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LEGEND OVER TRUTH: THE MYSTERY OF GRAND DUCHESS ANASTASIA ROMANOV

Haley Wells

On July 29, 2007,¹ a shallow grave in Russia's Koptyaki Forest, just outside the city of Yekaterinburg, was unearthed. Inside the grave were forty-four charred bone and teeth fragments—the possible remains of Grand Duchess Anastasia Romanov and her little brother Alexei, and, perhaps, the answer to one of the twentieth century's most notorious cold cases.² Dubbed “one of the last century's most momentous events,”³ the disappearance of the Russian royal family in 1918 and the many conspiracy theories about their fate have captured public imagination for decades and have been the inspiration for many intrigue-filled movies, books, and television shows. More specifically, the unknown fate of the Grand Duchess Anastasia and the conspiracy theories surrounding her fate have made her one of the most well-known royal women in modern history and the star of many dramatic fairy tales, told and retold throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As one of Russia's—and the world's—most popular conspiracy theories of the last century, the effect Anastasia's legend has had on modern society, culture, and pop culture makes it very important to understand and examine.

Conspiracy theories are important because of their political, cultural, and societal impact; because of their influence on pop culture; and because of how they affect people's emotional and mental states—both positively and negatively. *New York Times* writer David Brooks states that they have become, “the most effective community bonding mechanisms of the 21st century. For those awash in anxiety and alienation, who feel that everything is spinning out of control, conspiracy theories are extremely effective emotional tools...For those who feel powerless, they provide agency...they provide liberation.”⁴ People often seek out conspiracy



Russian Imperial family, circa 1913. By manhhai, licensed under Creative Commons BY-NC 2.0.

theories and fellow conspiracy theorists when their lives are chaotic and uncertain.⁵ As Brooks states, belief in these theories creates a sense of being in control and gives the theorists an exclusive community within which they can rely on and support each other. This makes conspiracy theories very effective coping mechanisms for those who are suffering emotionally, mentally, and even physically.⁶

The conspiracy theory that Anastasia Romanov survived the execution of her entire family speaks to how much the desire—even the need—to believe in something influences what people actually end up believing. While those who believed in the legend of Anastasia could be dismissed as gullible, their faith in a conspiracy theory so fantastical should be examined at a deeper level. Why did they believe Anastasia had survived despite all evidence to the contrary? Why did they want to believe? What emotional solace did this

conspiracy theory provide? Lenin and the Bolsheviks laid the groundwork, while Russian émigrés, women claiming to be Anastasia, and the media created and propagated the legend we know today, all for a variety of different reasons. Because this growing legend, the desire to believe that legend, and a legitimate government coverup obscured the facts, the truth of Anastasia's fate was uncertain for decades; today, however, new discoveries and DNA evidence have conclusively proven that she was murdered along with the rest of her family on July 17, 1918.⁷

Although the groundwork for Anastasia's demise was laid from the moment her father, Tsar Nicholas II, ascended to the Russian throne, World War I was the catalyst that brought everything to a head. When the war started in August 1914, Germany declared war on Russia. Russia entered WWI as an ally of Britain and France, and together they fought against Germany and her allies. But the Russian army was not equipped to fight a war of such magnitude, and the people of Russia were less than enthusiastic about entering another conflict (having fought a war with Japan just ten years prior). The political situation in Russia was already unstable, and war only made everything worse. Historian Mark Steinberg states, "As the war dragged on, it exacerbated most of the problems in Russian life. The economy strained to keep up in a war that mobilized an unprecedented amount of human and material resources. Shortages of all sorts became epidemic...and prices soared...Carnage at the front and economic hardship in the rear helped revive and intensify civic protest."⁸ In February 1917, these protests broke out into open revolution. All across Russia, calls rang out for Nicholas to abdicate the throne and for a new government—a government of the people—to be created. On March 2, 1917⁹, in what he claimed was an effort to stop the streets of Petrograd and other hotbed cities from turning into a bloodbath, Nicholas abdicated his throne. He placed power in the hands of his brother, Mikhail,

who also abdicated, placing power in the hands of the Provisional Duma Committee, soon to be the new Provisional Government.¹⁰

By abdicating, Nicholas placed himself and his family in danger. As symbols of autocracy and the old regime, the people of Russia deeply hated them, and by March 1917, many Russians wanted "Nicholas the Bloody" and his family to be killed. To soothe the agitated feelings of the Russian people and to protect the imperial family, Nicholas and his family were placed under house arrest at their palace in Tsarskoe Selo in March 1917.¹¹ They remained there until August 1917, when they were moved to Tobolsk, Russia.¹² Gleb Botkin, a friend of the imperial family who traveled with them to Tobolsk, described the town as "a truly God-forsaken place, 250 miles away from the nearest railroad."¹³ This was exactly why the imperial family was sent there—the Provisional Government hoped to keep them away from danger by completely isolating them.

Then, in October 1917, radical Bolsheviks toppled the Provisional Government and rose to power. In early 1918, these new leaders demanded that the Tsar and his family be relocated to Yekaterinburg, Russia—a city burning with Bolshevik fervor, dubbed the capital of the "Red Urals."¹⁴ At this time, the Bolsheviks were claiming that they wished the imperial family no harm. Lenin, cognizant of how the Bolshevik rise to power paralleled the events of the French Revolution, was very vocal about how the actions of the Bolsheviks would not mirror the actions of Marat, Robespierre, and the Jacobins. He stated that the "terror which the French revolutionaries used to guillotine unarmed people we do not use, and I hope, will not use."¹⁵ Additionally, the Bolsheviks claimed that they were planning to put Nicholas on trial for his crimes against the people of Russia and were already collecting evidence to use against him as of April 17, 1918.¹⁶

So, the Bolsheviks' motives in sending the Tsar and his family to Yekaterinburg—a city full of people who wanted them dead—are suspect. It is possible that they were hoping the Ural Regional Soviets would murder Nicholas, thus taking his blood off their hands and allowing them to retain their image as benevolent revolutionaries. Whatever their motives, by May 24, 1918, the entire imperial family was housed at the Ipatiev House in Yekaterinburg.¹⁷ They would live here for less than two months.

On July 17, 1918, the imperial family and their four servants were awoken and led down to the basement of the Ipatiev House where they were all murdered.¹⁸ According to the family's head executioner, Yakov Yurovsky, the executioners first shot each person at chest-level. The Tsar was killed immediately, but the Grand Duchesses, the Empress, Alexei, and one maid were still alive. They were then stabbed with bayonets, shot in the head, and clubbed with rifle butts to finish them off, all of which took about twenty minutes.¹⁹ Following the execution, Yurovsky claimed that the bodies were loaded into a truck and transported out to the nearby Koptiyaki forest, where they were disposed of.²⁰

Just a few days after the execution, Lenin and the Bolsheviks made an announcement: they claimed that they had executed the Tsar, but that the rest of his family was still alive. The leaflet announcing Nicholas's murder stated, "The Ural Regional [Executive] Committee resolved to shoot Nicholas Romanov, and this was carried out on the sixteenth of July. Nicholas Romanov's wife and son are in a secure place."²¹ However, the leaflet did not mention where the Grand Duchesses were or if they were alive—which led to intense speculation about their fate. Later, the official Bolshevik party line became that the Empress and all her children were being cared for and hidden at an unnamed location.²² They implied that keeping the family hidden and surrounded by a veil of

secrecy was for their protection, but those who knew how hated the imperial family had been began to assume they were dead.

When the anti-Bolshevik forces captured Yekaterinburg just days after the murders²³, they investigated the fate of the family.²⁴ They found blood and bullet marks in the basement of the Ipatiev House, but no bodies. They then went out to the Koptiyaki Forest. There, in a small clearing, they found objects belonging to the imperial family and their servants: family jewels, small icons, charred clothing and corsets, the corpse of Anastasia's dog, and more.²⁵ Based on this evidence, they assumed the imperial family had been murdered; however, they had no bodies to prove this assumption.

Although Lenin and most of the Bolsheviks never directly propagated any conspiracy theories about Anastasia or the other imperial family members, their insistence that the Empress and imperial children were still alive and in hiding created the perfect environment for theories to spring up. Some, like Nicholas Sokolov, who investigated the disappearance of the family, were sure that the entire family had been murdered, based on the minimal but ominous evidence they had.²⁶ Yet even as Sokolov began to build a case arguing that the entire family had been killed, many of the family's relatives and those loyal to them hoped against hope that they were still alive—thus feeding the conspiracy theories. Wild rumors began to spring up all across Russia and Europe, originating from a plethora of different sources. Because the Bolsheviks kept the supposed whereabouts of the Empress and her children a complete secret, people began to speculate that they were hidden in the Vatican, a remote Russian monastery, or even with relatives of Rasputin.²⁷ Some of these stories were even propagated by Bolsheviks²⁸—perhaps as a way of adding credibility to the claim that the family was still alive, or perhaps because

they simply could not resist adding to the rumors. In the end, without any bodies to prove that the family had died or living humans to prove they were alive, no conspiracy theory—however wild—was impossible, which made them both persistent and popular.

It has often been stated that the Bolsheviks concealed the execution of the Empress and her children because they knew “how the world would view...the slaughter of the empress and her innocent children.”²⁹ Although this statement has some merit, it is only partially true.

Yurovsky and his cohorts did hide the bodies to prevent the anti-Bolshevik White Army from

finding them and using them for propaganda purposes. White Army propaganda “drew heavily

on the horrors of the Red Terror...It depicted the Bolshevik movement as bloodthirsty, antireligious, and destructive.”³⁰ If the White Army had found the mutilated corpses of the imperial family, they would certainly have used them to create gruesome, fear-mongering propaganda vilifying the Bolsheviks. Yurovsky even stated, “I worried very much about disposing of the corpses properly...Otherwise, all the corpses would wind up in the hands of the White Guards [the White Army]. It is easy to imagine how they would have exploited the situation.”³¹ Although this propaganda would not have been particularly impactful in Russia—the majority of the Russian people were beyond caring about the fate of their former Tsar or his despised family—it would certainly have had a significant impact in other European countries, particularly Britain and Germany. If the corpses were revealed, the Bolshevik mask of benevolence and fairness to their former oppressors—the image that Lenin had endlessly promoted—would be stripped away. Britain and France were already heavily invested in seeing the Bolsheviks defeated, even funding the anti-Bolshevik forces, because they hoped that

the White Army would defeat the Bolsheviks and bring Russia back into the war as their ally.³² Learning about the brutal murders of the imperial family would cause public outrage amongst the people of Europe and give Britain and France another reason to see the Bolsheviks defeated: to prevent another bloody, Reign of Terror-style regime.

More concerning for Lenin was how the news of the imperial family’s death, if leaked, could affect his relationship with Germany. In March 1918, Lenin had signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk³³, ending war with Germany and even creating a tenuous alliance. The Germans hoped that internal strife would keep Russia out of WWI permanently, so they encouraged this alliance and funded many of Lenin’s and the Bolsheviks’ activities. But Kaiser Wilhelm II, cousin to Empress Alexandra, was worried about her disappearance. Several times after July 1918, he asked Lenin’s ambassador to Berlin, Adolph Joffe, about the fate of Empress Alexandra.³⁴ Both Joffe and Lenin refused to give him a straightforward answer. If the Kaiser had learned that his cousin and her children were dead, it could have ended Russia’s peace with Germany and launched them into another war. Even if Lenin had not directly ordered the murders (to this day, it is unclear whether he ordered the execution, or if the local Bolsheviks acted independently³⁵), the responsibility for them would still fall on his head. Although this situation was not as perilous after Germany and the Kaiser were defeated in November 1918, the Russian Civil War dragged on for four more years, and Lenin’s power remained relatively tenuous. Any revelation about the imperial family and their fate could negatively affect the outcome of the Civil War and upset the delicate balance of power. So, for the sake of winning the Russian Civil War and creating the Russia he desired, Lenin had to conceal the murders and remain silent.

Russian émigrés—people who had fled Russia to escape

the turmoil—created and propagated the conspiracy theories because of their societal and emotional states following their displacement from Russia. Formerly members of Russia’s Tsarist and Provisional Governments, the White Army, and the intelligentsia, these émigrés had lived comfortable and privileged lives before the Revolution. Now, as displaced refugees living in Paris, Berlin, London, and even China, their lives were much less comfortable and secure. Author Greg King states, “Former tsarist generals drove taxicabs, once-proud countesses served as maids, elegant courtiers waited tables in crowded cafes, and dispossessed princesses acted as tutors.”³⁶ This change in their economic circumstances, compounded by being displaced and stateless, caused an identity crisis amongst many of the émigrés. This situation was exacerbated when, in 1921, the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (the precursor to the USSR) “issued a decree that resulted in the mass denaturalization of former citizens of Imperial Russia.”³⁷ This meant that millions of Russian émigrés were left without legal protection, representation, or legitimate travel documents. Their home and identity as citizens of Russia had been taken from them, throwing their lives into turmoil and creating emotionally-distressed people who would gladly turn to conspiracy theories for comfort, stability, and an explanation for why these things were happening to them.

Furthermore, most of these émigrés were monarchists who could not accept that the old world order had ended, causing them to cling to conspiracy theories about the survival of the imperial family members. Referring to the Russian émigrés, authors Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan state, “The émigré community continued dressing their children in prerevolutionary uniforms and teaching them to sing ‘God Save the Tsar.’ They clung desperately to the (old) Russian way of life and wanted to keep it enshrined for the next generation.”³⁸ All they could think of was the past. One

émigré, Grand Duchess Marie Pavlovna, stated, “This past was like a dusty diamond, which we held to the light in the hope of seeing the sun rays playing through it. We spoke of the past, we looked to it.”³⁹ This obsession with the past kept conspiracy theories about the imperial family at the forefront of their minds. Additionally, despite their denaturalization, many of these émigrés still dreamed about returning to Russia after the political regime had changed. To admit that the Tsar and his entire family had died would be to admit that the past was truly gone and that they, most likely, would never be able to return to their homeland. So, despite the growing body of circumstantial evidence that pointed to the demise of the entire family, they clung to the hope that at least one family member had been saved, in the expectation that a surviving Romanov—or Romanovs—would restore the old political regime. This obsession with the past, clinging to hope despite all evidence that the entire family had perished, and their fragile emotional states led the émigrés to craft wild conspiracy theories about the survival of the Empress and her children.

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The creation, belief in, and propagation of these theories benefited the émigrés for a number of reasons. First, these theories were a way for them to cope with their denaturalization and refugee status. Convincing themselves that at least one Romanov had survived and would someday bring back Imperial Russia allowed them to accept their displaced status—because, they reasoned, it would only be temporary. Second, belief in these theories allowed them to reclaim a sense of having power and being in control. Now, the Soviets made the decisions they had once made, leaving these formerly influential people completely powerless. Creating and believing in conspiracy theories about the imperial family helped émigrés feel as if they had reclaimed their autonomy and former identities, while simultaneously terminating the power the Soviets had over them. In short, it was a way for them to fight back against their “oppressors.” Finally, the conspiracy theories gave the émigrés a community and a support system. They became part of the glue that bound émigré communities together, helped them create a home away from home, and provided a sense of emotional stability that made the émigrés feel less alone in the world.

Additionally, it was not a stretch for the émigrés to believe in these theories because they had a history of believing outlandish conspiracy theories. As they had started to lose their political and social predominance in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (due to industrialization, a population boom, and an unhappy peasant population), they had turned to bizarre conspiracy theories—such as the global cabal theory, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*—to justify the direction their lives were taking. Although the theories about the Elders of Zion were no more than a pack of fantastical lies, many prominent Russians, including Tsar Nicholas,⁴⁰ saw the theories as entirely true and the explanation for why everything was changing. The Russian elite had

wholeheartedly believed in ridiculous theories when it was merely convenient to do so; it is easy to see how they would turn to similar theories when their lives were falling apart and they desperately needed something to believe in.

Claimants—people who came forward claiming to be a surviving imperial family member—also propagated the conspiracy theories and built on them as a way to legitimize their claims. Since 1918, over 200 people have come forward claiming to be Alexei or one of the four Grand Duchesses, demonstrating both the popularity of the Romanov conspiracy theories and the continual allure of Romanov claimants.⁴¹ Several women claiming to be Anastasia surfaced before 1920, but each of these women, in turn, was proven to be a fraud.⁴² Additionally, even before they were unmasked, none of these women were particularly compelling, although some did get their hour of fame in the media.

The conspiracy theories did not shift from speculating about the fate of the Empress and any of her children to centering solely on Anastasia until October 1921.⁴³ This shift was caused by a woman called Fraulein Ubekannt (“Miss Unknown” in German⁴⁴), who came forward claiming to be the Grand Duchess Anastasia. Committed at the Daldorf Hospital in Berlin for attempting to commit suicide the previous year, her claim soon attracted the attention of many.

Although she was not the first Anastasia claimant (and would not be the last), Miss Ubekannt—soon to be known as Anna Anderson—was certainly the most compelling and charismatic, for several reasons. The first was that she came forward the same year the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic denaturalized millions of Russian émigrés, rendering them stateless. So, although the émigrés had always been vulnerable to the charms of conspiracy theories about the imperial family, her claim found them at a particularly weak moment. Whereas many émigrés might have been unwilling

to believe her at a different time—especially as her story and “proof” that she was Anastasia were particularly weak when she first came forward—their extreme emotional vulnerability made them much more likely to believe her.

This desperate desire to believe helped to conceal many of the problems with Anderson’s claim. First, she refused to converse in any language but German, and her understanding of Russian was clearly elementary at best. Moreover, she knew no English or French—languages Anastasia had known. This aspect of her claim was particularly confusing because Anastasia had been fluent in Russian, but not in German—unlike Anderson who spoke German very well.

Although Anderson tried to explain her inability to speak Russian by saying it was a result of her trauma, her puzzling linguistic abilities should have made the émigrés suspicious. But because they wanted to believe her, they ignored all the signs that her story was false. Even when her “memories” about the imperial family were obviously incorrect—as they often were—or when she could only “remember” aspects of her past life after someone told her the correct answer, many tearfully hailed her as the Grand Duchess Anastasia. Moreover, their reasons for believing in her were often ridiculous: one man stated that he knew Anderson was Anastasia because she knew how to operate a samovar⁴⁵ (a Russian urn used to make tea)—as if only a Romanov could understand how a samovar worked.

Despite the many hints that her claim was false, there were also many things that made Anderson’s claim believable. First, she shared a physical resemblance to Anastasia that the other Anastasia claimants did not. She had hallux valgus, a genetic foot deformity that Anastasia had also suffered from.⁴⁶ She also had piercing gray eyes—eyes that many of her supporters said reminded them of Nicholas II’s eyes. In addition, several physicians examined her and found that

her body showed evidence of a severe attack—perhaps a Bolshevik one. She had suffered skull damage, although the damage was much more minimal than later legends made it out to be. She had also suffered “some heavy blow or blows to her face”⁴⁷ that had fractured both her upper and lower jawbones and knocked out many of her teeth. Greg King states, “Blows of considerable force would have been necessary to fracture both jaws”⁴⁸—such as blows from a Bolshevik rifle butt. On her upper stomach, the doctors found an area of discoloration that some of the doctors suggested could be powder burns—something she would have sustained had she been shot at close range. Her most interesting injury, however, was a scar on her right foot. King calls this scar “a transpiercing wound, the clear result of some object having been driven through the foot.”⁴⁹ Lore about Anderson later claimed that this scar was the result of her being stabbed with a bayonet. This combination of injuries made Anderson’s claim seem more probable, especially after she claimed she had sustained them during the execution and while she was trying to escape.

Another intriguing aspect of Anderson’s claim was her total disinterest in conclusively proving her identity. Although the legal battle to prove her identity was the longest in *German history*—lasting thirteen years—she did not personally pursue her claim in the courts, nor did she even start the legal process. In fact, she completely refused to attend the trial. Her case was instead initiated by two German lawyers, who did so at the suggestion of Anderson’s lawyer, Edward Fallows, and the Mendelssohn Bank in Berlin. In 1906, Tsar Nicholas had deposited two million rubles— “approximately \$20 million in 2010 figures”⁵⁰—into the bank. By 1933, the entire imperial family was presumed to be dead, requiring the bank to give the money to seven collateral Romanov heirs—unless a supposed child of the Tsar disputed it. So the Mendelssohn Bank, hoping to avoid having to pay out

any of the money, contacted Edward Fallows and suggested “that he protest any payments based on his client’s claimed identity.”⁵¹ Fallows could not do anything because he was an American, but he contacted two German lawyers who started the legal process. This was the beginning of the thirteen-year legal battle to prove Anderson’s identity—a process she apparently had no interest in. When asked why she refused to go to court, Anderson declared, “I know perfectly well who I am. I don’t need to prove it in any court of law.”⁵² Her apparent disinterest in definitively proving her claim gave her “an aura of authenticity.”⁵³ In the end, the courts ruled against Anderson. They stated that the burden of proof rested with her and her lawyers, and that she had failed to definitively prove she was Anastasia. Had she agreed to show up in court and make a concerted effort to prove her claim, the courts might have ruled in her favor. Unlike the other claimants, who clearly came forward hoping to get a vast payout, Anderson’s disinterest in proving herself—and claiming her money—made even those skeptical about her claims reconsider her.

Anderson’s claim also received an air of plausibility because of the support of those who believed in her. Gleb Botkin was one of Anderson’s most ardent defenders. In an article published in 1930, he stated, “To me there is no mystery attached to the case of Madame Tchaikowsky [another name Anderson used]. I not merely believe her to be Anastasia—I know that she is. The guest of Miss Jennings [a woman Anderson stayed with for a time] is the youngest daughter of the late Emperor Nicholas II, and the only survivor of the Ekaterinburg massacre.”⁵⁴ He also described the first time he saw Anderson: “From the first moment that I saw Madame Tchaikowsky, I knew her to be Anastasia. There could be not the slightest doubt about it.”⁵⁵ Many others also championed Anderson’s cause. The endorsement of these people—people who had been close to Anastasia and the imperial family, people who seemed credible and discerning—

made Anderson’s story seem more legitimate. Much like a celebrity endorsement today, they made her claim seem more plausible to the general population and the media.



Left, Grand Duchess Anastasia. Right, profile photograph of Anna Anderson. By Royal Opera House Covent Garden. Licensed under public domain.

In the end, the intrigue and charm surrounding Anderson’s claim boiled down to three things. One, her claim could be neither conclusively proved nor disproved. Two, people wanted so desperately to believe in her that they would do so, despite any evidence that pointed to her being an imposter. And three, the media propagated her claim more than it propagated the story of any other claimant. The relationship between Anderson and the media was symbiotic: she gave them a wealth of material to adapt into romantic stories, and they turned her into a living legend.

More than anyone or anything else, the media created the Anastasia legend. Since the announcement in 1918 about the execution of Nicholas II, the media has been popularizing rumors and conspiracy theories about the fate of the imperial family. In fact, the October 23, 1921 issue of *Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung*, a popular German magazine, seems to have been the inspiration for Anderson’s claim, as it contained an article

speculating about the fate of Anastasia.⁵⁶ After Anderson came forward, the media popularized both her personality and her claim. Stories about Anderson—more conspiracy theories about the fate of Anastasia—were published in newspapers, magazines, and books all across the world. This served to make Anderson the most famous Anastasia claimant.

Then, starting in 1928, Anderson's story—and, by extension, the growing Anastasia legend—was adapted for the stage and screen. A 1928 silent film called *Clothes Make the Woman* began the Anastasia fairy-tale. It told the story of Anastasia being saved by a sympathetic Bolshevik, then escaping to America and becoming a famous movie star. The movie ended with the Bolshevik and Anastasia getting married.⁵⁷ This romantic tale appealed not just to Russian émigrés and those who believed Anderson's claim, but also to people who wanted to believe in something hopeful. After “a decade of tragedies that marked the passing of the old world order”⁵⁸, people wanted to believe in something happy and hopeful—and these glamorous, romantic tales suited the more glamorous, carefree atmosphere of the Roaring Twenties. The subsequent media that retold and romanticized Anastasia's story turned the conspiracy theories about her away from their political implications and towards what Anastasia meant

“ The subsequent media that retold and romanticized Anastasia's story turned the conspiracy theories about her away from their political implications and towards what Anastasia meant as a symbol to people everywhere. ”

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Many more movies and plays followed *Clothes Make the Woman*, including the 1956 movie *Anastasia* (starring Ingrid Bergman) and the beloved 1997 animated film *Anastasia*. Each of these movies and plays expanded on the legend of Anastasia and turned her into the fairy-tale princess we know today. It was a calculated move: the movies and plays about Anastasia capitalized on the “Disney princess culture” that was becoming popular, thanks to movies like *Snow White* (released in 1937), *Cinderella* (released in 1950), and *Sleeping Beauty* (released in 1959)⁵⁹. They turned Anastasia from a symbol of hope for anyone who wanted to believe that the world was not as dark and brutal as it seemed into a modern fairy-tale princess. And she also became a symbol of endless possibilities.

Yet amidst all the books and movies and ever-growing Anastasia legends, the question remained: would the world ever definitively know what had happened to the Grand Duchess? Was she truly Anna Anderson, or had she died on the night of July 17, 1918? And, if she had died, where was her body?

One mystery was solved when Anna Anderson died in 1984. Postmortem DNA testing done on her hair and her bowel tissue (from a surgery Anderson had undergone in 1979) definitively proved that she was not Anastasia. Instead, she was Franziska Schanzkowska⁶⁰, a Kashubian woman from Germany (now modern Poland). Even after her true identity was revealed, many who had believed in her claimed that the DNA results were wrong, and that the testing and subsequent identification were part of some conspiracy to discredit her. Still, this revelation did nothing to explain what had happened to the true Anastasia.

Then, in 1991, two Russian men unveiled a massive find. Using clues embedded in an account Yakov Yurovsky

had written about the Romanov family execution and the subsequent burial of their bodies, Geli Ryabov, a Russian writer and movie director, and Alexander Avdonin, a geologist, had uncovered a burial site (in the Koptiyaki Forest) in 1979. This grave contained nine skeletons. Although Yurovsky and the other executioners had placed several containers of sulfuric acid in the grave and shattered them before covering the grave up, Ryabov stated that “the corpses survived simply because the acid didn’t remain on them long enough...Therefore, the soft tissues were destroyed but the bones remained intact.”⁶¹ This meant that there was more than enough material to do sufficient DNA tests. Ryabov and Avdonin had concealed their find for over a decade because they feared that revealing such a massive Soviet secret could result in their deaths.⁶² Only after the Soviet regime ended in 1991 did they bring the corpses forward and allow them to be tested.

Dr. Peter Gill of the British Home Office’s Forensic Science Service Laboratory initially identified the corpses, but his team’s work was subsequently verified by other scientists and forensic laboratories around the world. The DNA tests revealed that the corpses were the remains of Tsar Nicholas, his wife Alexandra, three of the Grand Duchesses, and their four servants. However, Alexei and one Grand Duchess were missing.

The identity of the missing Grand Duchess quickly became controversial. During the Reno Forensic Science Convention in 2000, Dr. Sergey Nikitin presented evidence, including facial recognition test results, that pointed to Corpse #6 from the grave being Anastasia. While the age and height of the corpse left it unclear as to whether she was Marie (Anastasia’s sister) or Anastasia, the skull was not a match for Marie’s features, and it was a perfect match for Anastasia’s.⁶³ Unfortunately, facial recognition technology was still in its

infancy—especially when being run against photos from pre-1918—so this was a highly controversial and widely disputed conclusion.

Rather than bring closure and conclude the decades-old mystery, this find actually created more fuel for the conspiracy theories. Although the world now had proof that the Tsar and most of his family had died on July 17, 1918, this was a fact that had been somewhat accepted for decades—especially in scholarly communities. Finding the corpses was a groundbreaking discovery, and their identification was “a defining moment for forensic DNA testing,”⁶⁴ but, for most people, it was little more than proof of what they had already accepted.

However, the absence of one daughter fueled the conspiracy theories anew. In his account, Yurovsky had stated that it took much longer than expected to kill the Grand Duchesses. When they were shot at chest-level, the bullets kept bouncing off them. Then, when the Bolsheviks tried to stab them with bayonets, the blades could not pierce their torsos. In his account of the execution, Yurovsky stated, “The daughters had diamond armor [sewn] into their under bodices [corsets].”⁶⁵ He found these jewel-lined corsets when he was undressing the women for burial. He stated, “I found a corset which had something tightly sewn [in it]. I ripped it and found precious stones.”⁶⁶—eighteen pounds of precious stones in total.⁶⁷ This revelation spawned lore that Anastasia’s jewel-lined corset had acted like a quasi-bulletproof vest, protecting her from the assault (a piece of lore that is popular to this day). Yurovsky stated that Anastasia had been murdered—he even described undressing and burying her—but that did not stop many from believing that Anastasia had survived. Yurovsky might have lied, and conspiracy theorists came up with many reasons why he would. Ultimately, without a body to prove that Anastasia had, in fact, died, the conspiracy

theories persisted.

Additionally, controversies about the DNA identification of the corpses began almost as soon the corpses were identified. Dr. Alec Knight, a senior researcher at Stanford University, “argued that the amplification of such a relatively large fragment (~1200 bp) from a degraded sample such as those from the Ekaterinburg mass grave was not possible and that the results obtained from Gill et al. were most likely contamination from modern DNA.”⁶⁸ His claim contained a valid criticism. Even those who believed that the identification was accurate admitted that getting such a clear, definitive result from such old, degraded DNA was unusual and remarkable. One scientist attributed the outstanding identification to the climate in which the bodies had been buried for decades, stating, “It is very likely that the extremely cold climate in Yekaterinburg, where the ground is typically frozen from September until April, provided an ideal environment to preserve the remains.”⁶⁹ Knight acknowledged that such an environment would preserve DNA exceptionally well, but pointed out that the temperature in Yekaterinburg can reach 100 degrees Fahrenheit in July and August⁷⁰—which is certainly not an optimal temperature for preserving DNA. Dr. Knight’s claims created even more doubt and made some question if the remains of any of the imperial family members had actually been found.

In 2007, the searchers found a grave about seventy meters away from the first that contained forty-four charred bone and teeth fragments, along with several bullet fragments and pottery shards.⁷¹ This time, Dr. Michael Coble and forensic anthropologist Anthony Falsetti were called in to examine the remains. By examining pelvis fragments from the remains, Falsetti was able to determine that the remains were from one male and one female. The male was between ten and thirteen years old, and the female was between eighteen and

twenty-three years old.

The mystery was finally laid to rest when Michael Coble produced DNA testing results for the bone fragments. The testing confirmed that Nicholas II and Alexandra were the parents, and that the remains came from siblings—Alexei and either Marie or Anastasia. In the report summarizing his results, Coble stated, “We found that the DNA evidence is 4.36 trillion times more likely if sample 147 is a daughter of Tsar Nicholas II and Tsarina Alexandra, and over 80 trillion times more likely if sample 146.1 is a son of Tsar Nicholas II and Tsarina Alexandra than if these samples were from two unrelated individuals.”⁷² Several other labs, including the Department of Genomics and Laboratory of Evolutionary Genomics from the Vavilov Institute of General Genetics, Russian Academy of Science, confirmed Coble’s findings. In their paper summarizing the authentication of Coble’s findings, the scientists at this institute stated,

Likelihood estimations show that it is >108 or even 109 times more likely that newly found remains and remains from the first grave belong to the Romanov’s children than to random individuals unrelated to the Romanov family. Taken together, our genotyping data establish beyond reasonable doubt that the remains of the last Russian Emperor, Nicholas II Romanov, his wife Empress Alexandra, their 4 daughters (Grand Duchesses Olga, Tatiana, Maria, and Anastasia) and their son (Crown Prince Alexei) have been identified. Thus, none of the Nicholas II Romanov family members survived the massacre.⁷³

After ninety years, the mystery of Anastasia Romanov had been solved.

As the evidence presented here has proven, the theory that Anastasia somehow survived the execution on July 17, 1918 is completely fallacious. In the wake of the situation

that Lenin and the Bolsheviks created by concealing the murders, Russian émigrés and others created and propagated conspiracy theories about Anastasia for many political and emotional reasons. The media further dramatized and popularized these conspiracy theories. However, despite the attractiveness of the Anastasia legend, DNA evidence has proven conclusively that Anastasia, along with the rest of her immediate family, died on July 17, 1918. As Michael Coble stated in a paper he wrote about the identification of the last two Romanov children, "It's time to put this controversy to rest."⁷⁴

Although the effect of Anastasia's legend on politics and history is considerable, her power as a symbol is incalculable. As a symbol of the old-world order, she first gave hope to multitudes of Russian émigrés and provided a stabilizing point for them to cling to. As a symbol of hope and "good" triumphing over "evil," she brought light to a world wracked with darkness and tragedy. In the post-WWI years, she became a symbol of better times to come. As a fairytale princess, she took her place in modern pop culture and in legend, becoming an inspiration for an entire generation of young women. Today, though few people know the truth of her story, almost everyone knows her name. Her persona and the tale created by the media connect with people for many different reasons. For some, her tale is about discovering who you are, but also defining who you want to be. For others, it is a story of hope and optimism in the face of darkness and evil. And for others, it is a story of family. In death, Anastasia has much more power than she ever had in life; the princess murdered before she had even lived two decades has become immortal.

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