

My Great Great Uncle's Second Cousin Was A Romanov: How the Modern Romanov
Descendants Are Utilizing the Romanov Name and the Romanov Tomb Controversy

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In 1917, the Romanov dynasty ended after the execution of Tsar Nicholas II and his immediate family by the Bolsheviks.¹ Since their demise 100 years ago, the murder of the Romanovs has been well discussed among scholars, specifically in reference to the identification of the Romanov bodies in the 90s and more recently in the 2000s.² But scholars are certainly not the only ones encapsulated by the death of the last Russian tsar. From rumors about the survival of one of the royal children (either Anastasia or Maria depending on whether you live in the United States or in Russia), to the recent creation of the show *The Romanoffs* on Amazon Prime, the mystery of the Romanov family has definitely been absorbed by popular culture as well.³ The media has also become interested in the Romanovs, most recently because of the Romanov Tomb Controversy, or the discourse between the Russian Orthodox Church and modern Romanov descendants over the burial of the Romanov remains.⁴ The Orthodox Church is not satisfied with the identification process of the remains, while the priority of the Romanov descendants is to see the remains buried as soon as possible.⁵

In this paper, I will examine how the current discourse between the Russian Orthodox Church and the modern Romanovs over the identification of the remains of Nicholas II and his

¹ Edel, Anastasia. "Opinion | The Remains of the Romanovs." *The New York Times*, (2018).

² Richard Stone, "Buried, Recovered, Lost Again? The Romanovs May Never Rest," *Science* 303, no. 5659 (2004): 753 and Michael D. Coble et al., "Mystery Solved: The Identification of the Two Missing Romanov Children Using DNA Analysis," *PLoS One; San Francisco* 4, no. 3 (March 2009): e4838, <http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.lib.davidson.edu/10.1371/journal.pone.0004838>.

³ "The Romanoffs Review: Mad Men Creator's New Show Is Curiously One-Note," *The Independent*, October 11, 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/reviews/the-romanoffs-season-1-episode-1-amazon-prime-matthew-weiner-hajar-a8578016.html>.

⁴ To the best of my knowledge, I have coined the term Romanov Tomb Controversy, but google searching the term does turn up more information on the issue. Here is a more scientific analysis of the controversy, see Michael Hofreiter et al., "Ongoing Controversy over Romanov Remains," *Science* 306, no. 5695 (2004): 407–10.

⁵ Alec Luhn and Hannah Furness, "Let Romanov Family Rest in Peace Together, Says Princess on 100th Anniversary of the Murders Which Shocked the World," July 17, 2018.

immediate family has opened the door for modern Romanov descendants, few of whom actually reside in Russia, to use their relation to the Romanov dynasty as an excuse to interfere with the burial of the Romanov remains. Furthermore, I will show how the Romanov name is being used by modern descendants to influence Russian politics. Finally, I will demonstrate how this attempt to gain influence and interference in Russian politics plays into Vladimir Putin's constructed version of Russian history.

Back during early 1990s, as part of the media coverage of the first official investigation into the identification of 9 bodies purported to be some of the remains of the lost Romanovs began, media sources focused on the death of Grand Duke Vladimir Kirillovich Romanov, the then head of the Romanov family. The Grand Duke was described as someone who had never even "walked on Russian soil," and Western media seemed to jump on the possibility of modern Romanovs reclaiming the throne because of the resurgence of popularity of the lost Romanovs.⁶ This media coverage seems to be the last time that the modern Romanovs were legitimately associated with a second coming of the Russian monarchy. Since then, modern Romanov descendants are usually only mentioned in scholarly writings that are focused on the scientific identification of the Romanov remains, as the DNA of modern descendants has been used by many researchers to identify the bodies purported to be the Romanovs.⁷

⁶ For the quotation, see "Russians Pay Last Respects to Grand Duke: [FINAL Edition]," *Austin American Statesman*; *Austin, Tex.*, April 30, 1992, sec. NEWS. For the Western perspective on the Romanovs reclaiming the throne, see Christian Caryl, "Russian Royalists Harbor Hopes For a Rapid Return of Romanovs," *Forward*; *New York, N.Y.*, March 10, 1995 and Sharon Waxman, "The Royal Road to Democracy; Yugoslavia's Crown Prince, Pitching the Return of Monarchy: [FINAL Edition]," *The Washington Post (Pre-1997 Fulltext)*; *Washington, D.C.*, July 27, 1992, sec. STYLE.

⁷ For examples of modern DNA being used for identification, see Michael D. Coble et al., "Mystery Solved: The Identification of the Two Missing Romanov Children Using DNA Analysis," *PLoS One*; *San Francisco* 4, no. 3 (March 2009): 2, Michael Hofreiter et al. 407, and Stone, 753.

Prior to the Bolshevik Revolution, many members of the imperial family were able to flee from Russia and escape the bloody wrath of the White army. Because of this mass departure from Russia, descendants of the Romanovs live all over the world.⁸ While some descendants do not wish to acknowledge their royal ancestry, some become members of the Romanov Family Association, a UK- based organization that describes itself as “charity that supports Russian emigre institutions” and is dedicated to uniting Romanov descendants from across the globe.⁹ The Romanov Family Association was founded by Prince Dimitri Romanovich Romanoff and his wife, but is now run by Princess Olga Romanoff who took over after Dimitri’s death in 2016. The Association has asserted that they in no way intend on attempting to take back the throne in Russia, yet they sent Princess Olga as a representative to attend memorial services in St. Petersburg as recent as 2017, on the 100th anniversary of the death of Nicholas II and his family.¹⁰ The Association was also involved in gathering Romanovs to attend the first burial of the Romanovs and their descendants in Peter and Paul’s fortress in 1998.¹¹ Princess Olga herself has even made public statements asking for the Russian Orthodox Church to allow the remaining two Romanov bodies that were discovered in 2007 and have yet to be buried to be returned to the tomb with the rest of the bodies.¹² Members of the Romanov Family Association come from across Europe, and few live in Russia or have significant connection to Russian culture besides their connection through the Romanov Family Association. Being a member of the Romanov

⁸ Flora Collins, “Modern Descendants of the Russian Royal Family,” *Town & Country*, October 5, 2016, <https://www.townandcountrymag.com/leisure/arts-and-culture/g2898/royal-squads/>.

⁹ “Romanoff Foundation | A UK Charity,” accessed April 23, 2019, <http://romanoff-foundation.co.uk/>.

¹⁰ Furness and Luhn, “Let Romanov Family Rest in Peace Together, Says Princess on 100th Anniversary of the Murders Which Shocked the World.”

¹¹ “17 July 1998: The Funeral of Tsar Nicholas II,” accessed April 24, 2019, <http://www.romanovfamily.org/funeral.html>.

¹² Furness and Luhn.

Family Association provides a way for Romanov descendants to have an influential voice in the way the remains of the last Romanovs are handled by the Russian government. In 2008, in order to appease the Russian Orthodox Church *and* modern Romanov descendants, Putin himself ordered that the Kremlin do its own investigation into the identity of the remains.¹³ In this way, the Romanov Family Association used their position as modern Romanov descendants to organize and provide themselves with an influential voice in Russia as dispersed family members of the last Russian tsar.

This trend of using the Romanov remains and the especially the Romanov title to one's advantage is more evident in the Imperial House of Russia, a historical association headed by Grand Duchess Maria Vladimirovna of Russia, who lives in Magrid. While the Romanov Family Association has tried to avoid becoming too involved in Russian politics, Grand Duchess Maria has used her title as head of the Imperial House of Russia to insert herself into several Russian political discussions. Maria has claimed Nicholas II to be her "predecessor" even though he is her 1st cousin several times removed and she has no relation to the royal line. She also insists on taking the title of Grand Duchess, even though according to Prince Dimitri of the Romanov Family Association, her relation to the Romanovs only makes her a Princess.¹⁴ According to the laws of succession within the Romanov dynasty, Prince and Princess are less significant roles, reserved for royal relatives more distant from the main line in power, while titles such as Grand Duchess or Duke are designated for children of the tsar.¹⁵ By citing Nicholas II as her

¹³ Fred Weir Correspondent, "Russian Church-State Mystery: Who Is Buried in Romanovs' Tomb?," *Christian Science Monitor*, October 27, 2015, N.PAG.

¹⁴ Dimitri Alexandrovich, "Press Releases by Prince Dimitri," 2009 -2010, accessed April 24, 2019, <http://www.romanovfamily.org/press.html>.

¹⁵ Carolyn Harris, "The Succession Prospects of Grand Duchess Olga Nikolaevna (1895-1918)," *Canadian Slavonic Papers; Edmonton* 54, no. 1/2 (June 2012): 66.

“predecessor” and giving herself a more powerful royal title, Maria has placed herself in the position of being the rightful heir to any potential recurrence of the Russian throne by conflating her relationship to the Romanov dynasty. Maria has also made more and more frequent trips to Russia and frequently writes letters and articles that argue that the royal family should be remembered as martyrs, to the point that they should be rehabilitated under the ruling of the Russian Supreme Court regarding the rehabilitation of victims of “political repression” from the time of 1917.¹⁶ The Supreme Court ruling promised to restore civil rights to those who were persecuted under Soviet rule as well as guarantee compensation for loss of property and other damages suffered by victims of persecution. Grand Duchess Maria believes that the Supreme Court’s denial of rehabilitation benefits for the Romanovs is evidence of a resurgence of “Soviet totalitarianism.”¹⁷ She even brought an appeal against the decision.¹⁸ While the Romanovs were forced to flee the country to avoid the Bolsheviks, most descendants are relatively wealthy and have established their lives in other countries and would not need the benefit of gaining back land and castles in Russia.¹⁹ Furthermore, the Grand Duchess has also issued statements regarding the Romanovs restoration as a monarchy in Russia as a way to honor Russia’s historical heritage. She states in her short biography on the Imperial House of Russia web page,

¹⁶ A.N. Zakatov and G. Iu. Luk’ianov, “A Statement from the Chancellery of the Head of the Russian Imperial House, H.I.H. Grand Duchess Maria Vladimirovna, on the Ruling by the Collegium for Criminal Affairs of the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation That the Holy Royal Passion Bearers,” November 8, 2007, <http://www.imperialhouse.ru/en/interest/rehabilitation/787.html>.

¹⁷ Zakatov and Luk’ianov..

¹⁸ Tony Halpin, “Last Tsar Is Set to Get His Day in Court after 90 Years: [Final 2 Edition],” *The Times; London (UK)*, November 16, 2006, sec. Overseas News.

¹⁹ For examples of wealthy Romanovs, see Flora Collins, “Modern Descendants of the Russian Royal Family,” *Town & Country*, October 5, 2016, <https://www.townandcountrymag.com/leisure/arts-and-culture/g2898/royal-squads/> and Bill Powell and Owen Matthews, “Home at Last,” *Murdered Romanovs’ Controversial Burial* 132, no. 3 (July 20, 1998): 32.

that she does not “wish Monarchy to be imposed on the Russian people against their will”²⁰ In her membership page, Maria also asserts that she is

Always ready to serve her for the people and to use for Russia the whole spiritual and historical potential of the Russian Imperial House. Like [her] Father and [her] Grandfather, the Grand Duchess Maria I Vladimirovna confidently and firmly performs the Royal service handed to her by God, wholly dedicating her life to her beloved Fatherland.²¹

While this quotation was translated from Russian and the tone could be affected by translation, this language still indicates that Maria is attempting to appeal to Russians who believe that Russia would be a better country with a monarchy, which completely disregards the fact that Nicholas II abdicated the throne right before he was murdered.²² Since the fall of the Soviet Union, some Russians are nostalgic for the Russian throne because of the resentment towards the influx of capitalism and other elements of Western culture.²³ The throne and elements of the Soviet Union are seen as authentically Russian, while the democratic and capitalistic society forced on Russia after the end of communism are seen as the demise of Russian culture. Some monarchists believe that Putin could fill this role, but the language within her various statements that allude to her “divine-sanctioned lineage” and passion for the people of Russia frames Maria

²⁰ “Head of the Russian Imperial House, Her Imperial Highness the Grand Duchess (de Jure Her Imperial Majesty the Empress of All Russias) Maria Wladimirovna,” accessed April 24, 2019, <http://www.imperialhouse.ru/en/imperialhouse-en/chipdom/maria.html>.

²¹ “Russian Imperial House - Head of the Russian Imperial House E.I.V. Grand Duchess Maria Vladimirovna,” 2017, accessed April 29, 2019, <http://imperialhouse.ru/rus/imperialhouse/house/maria.html>.

²² Tom Evans, “Putin for EMPEROR: Top Moscow Chief Calls for Vlad to Rule as Supreme Monarch,” *Daily Star (Online); London (UK)*, January 2, 2017, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1855525540/abstract/C4441439F1234C05PQ/4>.

²³ For more information on Russian resentment towards the West, see Svetlana Alexievich, *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets*, trans. Bela Shayevich (Melbourne, Australia: Text Publishing, 2016).

as another potential option for a monarch.²⁴ Grand Duchess Maria has even gone as far as to insert a pictures of herself and her son, Grand Duke George Mikhailovich (not included in pictures), alongside portraits of historical members of the Romanov Dynasty on the Imperial House of Russia Home Page, further associating herself with the direct line of the monarchy, which in reality she has no relation to.²⁵



While the Imperial House of Russia claims that the Romanovs do not believe that they should be given political power, the Grand Duchess's public statements to the Russian people, her inflated title, as well as other articles from the Russian Imperial House that center around Russian current events including support for the annexation of Crimea, all from the outside of Russia certainly seem to indicate that Grand Duchess Maria and other members of the Imperial house wish to have influence over the Russian people.²⁷ Though the Grand Duchess Maria does not focus as much on the Romanov Tomb Controversy as the Romanov Family Association, she still uses her distant relationship to the last tsar of Russia to gain influence over a "Fatherland" that is not her own.

²⁴ Tom Evans, "Putin for Emperor: Top Moscow Chief Calls for Vlad to Rule as Supreme Monarch," *Daily Star (Online)*; London (UK), January 2, 2017, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1855525540/abstract/C4441439F1234C05PQ/4>.

²⁵ Grand Duchess Maria is in the pink dress.

²⁶ Photos come from "Russian Imperial House Home Page." Russian Imperial House, last modified 2017, <http://imperialhouse.ru>.

²⁷ A.N. Zakatov, "The Status of the Russian Imperial House in the Russian Federation," October 8, 2015, <http://www.imperialhouse.ru/en/interest/status/657.html>.

Though it may seem that this outside influence from Romanov descendants could be threatening to Vladimir Putin's grip on the Russian government, Romanov descendants actually can be easily worked into Putin's framing of Russian history. Putin has used Soviet nostalgia to his advantage by altering the Russia's national identity to encompass both the Soviets and Russia's imperial past prior to the Bolshevik Revolution.²⁸ This unification of these extremely conflicting periods of Russian history has helped Putin maintain his popularity as the physical representation of the culmination of Russian history. In order to combine these two modes of Russian civilization, Putin maintained a mostly state controlled economy (similar to the Soviets) early in his presidency to aid Russia's economic crisis that remained from Yeltsin's time in office.²⁹ Today, he uses images of both the Russian Empire and the USSR in propaganda to create the image of unified and powerful Russian State for Russian citizens.³⁰ This method of remembering Russia's past allows for Russian history to be connected seamlessly from the Romanovs Imperial Rule to the Soviets' successes in World War II to Vladimir Putin. Therefore, modern Romanov descendants act as living historical figures that Russians can take pride in. These figures can only influence Russians under Putin's control, only acting as representations of Russia's imperial past, while Putin remains at the helm of the Russian government.

Ultimately, the way the Romanovs have used their relationship to the last Russian dynasty to earn themselves an influential voice in the burial of the remains of the Romanovs, as well as using the Romanov name to affect Supreme Court rulings and other political actions in Russia is an example of how history can be manipulated and used in order to benefit people who

²⁸ Patrick Lawrence, "Discerning Vladimir Putin," *Raritan; New Brunswick* 38, no. 1 (Summer 2018): 11.

²⁹ Nikolay Koposov, *Memory Laws, Memory Wars: The Politics of the Past in Europe and Russia (New Studies in European History)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 239.

³⁰ Lawrence and Koposov.

want to be in a position of power. The modern Romanovs are just one example of this manipulation of history. Putin has used manipulated history to gain popularity with the Russian people just as Neo Confederates in the United States have created Confederate war memorials in an attempt to change how the American Civil War is viewed.³¹ The Romanovs have used Russian history and the popularity over the mystery of the lost Romanovs to their advantage, and Putin has used their desire for power to his advantage.

³¹ For information about manipulated history, particularly the memory of revolution, see my definition of Revolution.

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