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The Man Who Maybe Sparked a Revolution

Mikhail Rodzianko is credited as the man who persuaded Nicholas II to abdicate. A century later, his descendants struggle with his legacy.

By Howard Amos

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Yevgeny Tonkonogy

In an attempt to calm his country's spreading revolutionary turmoil, Nicholas II, Russia's last tsar, sent a telegram on March 15, 1917, announcing his abdication.

It was addressed to Mikhail Rodzianko, a senior courtier, speaker of the imperial parliament, the Duma, and a prominent advocate of constitutional reform.

"There is no sacrifice I would not make for the sake of the true well-being and salvation of our

Mother Russia. For that reason, I am prepared to renounce the throne," Nicholas II wrote.

Weeks before the decision, it was Rodzianko who had warned Nicholas II that the situation in Petrograd, the wartime name for St. Petersburg, Russia's imperial capital, was spiraling out of control amid mass demonstrations, strikes, and mutiny in the armed forces.

A hundred years later, as Russia marks the centennial of the tsar's abdication, Rodzianko's great-grandson, Alexis Rodzianko, still lives with the actions of his famous ancestor.

Living with a legacy

Modern-day conservatives and nationalists blame "traitors" for the events of 1917 that led to the destruction of the Russian Empire — and Rodzianko is one of their targets.

"It's almost like the man is still alive and they are still arguing with him," says Alexis Rodzianko, now head of the American Chamber of Commerce in Moscow. "There are people who consider our family to be beyond the pale to this day. That's why it's so ambiguous. People are still living it."

Alexis Rodzianko says he often reads online attacks against his family. Social snubs are also common: he was not invited to a recent high-profile conference on the February Revolution organized by the Orthodox Church in Moscow's Christ the Savior Cathedral.

The abdication of Nicholas II was the culmination of the 1917 February Revolution (although it now falls in March, with Russia's adoption of the Gregorian calendar). After Nicholas II stepped down, a provisional government emerged, only to be swept away in November when Vladimir Lenin's Bolsheviks seized power and began to carve out a Communist state.

Alexis Rodzianko, who was brought up in the United States after his parents emigrated there following World War II, said there was always lots of talk in the family home, particularly between his grandparents, about the revolution and its consequences.

"It was a hot topic for them," he says. "One of the very first things I remember were some of the animated discussions about the revolution and events in Russia."

The "only person who told the tsar the truth"

Mikhail Rodzianko, known for his rotund physique and deep bass voice, was from an old Russian aristocratic family and owned large estates near Poltava in modern-day Ukraine. He was appointed speaker of the Duma in 1911. Though a loyal monarchist, he had a difficult relationship with Nicholas II and he took a leading role in criticizing the imperial family over the influence of the scandalous holy man Rasputin, who Nicholas II's wife believed could manage her son's hemophilia.

But the relationship between the two men took on immense significance for Russia's future during the events of the February Revolution.

Rodzianko was one of the few people close to the tsar to warn him repeatedly that the situation in Petrograd was reaching a crisis point. On February 28, a week before the escalation of demonstrations that would lead to the revolution, Rodzianko sent a dire

warning. "We are approaching the twelfth hour and we are too close to the moment when appeals to the people's reason will be late and useless," he told the tsar in a letter, according to the website project1917.ru, which is marking the revolution's centennial by re-telling events in real time on social networks, using excerpts from diaries, letters, and memoirs.

On March 12, three days before the tsar would resign, Rodzianko wrote, "Anarchy in the capital. Government paralyzed. Transport of food and fuel completely disorganized. Public disaffection growing. Chaotic shooting on the streets. Army units fire at each other," according to an account in the book "The Russian Revolution" by U.S. historian Richard Pipes.

Nicholas II, who was away from the capital, repeatedly disregarded Rodzianko.

Pipes recounts how, on March 13, in response to another message, Nicholas II remarked, "That fat fellow Rodzianko has again written me all kinds of nonsense which I shan't even bother to answer."

But just two days later, with his train stranded in the city of Pskov because of strikes, Nicholas II was persuaded to step aside by his generals, who had also been briefed by Rodzianko on the situation.

Alexis Rodzianko says that, according to family legend, shortly after his abdication, Nicholas II acknowledged that he should have heeded the warnings and said: "At the end of the day the only person who told me the truth was Rodzianko."

An awkward anniversary

The centennial of the revolution and the fall of Nicholas II, who was murdered by the Bolsheviks with his family the following year, is an uncomfortable event for the Kremlin, which prefers to emphasize more triumphant episodes in Russian history. There are few official events planned to mark the anniversary.

"It's a confusing event for Russia and the Russian population," says Alexis Rodzianko. "There are still a lot of different viewpoints: Was it a step forward? A national tragedy? The end of Russian history? It's not clear."

For Mikhail Rodzianko — who always maintained he wanted to see Russia evolve into a constitutional monarchy like Britain — the collapse of tsarism was a tragedy.

"His reaction [to the abdication] was that it was the end. And it was — for him. His actual influence and ability to do anything was eliminated," says Alexis Rodzianko of his great-grandfather. "He also understood that the minute the abdication happened and the provisional government was set up, he would be cursed forever. He had that very clearly in his mind and he was right."

As the cause of the conservative Whites in the Civil War collapsed and the Communists consolidated control, Mikhail Rodzianko left Russia with his family in 1920. One of his sons was shot by the Bolsheviks in Kiev in 1918, another emigrated to Paris. A third son, Alexis Rodzianko's grandfather, lived in Serbia until the arrival of the Red Army at the end of World War II, when, fearing for his life, he fled with his family first to Germany, and then to the U.S.

The statesman himself died in Serbia in 1924, apparently in poverty. According to great-grandson Alexis, he remained tormented by his role during those decisive 1917 days: "His great pain was 'Did I do everything I could to prevent this revolution?'"

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