

NICHOLAS II

(1868–1918), last emperor of Russia.

The future Nicholas II was born at Tsarskoe Selo in May 1868, the first child of the heir to the Russian throne, Alexander Alexandrovich, and his Danish-born wife, Maria Fedorovna. Nicholas was brought up in a warm and loving family environment and was educated by a succession of private tutors. He particularly enjoyed the study of history and proved adept at mastering foreign languages, but found it much more difficult to grasp the complexities of economics and politics. Greatly influenced by his father, who became emperor in 1881 as Alexander III, and by Konstantin Pobedonostsev, one of his teachers and a senior government official, Nicholas was deeply conservative, a strong believer in autocracy, and very religious. At the age of nineteen, he entered the army, and the military was to remain a passion throughout his life. After three years service in the army, Nicholas was sent on a ten-month tour of Europe and Asia to widen his experience of the world.



Nicholas II received his education through a string of private tutors, including a high-ranking government official named Konstantin Pobedonostsev. While Nicholas II excelled in history and foreign languages, ironically, the future leader struggled to comprehend the subtleties of politics and economics. To make matters worse, his father failed to provide him with much training in affairs of state.

In 1894 Alexander III died and Nicholas became emperor. Despite his broad education, Nicholas felt profoundly unprepared for the responsibility that was thrust upon him and contemporaries remarked that he looked lost and bewildered. Within a month of his father's death, Nicholas married; he had become engaged to Princess Alix of Hesse in the spring of 1894 and his accession to the throne made marriage urgent. The new empress, known in Russia as Alexandra, played a crucial role in Nicholas's life. A serious and devoutly religious woman who believed fervently in the autocratic power of the Russian monarchy, she stiffened her husband's resolve at moments of indecision.

The couple had five children, Olga (b. 1895), Tatiana (b. 1897), Maria (b. 1899), Anastasia (b.1901), and Alexei (b. 1904). The birth of a son and heir in 1904 was the occasion for great rejoicing, but this was soon marred as it became clear that Alexei suffered from hemophilia. Their son's illness drew Nicholas and Alexandra closer together. The empress had an instinctive aversion to high society, and the imperial family spent most of their time at Tsarskoe Selo, only venturing into St. Petersburg on formal occasions.

While Nicholas's reign began with marriage and personal happiness, his coronation in 1896 was marked by disaster. Public celebrations were held at Khodynka on the outskirts of Moscow, but the huge crowds that had gathered there got out of hand and several thousand people were crushed to death. That night the newly crowned emperor and empress appeared at a ball, apparently oblivious to the catastrophe. The image of Nicholas II enjoying himself while many of his subjects lay dead gave his reign a sour start.

Who was Nicholas II?

Nikolai Aleksandrovich Romanov was born near St Petersburg on 18 May 1868, the eldest son of **Tsar** Alexander III. When he succeeded his father in 1894, he had very little experience of government. In the same year, Nicholas married Princess Alexandra of Hesse-Darmstadt (a Duchy in Germany).

They had four daughters and a son, Alexis, who suffered from the disease haemophilia.

Alexandra was the dominant personality in their relationship and encouraged the weaker Nicholas's **autocratic** tendencies. He mistrusted most of his ministers and yet was incapable of carrying out the task of ruling the vast Russian empire alone.

Determined that Russia should not be left out in the scramble for colonial possessions, Nicholas encouraged Russian expansion in Manchuria. This provoked war with Japan in 1904. The resulting Russian defeat led to strikes and riots. In January 1905, on 'Bloody Sunday', the army in St Petersburg shot at a crowd demanding radical reforms. Opposition to the tsar grew and Nicholas was forced to grant a constitution and establish a parliament, the **Duma**.

Nicholas's concessions were only limited. Changes were made in the voting laws to prevent the election of radicals and the secret police continued to crush opposition. However, the Duma did give many more people, especially the middle classes, a voice in government.

Nicholas is often considered a weak ruler, far more interested in the welfare of his family. Russia during his reign was a distinctly backwards nation. There was little industrialisation and majority of citizens lived in abject poverty. Nicholas seemed largely blind to these issues in his palaces of gold rooms. Despite this, most Russians did seem to genuinely love him - it was common to have a picture of him hanging in your hut!



Keywords

Tsar - Russian word for King

Duma - Russian parliament under Tsar Nicholas. Very limited power.

Autocratic - Power that is absolute