

On Centenary, Russian State and Orthodox Church at Odds Over Romanovs

Russians are still processing the executions of Tsar Nicholas II and his family a century ago.

By [Evan Gershkovich](#)

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A procession in Moscow on Tuesday commemorated the centenary of the Tsar's death. **Evan Gershkovich**

Inside a monastery in central Moscow on Tuesday morning, a dozen men clad in all black stood next to banners depicting Jesus and Tsar Nicholas II. Although the sun had not yet reached its peak, the men, members of the Union of Orthodox-Banner Bearers, had already begun to sweat.

“We wear black so as not to distract from these saintly figures,” explained Leonid

Simonovich-Nikschich, the group's founder and leader, as he motioned to the banners. "The focus is meant to be on them, not us."

The group of Russian Orthodox nationalists had congregated to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the murders of the tsar, his wife and their five children. Made saints by the Church in 2000, the Romanov family — part of a dynasty that ruled Russia for 300 years — has since become a fulcrum symbol of traditional Orthodox values.

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Some, like the Orthodox nationalists, go a step further. To the so-called "tsar worshippers," Nicholas II was not just a martyr, but a Jesus-like figure. "Like Christ," as Simonovich-Nikschich put it, "he suffered for the Russian people."

Along with Orthodox priests, some 100 worshippers and a smattering of representatives of other nationalist organizations, the gathering circled a small church in the center of the Andronikov Monastery, singing hymns and stopping occasionally for the priests to bless them with holy water.

"One hundred years after their deaths, there is a new Russian Orthodox civilization beginning," Sergei Moiseyev, one among the group said to the crowd. "And in Moscow, a multicultural city, we are still small, but our goal is to eventually grow out of the boundaries of this monastery."

Indeed, the gathering was only a fraction compared to the overnight procession in Yekaterinburg, the site of the executions the night of July 17, 1918. There, over 100,000 people led by the head of the Orthodox Church Patriarch Kirill [marched](#) from the city center — where Bolshevik revolutionaries executed the family by firing squad — to a monastery at Ganina Yama — where some of the bodies were disposed.

Yet outside of the Urals city, commemorations were more muted. And conspicuously, the Kremlin had not planned any official ceremonies.

"The state doesn't see the family in the same way the Church does," Ksenia Luchenko, a journalist and author on the Russian Orthodox Church, told The Moscow Times.

While Vladimir Putin aspires to project the image of a strong leader and admires some of the Romanovs like Alexander Nevsky or Alexander III, she said, the president thinks of Nicholas II's rule as unsuccessful and his end weak. "Putin sees Nicholas and his family essentially as having laid down and waited to die," Luchenko said.

The difference in views has been most publicly seen through an impasse over the authenticity of the remains of the family's bodies. Although the question had been considered settled by the state after a 14-year investigation, the Church in 2015 pushed for the investigation to be re-opened.

“The Church felt it wasn’t fully involved in the first investigation,” said Luchenko. “And to save face, the Investigative Committee said it would let the Church take a bigger part in the investigation this time around.”

Related article: [Investigators Confirm Authenticity of Tsar Nicholas II’s Body from Burial Site](#)

Yet on the eve of the anniversary, the government [announced](#) that its new probe had confirmed once again that the bodies were the Romanovs’. The Church, in turn, said it will take the findings into account during its own ongoing investigation.

“If you asked me before the Investigative Committee’s announcement if there was a battle between the Church and the state, I would have said no,” said Luchenko. “I still don’t think there’s a direct conflict, but there clearly are some disagreements.”

For Roman Lunkin, director of the Center for the Study of Religion and Society, a state-run institute, the Church stands to gain from not accepting the Investigative Committee’s findings.

“Despite the fact that scientists are sure that these remains are those of the family, the Church cannot accept this,” he said.

If the Church accepts the findings, Lunkin continued, then there would no longer be an aura of “holiness” around them: they would seem like normal people.

“They would just be regular bones,” Lunkin said.

Lev Gudkov, director of the independent Levada Center pollster, suspects that underlying the resistance to closure is a political agenda.

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“The Orthodox Church is exploiting their deaths to push forward its own political position,” he said. “It is trying to solidify its role as the ideologue of morality in the country, and advance the view that a monarchical tsar, getting his mandate from God, would not be beholden to society.”

That, for the members of the Union of Orthodox-Banner Bearers, would be ideal. “Russia isn’t France or Belgium,” explained Simonovich-Nikschich. “We have a different mentality — democracy just doesn’t work for us. Both democracy and communism have not brought us anything positive.”

Gudkov, though, pointed out that a majority of Russians do not support a return to monarchy. Galina, 63, from just outside Moscow was apparently among them. In the capital for business, she had ambled into the monastery because it looked beautiful and peaceful and didn’t even know it was the anniversary.

“I’ve read about him,” she said. “I think he was pretty incompetent and it’s his fault we got the revolution. If there was a different tsar, we wouldn’t have had the Soviet Union.”

If there is common ground between the Church and state, over the Romanovs, Lunkin says, it is in their rejection of communism.

“Both the government and the Church are engaged in a process of revisionist history for their benefit,” said Lunkin. “And because, unlike Ukraine or Poland, where communist symbols like statues of Lenin have been taken down, we haven’t really had a vigorous, analogous process of decommunization, reviving the family has served both church and state in an effort to say communism wasn’t great.”

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It has arguably worked. [According](#) to local Yekaterinburg authorities, the first annual march in 2002 drew only 2,000 people. And in a recent [survey](#) by the state-run VTsIOM pollster, a majority of respondents said they considered the executions of the tsar and his family a “monstrous and unjustified crime.”

Ultimately, says Luchenko, the Romanovs serve the Church best in its push to return Russia to traditional values. “You have these beautiful daughters, this classic father figure, this tight family — it has all the archetypes the Church is looking for,” she said.

Indeed, that image is precisely what seduced Nikolai Zhuravlev, a 27-year-old member of the Union of Orthodox-Banner Bearers. “I remember when I was a kid I opened a history book and I saw this photo of him,” Zhuravlev said. “There was something beautifully godly in him and he made a big impression on me.”

“I wasn’t raised a Christian,” he continued, “but Nicholas, from heaven, helped bring me to the Orthodox, monarchical, traditional-values worldview.”

Whatever one’s view of the tsar, Zhuravlev believes there’s one thing all Russians — indeed, any person — should be able to agree on. “Shouldn’t any normal person understand that it is awful to kill unarmed people, especially children?” he said. “They didn’t need to be killed.”

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