



Ganina Yama. Photo:  
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CLOUD OF WITNESSES

## Contested Bones

Xenia Loutchenko

Translated by Vera Winn

In the woods about a half-hour's drive from Yekaterinburg, Russia, is a gentle depression covered with moss and grass, its slope smoothed over by time. It is the site of an abandoned mine shaft, surrounded by a wooden-roofed causeway. The gilded domes and crosses of Holy Royal Martyrs Monastery emerge through the foliage, located about four kilometers from Porosenkov Log. This depression in the earth, today known as Ganina Yama, is the sacred center of the monastery, the reason for its construction, and a powerful draw for hundreds of thousands of pilgrims from all over Russia.

On the night of July 16, 1918, eleven bodies were thrown into Ganina Yama—the former Tsar Nikolai Alexandrovich

Romanov, his wife Alexandra Feodorovna, their four daughters, their son Alexei, royal family doctor Yevgeny Botkin, footman Aloisy Trupp, cook Ivan Kharitonov, and maid Anna Demidova. Over the course of years, various search teams discovered ashes, burnt pieces of clothing, heels, jewelry, bullets—and, on the icy bottom of the mine, the corpse of the Grand Duchess Anastasia's dog Gemma.

Unlike Ganina Yama, which is included in all tourist routes, the toponym "Porosenkov Log"—the name of a notorious field not far from the monastery—is unknown even on Google Maps. If you ask the monks how to get to there, they tell you that you can't go to this place, that it is rotten and diabolical. While they acknowledge that

some say that the holy royal martyrs were actually buried in Porosenkov Log, the monks claim that people who believe this story usually meet a terrible fate. Some die in accidents, some go mad, some become paralyzed. The monks maintain that there are no remains at Porosenkov Log, that it's all a forgery, that the Tsar and his family were burned in Ganina Yama.

Nevertheless, if you use geolocation coordinates, drive along a deserted highway, and ask the residents, you can find the site where, in 1991, a group of researchers extracted seven hundred bones and bone fragments, along with three bullets and fragments of bottles that once held sulfuric acid. The researchers identified the bones as the remains of the royal family and their servants, and assembled them into nine skeletons. Two were missing: Tsarevich Alexei and Grand Duchess Maria. In 1998, the remains were buried in Saints Peter and Paul Cathedral in Saint Petersburg.

In 2007, the mystery of the two missing victims was solved. Not far from where the other Romanovs were discovered, archaeologists found the almost completely burned remains of the tsarevich and the grand duchess. After the government's Investigative Committee concluded its examination, the remains were placed in a safe in the State Archives of the Russian Federation.

### **“They Looked Like They Were Alive”**

When one visits Porosenkov Log today, there is total silence. The heavy railroad ties under which the bodies were found are topped with a large metal cross and a stone. The inscription on the stone says: “Here lie the remains of the Imperial Family and those loyal to them who were killed on July 17, 1918, in Yekaterinburg, and

were hidden here from people.” Like Ganina Yama, the site is surrounded by birch trees, but no monastery bells ring, no prayers are chanted, and the only sounds are from chirping birds.

The real history, as best it can be reconstructed today, is as follows. While executing the Romanovs and those loyal to them, the team of Ural Bolsheviks led by Yakov Yurovsky was in a great hurry. The White Army was about to enter Yekaterinburg. Yurovsky and his confederates did not have instructions from the central authorities (a telegram from Lenin ordering the regicide was never found). Yet it was out of the question to spare the Romanovs' lives—let alone leave their bodies for veneration—or to leave any witnesses to the execution.

After murdering the family and their servants, they loaded the corpses onto a truck, took them to the abandoned Chetyrekhbratsky mine (better known as Ganina Yama), and pitched them down the shaft. Instead of disappearing into the water, however, the bodies fell onto a layer of ice. The executioners threw grenades into the pit but the shaft did not collapse and the bodies were not destroyed. So they pulled the remains back out.

According to Isai Rodzinsky and Mikhail Medvedev, who were members of the massacre squad: “When those who had been executed were pulled with ropes by the legs from the water to the surface and laid in a row on the grass, it became clear how carelessly we had buried them. Ready-made ‘miraculous relics’ lay in front of us: the icy water of the mine not only completely washed away the blood, but also froze the bodies so much that they looked as if they were alive. A blush even appeared on the faces of the Tsar, the girls, and the women. Undoubtedly, the

Romanovs could have been preserved in such excellent condition in a mine refrigerator for more than one month, and only a few days remained before the fall of Yekaterinburg.”<sup>1</sup>

For a long time, the firing squad crew did not sleep or eat. They panicked. They did not have a plan. Yakov Yurovsky’s written account under-



Bolshevik revolutionary Peter Zakharovich Ermakov at Porosenkov Log, posing atop the grave of the Tsar and his family. Photo c 1920.

scores how nervous the murderers were. They fell from their horses; their carts were falling apart; they unexpectedly collided with local peasants. They would start digging holes and then abandon them. On the third day after the massacre, they managed to take the remains away, along the Koptyakovskaya road, but the truck got stuck. Finally, as Yurovsky documented, they “laid the corpses in the pit, doused them with sulfuric acid both for unrecognizability and in order to prevent the stench. The pit was shallow, so we threw on dirt, brushwood, and railroad ties, and drove the truck several times on top of it. As a result, no traces of the pit were left.” The site of this burial was Porosenkov Log.

#### **Skeleton No. 4**

The bodies were left undisturbed until 1978, when, with the permission of the

Soviet government, filmmaker Geliy Ryabov and local historian Alexander Avdonin conducted a search and discovered the remains. Yet they had to keep their discovery a secret until the beginning of perestroika in 1989. Two years later, the remains were exhumed.

For the next seven years, forensic scientists conducted dozens of examinations on the remains, including micro-osteological, forensic dental, traceological, ballistic, and anthropological tests. Molecular genetic examinations were carried out at Britain’s central forensic laboratory in Aldermaston and at the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory in Washington, D.C. It was in Aldermaston that geneticist Alec Jeffries had first developed the techniques of genetic fingerprinting and DNA profiling that are now used worldwide in forensic science.

All these studies, along with historical and archival research conducted as part of the investigation into the murder of the Romanov family and their servants, confirmed the authenticity of the remains of nine people: Tsar Nicholas II, his wife Alexandra Feodorovna, their three daughters, and four servants. Russian molecular geneticist Yevgeny Rogaev independently examined blood samples from Tikhon Nikolaevich Kulikovskyy-Romanov, the son of Nicholas II’s sister Olga Alexandrovna. A comparative analysis revealed a complete match of the mitochondrial DNA sequences with the bone tissue of skeleton No. 4 from the burial site in Porosenkov Log. Scientists have suggested that skeleton No. 4 belonged to Nicholas. A comparative analysis of the DNA of his brother, Grand Duke George Alexandrovich, also showed a complete match, including a rare genetic mutation.

<sup>1</sup> Natalia Rozanova, *Царственные стратотерцицы: Посмертная судьба* (Moscow: Варриус, 2008), 150.

## Memorial for the Unknown

In January 1998, the State Commission for Issues Related to the Study and Reburial of the Remains of the Russian Emperor Nicholas II and Members of His Family, chaired by Boris Nemtsov, decided by majority vote to bury the remains in Saint Petersburg's Peter and Paul Cathedral. A minority opposed the decision: Metropolitan Yuvenaly of Kolomna, who represented the Russian Orthodox Church on the commission, refused to recognize the veracity of the scientific findings. Thus, when Nicholas II and his family were finally buried, eighty years after their execution, Patriarch Alexy II refused to officiate and banned bishops from participating in the funeral. The cathedral priest used a formula ordinarily reserved for unknown soldiers: "You, Lord, know their names."

Boris Yeltsin and his wife attended the funeral. He had a personal connection to the story. As First Secretary of the Sverdlovsk Regional Committee of the CPSU, Yeltsin had carried out the Politburo Resolution of July 30, 1975, to raze the Ipatiev House in Yekaterinburg, where the Imperial Family had been held under house arrest for seventy-eight days before being murdered.

The reason behind this resolution was simple. Every year, on the anniversary of the death of the Imperial Family, people were coming to the Ipatiev House to light candles and offer prayers. The authorities saw these visits as "anti-Soviet activity." The solution was easy: no Ipatiev House, no problem.

Twenty years after the Ipatiev House was demolished, Yeltsin did everything he could to atone for what he had done and to bury the Romanovs with all due honors in their family tomb.

## No One Will Ever Know

It is highly unlikely that we will ever find out what happened in the summer of 1998, when the Russian Orthodox Church refused to recognize the authenticity of the remains even though the state commission answered all its questions except one: the fate of the remains of the missing two family members, Alexei and Maria. Boris Nemtsov, Boris Yeltsin, and Patriarch Alexy are dead, and Metropolitan Yuvenaly remains silent. The Church's denial of the remains has turned into a quagmire that the deniers could hardly have foreseen.

Two years later, on August 15, 2000, the Russian Orthodox Church announced the canonization of Nicholas II and his immediate family as martyrs, for their "humbleness, patience, and meekness" during their imprisonment and execution by the Bolsheviks. This decision was not unanimous, and many openly spoke out against it. But there were serious reasons behind the canonization. The Russian Orthodox Church wanted to reunite with the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad, which had canonized the last Tsar as a saint in 1981. This was a first step toward unification.

Moreover, spontaneous popular veneration of the murdered royal family was gaining momentum. In 1996, in the former village of Taininskoye, situated nineteen kilometers northeast of Moscow, a monument to Nicholas II by Vyacheslav Klykov was consecrated. Some Russian priests began to serve the "Rite of Nationwide Repentance for the Sin of Regicide." Apparently, the Church hierarchs decided that if they couldn't block the process, they should lead it.

In the fall of 2000, immediately after the canonization, a monastery was

founded in Ganina Yama. Hegumen Sergius, who ironically bears the surname Romanov, initiated its construction and became the monastery's first abbot. Before becoming a monk, Romanov had served thirteen years in a prison colony for murder. It is said that when he was an abbot of Ganina Yama, there were many former prisoners among the monks and staff.

### “Do Not Look for My Grave”

Many people from the Ural region entertain unusual religious ideas. For centuries, the Orthodoxy that spread here during the Russian colonization of Siberia coexisted with powerful sects of Old Believers who escaped Russian authorities and settled in the Urals. Even though most of the Old Believers merged into Soviet society, they still

Monument to Nicholas II designed by Vyacheslav Klykov, Taininskoye, Russia, under construction in 1996.



consider their religion true and official Russian Orthodoxy false. They also exercise various informal spiritual practices, are prone to archaic mysticism, and are often socially mobile. The radical *tsarebozhie* doctrine, according to which Nicholas II is the redeemer of the sins of the Russian people and Russia is the Kingdom of God on earth, holding back the whole world from falling to the Antichrist, spread through the Ural region like a virus. Networks of secret monastic communities and alternative priests germinated in parallel with the creation of a new cult around the “Royal Passion-Bearers” by the official Yekaterinburg diocese.

The Yekaterinburg diocese established annual “Tsar’s Days” to commemorate the Royal Martyrs in mid-July. The main event is a Divine Liturgy celebrated on the anniversary of the regicide in the Church on Blood, built on the site of the Ipatiev House. At the end of this Liturgy, tens of thousands of pilgrims from all over the country take part in a twenty-one-kilometer Cross procession to Holy Royal Martyrs Monastery in Ganina Yama. In the summer of 2017, sixty thousand people participated in this event. The procession does not go to the Porosenkov Log, though sometimes priests who recognize the authenticity of the remains serve there and members of the public lay flowers.

For the official Church, the belief of *tsarebozhniki* that Nicholas II made an atoning sacrifice for the entire Russian people akin to Jesus’s atonement for the sins of mankind is heresy. But the veneration of the Tsar’s family is not limited to the *tsarebozhniki*. The image of a sinless family—a strong, handsome father, a mother of five children, angelically innocent daughters in white dresses, and a handsome boy—elicits sympathy for the monarchy and an emphatic response from the majority of Orthodox

Christians. Because these royal saints lived comparatively recently, their photographs, personal belongings, letters, and diaries kindle the public's empathy and curiosity. At the same time, they lived just long enough ago to be a part of an irrevocably gone "golden age." The royal family is loved, their memory is honored, and their icons grace almost every church.

The Church's denial of the remains' authenticity has actually nurtured the veneration of the Tsar's family, and not only among the *tsarebozhniki*. Ironically, rather than accepting the existence of the relics, believers prefer the idea of the saints' absence from earth. Perhaps they entertain the notion that, just like Jesus and his mother, the Tsar and his dear ones ascended to heaven without leaving any traces of their material bodies. Many cite some elder who allegedly said, "Do not look for the remains. They were all destroyed at Ganina Yama." There is a rumor that this message was given to such an elder by Nicholas II himself in a "spiritual dream."

Associated with this popular veneration are various conspiracy theories, rooted in a distrust of authorities such as Yeltsin and Nemtsov and biased interpretations of historical sources. One of the most prominent conspiracy theorists is the historian Pyotr Multatuli, who claims that the ritual murder of the Tsar's family was committed by Jews. He alleges that the White Guard investigator Nikolai Sokolov found Kabbalistic signs on the walls of the basement of the Ipatiev House.

For nine years, there had been a silent consensus: the state and secular society have believed that the last Russian Tsar and his family were buried in the Peter and Paul Cathedral, while the Church and the laity have not recognized this

burial and revere Ganina Yama as the martyrs' last earthly resting place.

### Time for Closure

In the 1990s, geneticists worked only with mitochondrial DNA, but in the 2000s, they learned how to isolate the Y chromosome, which enabled them to trace familial relationships through both female and male lines.

The laboratories that studied the royal remains kept samples from the first burial. In the summer of 2007, the remains of Alexei and Maria were finally exhumed and scientists examined them using newer technologies. Evgeny Rogaev and Nikolai Yankovsky from the Institute of General Genetics of the Russian Academy of Sciences; Michael Coble, Director of Research of the U.S. Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory; and specialists from Innsbruck Medical University worked on this project in parallel. In the end, geneticists and forensic scientists had no doubts that the remains of the last Romanovs were genuine. Yet the Church still hesitated, and postponed a decision on the burial of Alexei and Maria for several years.

Unlike Yeltsin, Vladimir Putin has no personal sentiments about Nicholas II. He was not his type. In his 2009 comment on the first Russian passion-bearers Boris and Gleb, the Russian President clearly expressed his attitude: "They gave everything up without a fight. For us, they are not good examples. They just did nothing but waited to be killed." Putin is not interested in the last Tsar from a political perspective either. His personal pantheon includes figures such as Vladimir Krasno Solnyshko, Alexander Nevsky, and Alexander III. A quiet family man killed by the Chekists' death squad does not inspire him. Even so, further

delaying the burial made no sense. It was time to close this issue.

By the order of Prime Minister Sergei Prikhodko, an interdepartmental working group “on issues related to the study and reburial of the remains of Tsarevich Alexei and Grand Duchess Maria Romanov” was established. The group announced plans to bury the remains on October 18, 2015. Later, however, they informed the public that the investigation had been postponed indefinitely because the remains required more scrupulous examination.

Meanwhile, the Moscow Patriarchate established a commission to study of the examination results, headed by Metropolitan Varsonofy of Saint Petersburg. Bishop Tikhon (Shevkunov) of Yegoryevsky was appointed Secretary of the Patriarchal Commission, effectively putting him in charge. Such an appointment was natural; Bishop Tikhon has close ties to the Kremlin and has never compromised himself with “liberalism.” To take the samples for DNA comparison, the remains of Nicholas II, Alexandra Feodorovna, and Alexander III were exhumed in the presence of the clergy.

#### “But We Still Don’t Believe”

The Church’s circus around the royal remains continues, despite scientific evidence confirmed by the Investigative Committee and the government commission. Patriarch Kirill’s refusal to recognize the results of these investigations is increasingly embarrassing. Initially, the Church provided vague answers to the question of why it disputes the remains’ authenticity, but now it simply states, “We do not believe.”

If the Church were to recognize the remains, it could provoke an unpredictable reaction from a significant portion

of its conservative-minded flock. These individuals might tell the Patriarch that he does not represent them. He has already gained a reputation as an “ecumenist” due to his meeting with the Pope. Recognizing the remains would mean serving prayers in the Peter and Paul Cathedral over graves neglected for years. It might also involve displaying the relics for worship and revising the sacred map of Yekaterinburg. Such actions could lead to protests from stubborn believers in the Urals. In a best-case scenario, the Church’s recognition could elicit silent discontent and rumors about the Patriarch’s “apostasy.”

The Patriarchal Commission claims that the Church has not recognized the remains because previous investigations were conducted without church participation, ignoring its questions. Although everything will be different this time, change will come slowly.

The Church apparently needs time to gradually transform unrecognized remains into holy relics in the minds of the flock. When Bishop Tikhon (Shevkunov) gave the first public comments on the Commission’s work at a press conference in the fall of 2015, he expressed doubts about the integrity of the tomb of Alexander III. His remarks demonstrate the Church’s rigorous approach to the case. Appearing alongside the bishop as an “expert” was Veniamin Alekseyev, the director of the Institute of History and Archeology of the Ural Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences. Alekseyev previously sided with Metropolitan Yuvenaly, who refused to recognize the authenticity of the remains, and has since suggested that perhaps the Grand Duchesses were not killed at all, but escaped to Europe. He also proposes that the remains were not actually burned, and that Tsar Nicholas II’s body was dissolved in hydrochloric acid and then poured into

the River Iset. Alekseyev’s presence with Bishop Tikhon demonstrates that the Church is very apprehensive about research and is willing to examine even the most absurd theories.

### The Last Word

The Commission remained quiet until 2017, the hundredth anniversary of the revolution, when a scandal erupted over the film *Matilda*, which portrayed an affair between Nicholas II and ballerina Matilda Kshesinskaya. The outrage that greeted this film demonstrated what the *tsarebozhniki* are potentially capable of. Forty-two requests were made to the Prosecutor’s Office to ban the movie, leading almost to its failure. “Prayer vigils” were held, though fewer than one hundred people attended.

In July 2017, Bishop Tikhon announced that more and more facts were being discovered, so the investigation would take longer. At the same time, his website Pravoslavie.ru began to publish materials related to the case. For every interview with a scientist examining the remains there was an article by a church conspiracy theorist. Everyone was given a word, and everyone was heard. Their theories were considered and they were patted on the shoulder.

However, the year of the centenary of the murder, when the Tsar’s Days would be especially widely celebrated, was approaching. The Moscow Patriarchate announced that although the examination of the remains was still ongoing, the upcoming Bishops’ Council of the Russian Orthodox Church would discuss the issue of the so-called “Yekaterinburg remains.” On the eve of the council, a conference took place in a luxurious hall in the Sretensky Monastery. It was chaired by Patriarch Kirill and attended by bishops, priests, and laity. For hours,



Poster for *Matilda* (2017), a romanticized portrayal of an affair between Nicholas II and a ballerina, featuring the Russian imperial crown.

they listened to the reports of forensic experts, anthropologists, criminologists, and historians. Two Orthodox TV channels broadcast the event live.

The experts, including senior investigator Marina Molodtsova, patiently answered questions, most of which had already been answered ten or fifteen years ago. The bishops, Multatuli (the historian), Orthodox publicists, and the public asked about rumors of severed heads allegedly brought to Lenin, vivisected bodies, anomalies in the dental remains, and surviving princesses. The proceedings resembled a court, with the clergy acting as plaintiffs, the experts and representatives of the Investigative Committee as defendants, and the Patriarch as judge. Bishop Tikhon served by turns as a prosecutor, by turns as a defense lawyer.

Media coverage focused on part of the conference when the bishop, playing prosecutor, called for an investigation of claims that the regicide was a “ritual murder”—a loaded term that carried anti-Semitic connotations of a Jewish conspiracy. The media omitted the Patriarch’s reaction to an explanation of why a human body could not fully burn under the weather conditions at



Ganina Yama in July 1918. On hearing this, the Patriarch advised the doubters to visit the Indian holy city of Varanasi and see how Hindus burn their dead on dry firewood for ten hours, then cut off the unburned limbs and throw them into the Ganges River.

Judging by the fact that genetic examinations have been repeatedly deferred on the pretense that they are not ready yet, it is unlikely that the Council of

Bishops will make a final decision in the foreseeable future. There will have to be other conferences before the Church finally amends the cult by adding holy relics to it.

Meanwhile, in Yekaterinburg, there will still be two empty pits: Ganina Yama, where the murderers tried to destroy the bodies, and Porosenkov Log, where the Romanovs' remains lay for seventy years. ✱



*Xenia Loutchenko* is a freelance journalist and an expert on religious issues in the Russian media and the role of the media in church-public relations. She graduated from the Department of Journalism of Moscow State University in 2001, and in 2009 defended her doctoral thesis on "The Internet in Information and Communication Activities of Religious Organizations in Russia." Loutchenko is the author of *The Orthodox Internet: Guidebook* (2004), a book on the lives of priests' wives (2012), and dialogues with Priest Sergei Kruglov (2015).

## ANNALS OF HISTORY

# British Monarchy Through the Centuries: A Photo Essay

Michael Berrigan Clark

On a recent trip to England and Scotland, I reflected on the long history of the monarchy and the Church in the land of my forebears, stretching from the sixth century to the present day. The struggle to find the proper relationship between the two has been fraught.

Original Roman and Anglo-Saxon stonework forms the foundation of the tiny church of Saint Martin in Canterbury. The Norman entrance tower and extended nave are the *newest* parts of this gem of early Christian

England. Cut into the ancient stonework in the center of the nave is Saint Bertha's private entrance (marked by her statue) where the princess, who had been sent by the Merovingian dynasty of her homeland to marry the still pagan Aethelbert of Kent, entered to attend services celebrated by the bishop she was allowed to bring with her as a condition of the marriage contract. She was influential in bringing the mission of Saint Augustine (approved by Pope Saint Gregory the Great) to England just before the end of the sixth century.