, which was commissioned under Alexander III and opened under Nicholas II. It linked Moscow with Vladivostok over a passage of 5,772 miles. Now this is very similar to the American Empire. the opening up of the railroad right across the continent, from east to west, and west to east. But in America, the impact was different. In America, it brings Americans together, whether they're Californians or New Englanders. It enables the federal regime in Washington to govern this America. In Russia, it didn't. They didn't utilise it in that way. The first major utilisation was to send an army to Vladivostok in the Russo-Japanese war of 1904. The first person to utilise the railway to pull Russia together, was Lenin. After the revolution of 1917. Lenin used the railway to send



out special trains, which showed films of the revolution, and pummelling people with the doctrines of Marxism all across Russia, thanks to the railway. Alexander III and Nicholas II had no vision of how they could use the railway in the way that the American governments could use the railway. I mean, one of the enduring pictures of America in the 20th century, is of presidential candidates standing at the rear of a train, on a balcony, lecturing the people in some tiny town as they went through. Just imagine if Nicholas II had tried to do that. But they didn't. They did not see the advantage of railways. But it wasn't only railways they didn't see the advantage of. It was the construction of large factories which they didn't see the danger of. Factories in the great cities of Moscow, St. Petersburg and Warsaw. And in these great factories, revolutionary tracts, written tracts, could be passed. People with the gift of the gab would stand up during lunch breaks in the canteen and lecture them. Some of you may remember that remarkable scene in Doctor Zhivago where you can see exactly that in the engineering works portrayed in the film. Because it's the urban working class who form the backbone of the Marxist revolution in October, 1917. The rural working class are by definition conservative, but it is the urban working class who can see the riches, can see the czar driving by, can know of the balls in St. Petersburg. It's them, and they've got a message. And their message increasingly is not one of constitutional monarchy or even democracy in a British or American sense, but a Marxist revolution. It's an appealing message. Marxism has a very appealing message. It's not a messy message, like constitutional monarchy or democracy. You just have to accept Marxism as you accept a religious faith. And then all questions are answered. If not by the church, the questions are answered by the political elite. You can even read the book. The equivalent of a political Bible, "Das Kapital." There's one other positive from Alexander III's reign in addition to infrastructure improvements and greater industrialization. Unusually for czarist Russia, Russia did not go to war during Alexander's reign. I said Alexander wasn't bright, but he was bright enough to know that Russia was ill-prepared for a war. But he also knew, increasingly, that trouble loomed on the horizon. How did he know? Why did he know? Well, Simon Sebag Montefiore tells us why in this small extract, which I'm going to share with you now. Montefiore writes, "The accession and new policies of the 29 year old German Kaiser, Wilhelm II, inconsistent, impulsive, and unstable, made up Alexander's mind for him. Straight after his accession to the German throne in 1888, Willie, as he was known, set off to visit Alexander."

Now remember, they're all related. Alexander's wife is the sister of the Prince of Wales. Wilhelm II's mother is Victoria and Albert's eldest daughter, Victoria. They're all intermingled. "Willie set off to visit Alexander who 'loathed the rascally young fop who throws his weight about, thinks too much of himself, and fancies as others worship.'" Not a bad analysis of Kaiser Wilhelm. "One of his courtiers remembered that Alexander was 'literally nauseated by Wilhelm, who

physically disgusted him.' He regarded him as a sort of infantile monkey. When the czar paid his return visit to Germany, Willie suddenly suggested the division of Europe between Germany and Russia, at which Alexander growled, 'Stop whirling around like a dervish, Willie. Just look at yourself in the mirror.'" Now, Alexander believed that Germany and Russia could be allied together, making Russia safe. He now realised after 1888, and the accession of Wilhelm II, this was not going to happen. And as Montefiore writes, "Alexander now felt Russia was isolated." Oh, goodness me! There's that wretched word again. The Russian paranoia over isolation. Putin and NATO on his borders. Alexander III and Germany on his borders. "Alexander felt Russia was isolated. He grasps long before most of his ministers that it was a new era. He said to one of the courtiers, 'I desire to establish the principle of protecting the rights of peoples, as well as dynasties. I suggest you maintain a friendly attitude to France at the proper time, and negotiate a formal alliance.' To which the response to the czar was, 'But, sire, the French are immoral revolutionaries. It's impossible.' The czar answered, 'Not so. That is my order.'" And thus comes that big division in Europe between Germany and Austria-Hungary on the one side, the autocratic Russia and the democratic France and Britain on the other side, as we move towards war in 1914. Alexander III was completely right in his evaluation, both of Wilhelm II and of Imperial Germany. Absolutely right. And if Alexander III came back today, and I was to brief him on the present situation with Russia, he would say, "But I quite understand Vladimir Putin. He's isolated. And he can't make allies because all of the allies are in alliance in NATO against him. So all he can do is push back against it." In Russian terms, what Putin is doing makes sense. In Alexander's case, he knew he needed allies. But Russia was not militarily competent on its own, despite the expense of money, to face Germany. Germany by the 1880s had defeated Austria-Hungary, and it had defeated France. It was the most modern and up-to-date army in Europe. So it made sense for him to say, "My enemy's enemy is my friend, even if it is revolutionary Republican France or democratic Constitutional Britain." But he had no argument with Britain. In the sense that they were family, in the real sense of family. I find it absolutely fascinating that this reign makes the links both to 1914, and to 1917, and to 2022 more understandable. It's in this reign that you begin to understand real modern Russian history. It wasn't to last. Alexander III dies unexpectedly in 1894, 49 years of age. He could have been expected to live well into the 20th century. There is an account—Well, there's a beautiful book. It's called "A Lifelong Passion." Again, it's on one of my Russian lists, if you get on the blog. "A Lifelong Passion." Nicholas and Alexandra's letters, and other letters of the royal family, of the imperial family. And it's a really good book. And in this book, it quotes the memoirs of Sandro. Sandro was Nicholas's cousin, Alexander. Incidentally, Sandro manages to escape the revolution, dies in exile in 1933, and his wife, Xenia, also escaped the revolution and doesn't die until 1960. I'm everlastingly saying to people, "Do not chop up history, like school teachers and

university lecturers chop it up into syllabuses." Xenia dies in 1933. She knew Alexander III. This is in Sandro's, her husband's, memoirs, which he wrote in exile. And he wrote this. "20th of October, 1894. Nicki," that's Nicholas, Nicholas II, as he's to become. "Nikki and I stood on the veranda of the beautiful palace in Levada," Crimea. "armed with bags of oxygen, and watching the end of the Colossus." The Colossus is Alexander III. "He died as he lived, a bitter enemy of resounding phrases, a confirmed hater of melodrama. He just muttered a short prayer and kissed his wife. Everyone in the crowd of relatives, physicians, courtiers, and servants gathered around his now lifeless body, realised that our country had lost the only support which kept it from falling down a precipice." I used the word "abyss," Sandro, in 1894, a member of the Romanov imperial family, uses the word "precipice." I've already quoted Olga, "Now they will murder us all." There's an awareness in the family. "The country had lost the only support which kept it from falling down a precipice. Nobody understood it clearer than Nicki." Nicholas II. "For the first and last time in my life, I saw tears in his blue eyes. He took me by the arm and led me downstairs to his room. We embraced and cried and cried together. He couldn't collect his thoughts. He knew he was the emperor now and the weight of this terrifying fact crushed him. He exclaimed pathetically, 'Sandro, Sandro, what am I going to do? What is going to happen to me, to you, to Xenia, to Alex,' his wife, 'to mother, to all of Russia. I'm not prepared to be a czar. I never wanted to be a czar. I know nothing of the business of czardom. I have no idea of even how to talk to the ministers.'" He was now the autocrat of all the Russians. A Russia with him by tension. From Democrats to Marxists, from Ukrainian nationalists to Zionists, from Polish nationalists to Finnish nationalists, from Armenian to Azerbaijani nationalists, from Georgia to the Baltic. And this is a man who says, "What is going to happen to me?" To me. "To you, to Xenia," Sandro's wife, "to Alex," Nicholas' wife, "and to Mother, and to all of Russia." But how significant Nicholas begins by saying "Me." Not Russia, "Me." It's the problem with hereditary monarchies. You land up with square pegs in round holes. And there was never a squarer peg in a rounder hole than Nicholas II, last czar of Russia.

Now, I wanted to finish, not with that. We'll pick up that story, of course, next week. But I wanted to share with you a letter that was sent to Alexander III as my finale, if you like, today. It was written by a Russian author, or maybe one, I'm not sure what is the correct woke term, a female author, called Maria Sabrikova. She was in exile in Paris. And she wrote an open letter, it was published in Russia, she wrote an open letter to the czar, to Alexander III, in which she began by saying, "Your Majesty, The laws of my country forbid free—" She means Russia. "The laws of my country forbid free speech. All that is honest in Russia is forced to look on at the arbitrary despotism of the officials, the persecution of thought, the moral and physical ruin of the rising generation, the slavery of the oppressed and plundered people, and to be silent." If she was alive today, she could begin by

addressing that to, "Dear Mr. Putin, The laws of my country forbid free speech. All that is honest in Russia is forced to look on at the arbitrary despotism of the officials, the persecution of thought, the moral and physical ruin of the rising generation, the slavery of the oppressed and plundered people, and to be silent." She went on to say, "The Russian emperors see and hear only what they are allowed to see and hear by the officials, who stand between them and the masses. The fearful death of Alexander II casts an ominous gloom over your succession to the throne. And your advisors have persuaded you that his death resulted from the free ideas fostered by the best part of his reign. Our terrorists were created not by the reforms of the last reign, but the insufficiency of those reforms." The point I've made before and the point I shall make again, you cannot have a "little reform." "You must have full reform," she wrote. "Were created not by the reforms of the last reign, but by the insufficiency of those reforms." At Alexander III's death, there is still not a parliament in Russia. She finished by saying, "Freedom of speech, personal security, freedom of meetings, full publicity of justice, education accessible to all, suppression of administrative despotism, the convoking of a national assembly for which all classes can choose their delegates. In these alone, our salvation lies. I, in my conscience, fully recognise my moral right and duty as a Russian woman to say what I have said." The czar read the letter; it reached him. He read it. And apparently, according to those present, remarked, "Well, that's all very well, but what on earth does it matter to her?" "I'm in charge. It doesn't matter to her. I'm the one that it matters to. No one else." Well, that is a damning, damning piece by that female author. And a damning response. And I've written here that well-known phrase with which I end this evening, or this morning, wherever you are. "There are none so blind as those who will not see. There are none so blind as those who will not see." The abyss, the precipice, of revolution is just there, over the horizon. They didn't know when or how, but increasing numbers of them, like Olga and Sandro, within the imperial family know it's coming. It's almost as though you can hear the thunder in the distance. But when will the lightning strike? No one knows. And we shall take the story closer to that point next week. Thanks for listening this week. And I'm sure there's questions. There are.

#### Q & A and Comments

- Jennifer, "Where do I swim?" In the sea. Hundred yards outside my front door.
- Yes, Fabergé had baulked at German living in St. Petersburg with a French-sounding name. Absolutely, correct.
- Angela writes, "My other grandfather, born in England, travelled on to America when he was a baby with his family, but came back again to Hall." Oh, God. Oh, I know Angela, I know who you are. Yeah, well. I'm

tempted to say, "Why on earth would anyone come back to live in Hall?" I can't go back, can't take that on board, really.

– Selma says, "When you visit the Armoury in Moscow, and you see how the Romanovs lived, diamonds, rubies, and emeralds as big as your hands, coaches made out of gold, prayer books covered in diamonds, no wonder there was a revolution." Yeah, yeah, absolutely.

– And Nancy says, "Fabergé was a descendant of a Huguenot family from France." Yes, we had lots of Huguenot jewellers that came to England, as well.

– Ah, I'm asked about Chechnya and the Muslims in Russia. They are not– That's a very good question, Shelly.

Q: "What about other nationalities and religions in Russian Empire in Asian areas, like Chechnya and Muslims?"

A: That is less important, in terms of the revolution, which is a Western– Is it a Western philosophy, Marxism? Or a Western philosophy, democracy? It's a Western collapse of the empire. The East follows on. The East becomes more important later, as we shall see in the story.

Q: "Can you please repeat the quote about the morally Europe versus Orthodox Russia?"

A: Well, I'm not sure I can. No, I'm not sure I can. He's, what he's doing is describing the West as morally corrupt. And Russian Orthodoxy as incorrupt. This is Putin's argument. "The West is corrupt." In things like gay marriage, and so on. And only Russia is wholly Russian. I'm sorry, I can't quickly find that quote, but the essence is that.

– Hilton asked, "Another–" You are asking very good questions. Which is a way of saying they're difficult for me to answer. Hilton says,

Q: "Would the Russian aristocrats have welcomed a modernist czar position at that time?"

A: Well, I think they might have done because they were prepared to accept Alexander II. I think they would, but I think the czar would've had to have reached out to a wider intellectual middle class. And remember, this is a culturally vibrant Russia. There are plenty. But he would've had to have reached out to the Jewish intellectual community, as well, for example. But yes, they would've done.

– Mayra, "Antisemitism then and now never ending." Absolutely.

Q: "What were the actions taken by Jews?"

A: They weren't involved in the assassination. It's not a Jewish event, is the assassination of the Alexander II.

- "Please write the title of the book you read from." It's simply called- Oh, and somebody's put it there. Well done, thank you, Nicholas. "A People's Tragedy" by Orlando Figes. Not an easy read. It's a heavy read. I'll come- The more recent book, which I can't, I don't- I'm not going to quickly put- It's in a big pile and I'm not sure- Oh, I think it's over there, hang on. The better- The better book now to read is, is the one by Antony Beevor, called "Russia: Revolution and Civil War." It's in bookshops, both sides of the Atlantic. It's available on Amazon. "Russia: Revolution and Civil War" by Antony Beevor. This is a- I think I would put my neck out and say it surpasses Orlando Figes's "The Russian Revolution." Beevor writes extremely well. This is with the latest research. I have no hesitation in recommending "Russia: Revolution and Civil War" by Antony Beevor. It's on my, one of my lists. Now I've lost you all. And I've got to get back to where I was.

- Here we are. Oh, I haven't answered that. Yep. Oh, the Ed- Thank you, Anita, for answering Betty's question. "The Education of Hyman Kaplan" by Leo Rosten.

Q: "What about eugenics proponents in Eng-" That's at Beverly. "What about the eugenics proponents in England and America regarding new immigrants who are having so many children?"

A: That's a different issue. Quite a different issue. And involves other 19th century thinking. I'm not going there.

Q: "Were Russian Jews conscripted into the army?"

A: Yes, but all these questions, Trudy will deal with tomorrow.

- "It's worth watching 'The Last Czars' on Netflix, says Hazel, which I have not done.

- "Civil war and emancipation did not end black racism. For decades, it continued with Jim Crow laws, lynchings and pogroms. And that there were many paths closed to Jews eyeing medical school." Yes, all of that is true. So Michael and Karen are saying. Yes, that is true. Mine was a rather broad brush attempt to make a distinction between Russia and America. If we were to do this as a university seminar-style course, then we would have to go into it in much greater depth, and you would have to look at the position Jews faced, problems Jews faced in America. They did not face the same problems as they faced in Russia in the 1880s. That simply wouldn't be true. It is true that the South rejected the end of the Civil War. All of that is true, but I was talking about Europe. Yeah, I mean, there is a distinction between European, incorporated into Russia and European immigrants, as opposed

to black slaves, who continue to live- We know about that. And I did say that some of the issues in America have come forth once again. And we are living in extraordinary difficult times, that a leading British newspaper can, at the weekend, publish an article on, "Is Civil War Coming Again to America?" Well, no, I don't think it is. But will America stay as one country is a very interesting question. I've always, over the last 10, 15 years doubted it can. But I won't go down that path. I'm glad this is done by Zoom, on occasion, so that you can't get at me, physically.

- Yeah, "Asians were treated badly in America." That is true. But that's not, yeah, that is- I can't deny that.

- How do you spell "Vickers?" I can't think for a moment where, where the word "Vickers" comes from because- Do you mean Figs? F-I-G-E-S, the man who wrote, "People's Tragedy?" I'm not- Oh, somebody's answered and said that. Yeah, that's lovely. Beverly, "This is what every educator loves. At the end of the book, Hyman Kaplan ends his final assignment by saying, 'I don't care if I don't pass. I love the class.'" Yeah, it's a fantastic book.

Q: "Many of the nobility knew the system could not go on. Did any of them leave for western European countries?"

A: No, not until it was too late.

- Hindi, "Olga and her Polish husband ended up in Toronto, and are buried in cemetery in our area, in a Russian section. She worked as a nurse."

Q: "What was czar's attitude to the emergence of America?"

A: I don't think he had an- I don't think they had a view about America. It was too far away for him to think about.

- Yes, Puti- You're absolutely right, Merna. Putin has compared himself to Peter the Great.

- Ralph, that's another good question. You are being top, top people tonight. I wish I was.

Q: "Were the Jews who immigrated from Russia proportionally larger than other groups who immigrated, or was this a part of a more general exit?"

A: No, I think they were larger. "And they moved for social, religious and economic reasons." Yes, all of those. Yes, no, I- But you see, when we talk about Russian Jews, we're also talking, at this date, about Polish Jews, Lithuanian Jews, Latvian Jews, Estonian Jews, all of whom were Russian. And where there were large Russian populations.

- Oh, Susan, you've told me something here. Oh, that is wonderful! I love this group. I learn something every time. "'The Education of Hyman Kaplan' by Leo Rosten. He was married to a sister of the anthropologist, Margaret Mead." I did not know that. What an extraordinary piece of information! Susan, you're a genius.

- Joseph,

Q: "If revolution was catalysed by the reactionary policies of Alexander III, can we make an analogy with the reactionary policies of Putin? Where is the current opposition to the repression of Putinism? Of course there is an opposition, Navalny, but can you see for--"

A: No, what I see is an even more right wing vicious rule in Russia if Putin is to die of natural causes, which is, one of the right-wing generals will take over. One of them this week says they will not be aiming at the beginning of World War III to drop bombs on Berlin or Paris, but drop them directly on London. Because they see Anglo-American policy as the most aggressively anti-Russian policy that exists in the world. Were linked with America, but London's an easier target, in terms of distance, if only that, to American- 8-5-0-9-2-2, I love this. I just can't help thinking, but you're a prisoner in Alcatraz who's listening. 'Cause I haven't gone a name.

Q: "What was the attitude of the hundred thousand court Jews during Alex and Nicholas's reign?"

A: That's a question which I know Trudy will love to answer because she's into the issue about court Jews. She'll talk about that.

- "Some people--" Well, thanks very much. People have been saying nice things. Remind me how much I have to owe some of you for writing nice things. I understand that's what people do on blogs. They pay people to say nice things, but I assure those of you who have sat there thinking, "I wish he'd shut up," I do not pay anyone to write anything.

Q: "Do you agree that we living in a democracy are fed with a lot of propaganda?"

A: Yes, and it's got worse because of the Internet. It is really important that we look at our school education, as well as adult education, and university education, in terms of making people alive to the issues of propaganda. It's not as simple as when many of us were young. We've got to be a lot more, a lot more careful in how we prepare children. And I don't think we're- I don't know about America or Canada or where else, or Israel, where you're living. I don't think we're very good in Britain at doing that.



- Yeah,

Q: "Do you think the Russian people saw a democratic system as something Western, thus rather replace the czar with another autocrat in the form of Lenin?"

A: Oh, Romi, that's such a good question. Yes, I think that the answer has to be they do see democracy as Western. But whether the second part follows on, I don't know that it does.

- Angela's written a lovely reply about why the family went Hall. I love that. Angela, that's fantastic! She writes, "The tenements of New York were less inviting than the breezes from the Hum." The River Hum. I think that's a- That's a fantastic answer to me. That put me in my place. Thank you very much, that's really clever.

- Judith writes something important. "My dad encountered antisemitism in Canada, but there is nothing compared to what he escaped from in Russia." Now, I'm assuming that your dad left Russia during Stalin's time. And that was just as dreadful, if not more dreadful.

- So this is- Abigail writes, "I think you would appreciate the book, 'The Dawn: Political Teachings of the Book of Esther.'" Because I went to an evangelical Christian public school here, we actually did study the Book of Esther, and I'm trying desperately to remember it. "Apparently, Mordecai's resistance to Haman's ascension is his understand- Now the power transferred from the group around the king directly to a single voice with no others allowed." Yeah, I, there's, I- It's a long time ago since I read the Book of Esther, I'm afraid. And I'm not- I don't think I know enough to be able to comment any further than that.

- Is there anybody else? I think I've probably got to the end. I think I've exhausted you today.

- [Judi] Okay.

- Thanks a- William, that was outstanding. Thank you for a fantastic presentation. It's so interesting, so stimulating, and so in keeping with what's going on right now. It puts everything in perspective, as you quite rightly likely said. Thank you.

- Thank you. Thanks very much, that's nice of you.

- Thank, thanks. Thanks, William, that was excellent. And just to say to all our participants, in 45 minutes, we have, we are doing, um- Who are we having, Judi? I know it's on current affairs.

- [Judi] Robert Fox.

- Robert Fox. He'll be dealing with current affairs. So we will see you all at 2:30. Thank you very, very much, everyone. And thanks, William.

- Thanks. See you soon, take care.

- And tune into Trudy tomorrow about Jews in Russia in this period.

- Absolutely.

- Then you will find out a lot more.

- Find out about all our relatives! Thank you so much.

- Take care.

- Bye-Bye.

- [Judi] Bye.

- Thanks, Judi.

- Thanks, bye-bye.