The Many Deaths of Tsar Nicholas II

Relics, remains and the Romanovs

Wendy Slater

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How did Nicholas II, Russia's last Tsar, meet his death? Shot point blank in a bungled execution by radical Bolsheviks in the Urals, Nicholas and his family disappeared from history in the Soviet era. But in the 1970s, a local geologist and a crime fiction writer discovered the location of their clandestine mass grave, and secretly removed three skulls, before reburying them, afraid of the consequences of their find. In 1991, as the Soviet Union collapsed, the bones of Nicholas and his family were again disinterred, this time with official sanction, and positively identified through DNA testing. They were re-interred with great ceremony by the Russian state beside the tombs of their Romanov ancestors, despite vociferous scepticism from the Russian Orthodox Church about the authenticity of the bones.

Yet the history of Nicholas's execution and the discovery of his remains are not the only stories connected with the death of the last Tsar. This book recounts the horrific details of their deaths and the thrilling discovery of the bones, and also investigates the alternative narratives that have grown up around these events. Stories include the contention that the Tsar's killing was a Jewish plot, in which Nicholas's severed head was taken to Moscow as proof of his death; tales of would-be survivors of the execution, self-confessed children of the Tsar claiming their true identity; and accounts of miracles performed by Nicholas, who was made a saint by the Russian Church in 2000. Not least among these alternative narratives is the romanticization of the Romanovs, epitomized by the numerous photographs of the family released from the Russian archives.

Wendy Slater taught Russian history at the University of Cambridge and the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College London, until 2003. She is deputy editor of *The Annual Register* and writes regularly on Russian affairs for *Keesing's Record of World Events*.

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Note on transliteration

In the sources and notes, Russian names are transliterated using the Library of Congress system.

In the text, I have used a modified version of this system to make names easier on the eye. I have also used the English version of some names (e.g. Nicholas II, not Nikolai II).

Acknowledgements

This book grew from the very small beginnings of a paper to a seminar series on death and immortality in Russian culture, at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies (SSEES), University College London, in the winter and spring of 2000 to 2001. While groping around for something to write for my own contribution to the series, I stumbled upon the story of the Tsar's severed head. The rest was history, as they say, but not just history: it was also stories and myths about Nicholas II and his death, and about what they mean in Russia and beyond.

Susan Morrissey organized the seminar series, and was an inspiring colleague and a good friend during my years at SSEES. Her company made our commute to work much more bearable.

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Nicholas II and his many deaths have accompanied me and my family through two house moves, a burglary – in which the first three chapters I had written disappeared – and, more happily, emigration to France.

Stephen Lewis encouraged me to start this book, and then he made me finish it. His expertise as an editor improved it immeasurably, but I owe him most for his enthusiasm for the way I wanted to write the stories and his forbearance over the demands that this made. For our daughter Heléna, 'mummy's book' will never match *The Little Wooden Horse* as a bedtime story, but I hope, nevertheless, that she will read and enjoy it one day.

This book is for them, with all my love.

1 Cruel necessity

> During my walk in the hills with Natasha today (the weather was almost like summer), I mulled over the conversation with Lenin about putting the tsar on trial. . . . Punishing the tsar's family would, of course, have been impossible in the legal sense. The tsar's family was a victim of the principle that forms the very axis of monarchy: dynastic inheritance.
>
> (Lev Trotsky, diary entry of 10 April 1935)

> Many people
> are charmed
> by a sun crown.
> Excuse me,
> nobles and gentlemen,
> A crown
> may be bestowed
> by us,
> But only
> with a mineshaft.
>
> (Vladimir Mayakovsky, 'The Emperor', Sverdlovsk, 1928)

It took so long to finish them. Especially the girls. Later we found out why. When we came to strip them we saw how their corsets were packed with jewels. Rubies, diamonds, emeralds – we'd never seen anything like it. So like the Commandant said, they had only themselves to blame. It was greed that made their deaths so cruel.

At the time, mind you, I wondered if András and Captain Lepa hadn't been right to duck out. They told the Commandant that they'd execute the Tsar, but they wouldn't shoot the women. He was furious. Just as well he never knew about András and one of the girls. The one with grey eyes, the nice one. András was keen on her. He'd even shown her the picture of his mother back in Hungary that he used to carry in his wallet. I don't know how far it had gone. She was probably just bored, or scared, or maybe sex-crazed, like they said her mother was with Rasputin. Who knows? But András was a good-looking lad, young, too, like her. We were all

young back then . . . before that night. All except the Commandant. When András and Captain Lepa refused to do it he gave them such a roasting. 'Shameful failure to do their revolutionary duty at the crucial moment', I remember him saying, and something about 'the necessity of wiping out the dynasty'.

He was right. Of course he was. In the Party School I'd read what Lenin had said about the Romanovs, that we should execute a hundred of them to teach them not to organize pogroms. Not that Nicholas could have organized anything. As an Emperor he was laughable. . . . Pleasant enough, I suppose, in his way, as a man. He even tried to get talking to one of our Special Detachment, one of the Kabanov brothers it was, though I don't recall which one. Turned out he'd been in Nicholas's Grenadier Guards for a short spell. The wife though, Alexandra Feodorovna, now she was a different matter. What a woman she was, an Empress to her fingernails. She had the whip hand alright. Nicholas couldn't even blow his nose without her say so. As for the girls, they were just trying it on all the time, especially the younger two. I wouldn't want to see my sister behaving that way, so familiar with strangers. But we'd already been warned about them by the Commandant and most of us kept our distance. Except András of course.

And then there was the boy . . . such a weakling. Strange to think that a cripple like him would have been the next Emperor of Russia. If he'd lived. That's the dynastic principle. And that's why they all had to die. It was what they taught us in the Party School. The rule of the tsars had given way to bourgeois democracy, and then to the real Revolution, the socialist one. In that sense the Romanovs were already irrelevant. But they were still important for the Whites. The counter-revolutionaries needed them as figureheads for their reactionary government. It had to be done.

Mind you, I would have organized the whole thing differently. He was a fool to have chosen that room. He should have done it outside. Two rounds each with Winchesters in the courtyard would have finished the job cleanly, especially if the prisoners had been properly searched beforehand and those jewels discovered. But he wanted to use the cellar. I mean, what the hell did he think would happen if he put eleven people in a room less than 50 meters square and then crammed a ten-man firing squad in the doorway? There was almost no light in there either. There was only one bare bulb overhead, and it was so dim that after the first volley we could see nothing through the smoke. And why in the dead of night? I suppose he wanted to keep it secret. But not even the old Cheka trick of revving a truck outside could mask the gunfire and the sound of all the screaming.

The Party called it the House of Special Purpose, but we knew it as the Merchant's House. The seven of us from the factory had been sent there as guards in early July when we were picked to replace a unit of Russian workers. We were a mixed lot, but good lads. We'd all worked for the local Cheka, too. A few of us were prisoners from the Habsburg army

who'd been through the Party School in Omsk, and then got drafted to the Upper Isetsk factory as Red Guards. There were a couple of Latvians as well, from the Rifles Battalion. That was a crack unit. Only one of us seven was Russian, an ex-Red Army man called Netrebin. We were all good Communists. We lived downstairs on the ground floor of the Merchant's House, and the prisoners had the top floor.

The Commandant – his name was Comrade Yurovsky – was a Russian and an important man in the Cheka. He'd been given command of the House when we were drafted there. He took over from another comrade who'd been stealing from the prisoners, or so it was said, and had been too slack about security. The Commandant soon put a stop to all that. He reorganized the guard rota and put us in the key posts. He dismissed the guards who'd become too friendly with the prisoners. He even had the family seal up their valuables in a box which he inspected every day. Still, like I said, he wasn't as thorough as he should have been with those jewels.

He was a tall man, dark, around forty years old, with a small moustache and a beard a bit like Lev Trotsky's. He'd been a medical orderly in the War, and a photographer before that, and he'd been in the Party since 1905. He could speak a bit of German, too. Picked it up in Berlin before the Revolution, I think. Now he was Deputy Commissar of Justice for the whole Urals Region. His second-in-command in the House was another Russian, called Nikulin. The Commandant used to rely on him a lot. I think Nikulin was the only one he trusted completely.

It wasn't a bad posting. I mean, there was no real work. It was boring, but then guard duty is always boring. It was hot, too. The city got more tense as the summer wore on. The Whites were closing in on Ekaterinburg. It was those bastards in the Czech Legion who'd rebelled and gone over to the reactionaries. The fools couldn't see that their best hope of national liberation lay with us. But that's another story. In the Merchant's House things got worse by the day. Everyone was talking about the possibility of a rescue. There were all kinds of monarchist sympathizers hanging around in the city. We'd see them outside the high fence that surrounded the house. The perimeter guards were constantly having to warn them off. We even arrested some of them. The prisoners definitely expected to be rescued. They never said so, but you could tell. You could see it in their eyes, hear it in the way they were always whispering to one another. The Cheka comrades had even proved it. Before we were posted to the House, they'd written a letter which they pretended was from a group of monarchist officers. Petr Voikov, the Urals Commissar of Supplies, drafted it in French, and Rodzinsky, who had the neatest handwriting, copied it out. Then they gave it to one of the inner guards who'd got friendly with the prisoners, and he passed it on to that stuck-up-bitch Alexandra Feodorovna. The prisoners thought it was real. I saw some of their replies. They gave plans of the House, details of the guard rotas, everything.

So of course it was the right thing to do. They could have been rescued at any moment, especially given the way the last lot of guards had been fraternizing with them. Even if only one had escaped, it would have been a disaster. We had to keep them secure. The Whites would have made any of them into a figurehead. Even one of their corpses would have been a holy relic. Even part of a corpse. But it was more than that. We weren't just there to stop them escaping. We had to protect them, too. The workers of Ekaterinburg wanted to lynch them. Especially after the city garrison went over to the Whites just a few days after we arrived in the House. And if that had happened, there would have been no trial. Until a few days before the execution, you see, we thought we'd be taking them to Moscow. Lev Trotsky was to be Chief Prosecutor. What an event that would have been! He would have run rings around Nicholas and he'd have shown the bloodthirsty tsarist system for what it was. I'm still sorry that it didn't happen. In the end though, the calculation was simple. We were fighting for the survival of the Revolution. While the prisoners remained alive, three hundred men were deployed to guard them when they should have been serving in Red units at the Front. With the Romanovs dead, those men were free to fight.

You ask about the servants? Yes, they had to die too. They'd been given the chance of freedom and they'd chosen to stay with their masters. I had no sympathy for them. They made their choice. The Commandant knew they were all beyond redemption. All except young Leonid, the kitchen lad. The Commandant thought he might be re-educated. Leonid used to play with the boy, the heir, and kept him amused even on days when the boy couldn't leave his wheelchair. But he played like children do, like equals. The other servants were cringing lackeys but Leonid was alright. So the Commandant sent him away on the evening of the execution, saying that he should be kept in the guard house across the road until it was all over. At heart, the Commandant was an idealist.

The night it happened was hot, oppressively hot. Hardly a breath of air. All day it had been close and humid. It was high summer, and the house was unbearably stuffy because the windows had been sealed to stop the prisoners from attempting an escape. I heard that the family made such a fuss about this that eventually one of the upstairs windows was opened to let in some air. Of course, they'd used it straight away to signal to their supporters outside and one of the guards had fired a warning shot. When he took over, the Commandant had a heavy grate fitted to that window. Naturally the prisoners complained about it. They were always complaining about something.

All through that last afternoon the lads from the outer guard shifted furniture from the basement room. It was hot work and they grumbled about it, but we needed the space. They could have saved themselves some trouble actually. No sooner had the prisoners entered the chamber than her High-And-Mightiness demanded to sit down, so the Commandant sent his

deputy out for chairs, one for her and one for the boy whose legs had been bad for days. Nikulin was laughing as he came through the antechamber where we were waiting. He was carrying two cane chairs, and I remember him joking as he passed us. 'The heir, it seems, wants to die in a chair.'

Once they were in the room and were seated to their liking, we were ordered in. We had our backs to the doorway and we were facing the prisoners. They seemed curious, not nervous. The Empress looked at us with contempt, as usual, and the others were whispering to one another. It was a relief to be doing something at last. We'd been waiting for hours in the antechamber, waiting for them to wash and dress. The Commandant had asked the Doctor to wake them up, around midnight, but it must have been two in the morning before they finally came downstairs. They were used to making people wait. It came naturally to them. I could see the Commandant was getting edgy. Summer nights in the Urals are short, and he still had the bodies to deal with. It was only later on that we realized why they'd taken so long to dress. The Commandant had spun the Doctor a story about there being shooting in the town and about needing to move the family downstairs where it would be safer. He'd said they shouldn't bring anything with them. But they were still hoping for a rescue and had put on their special clothes. They were carrying bags and cushions, too, as though they were going on holiday somewhere. Such greed, even in their final moments.

Like I say, the Commandant had wanted it to happen earlier in the evening, and it would all have been so much easier if he'd had a few more hours of darkness. But before beginning the operation he had to wait for the truck that was going to transport the bodies, and predictably enough that puffed-up nonentity Ermakov was two hours late with it. Not only was he late, he was also drunk, although we didn't realize that until afterwards.

It started badly, and it didn't get any better.

I had seen how it would go from the minute the Commandant called us to his room that afternoon. That was when I learned what the execution squad was going to do. What we were going to do. That was when András and Captain Lepa refused to take part. Each of us was allocated a prisoner to shoot, because the Commandant thought it would be more efficient that way. He distributed the Nagant revolvers that Nikulin had collected from the outer guard that afternoon. There was more than one each, I remember. The Commandant and Nikulin had their own weapons, and so did Kudrin from the Cheka, so in the end Ermakov took three, stuffing them in his waistband like a comic book bandit. Then there was a big argument between the Russians about which of them would shoot the Emperor. Eventually, the Commandant pulled rank and claimed Nicholas for himself, although Ermakov grumbled that he had done hard labour and so he was entitled to shoot 'bloody Nick'. I was given the valet, a scrawny old man, always

grovelling before his master. I didn't really care who I got. Although a part of me was glad that it wasn't one of the girls.

The trouble was, once we crowded into the doorway of that little room, I saw right away that it wasn't going to work. None of us was facing the right target because the Commandant had let the prisoners stand wherever they liked. They weren't lined up properly. The Tsar was to one side, standing in front of the boy who was on one of Nikulin's chairs. The Empress was on the other chair next to the boy, with three of the girls around her. The fourth girl was somewhere towards the back, standing with the maid near a closed door that led to a lumber room. It was so dim back there that they were just pale shapes. My target, the valet, was standing in the other corner with the Doctor and the chef, behind the Emperor. It meant that I was facing one of the girls, the pretty one who liked András.

It was so crowded and hot that it was difficult to breathe. I knew the moment had come and I felt calm. But it seemed to take so long. As we looked at one another, that family in the semi-darkness and us in the lighted doorway, it seemed as though time had stopped for a moment. They were the past and we were the future. Something new was being born. . . . The Commandant stepped forward and pulled a scrap of paper from his pocket. I'd seen him earlier in his room, scribbling on it, muttering phrases that would bid a grand farewell to three hundred years of Romanov history. In the end, it was very ordinary. He was brief and to the point. 'The Executive Committee of the Urals Soviet of Workers', Peasants' and Soldiers' Deputies has resolved that you are to be executed.'

Until then I don't think they had any idea that they were about to die. That all their magnificence was to end there, in that tiny underground room. Nicholas couldn't believe it. He turned to his wife, and then back to look at the Commandant. 'What?' he said, 'What?' He said it twice. And those were the last words of the last Tsar of All the Russias. As he spoke he fell backwards. Actually, he was lifted off his feet by the hail of bullets fired at him by all the Russians in the room. It didn't matter what they'd agreed in the Commandant's office. Nothing was going to stop every single one of them from taking a shot at their Emperor. I decided to follow orders and aim at the valet, even though I wasn't directly facing him. I couldn't shoot András's girl who was my nearest target. I think I hit the valet. I suppose that he and the chef and the Doctor all got some of the bullets meant for the Emperor because they went down quite fast. I can't be sure, though, because after that first volley, with all the smoke and dust, it was hard to see anything. No one had given the order to fire and the shooting was completely random. I did see the Empress slump from her chair. She'd been shot in the side of the head.

It got worse. Once it began, the girls started to run away, hammering on the door to the lumber room and screaming to be let out. And those of us who were standing in the second row, crammed in the doorway, barely

had room to aim. Then a couple more lads from the outer guard joined in. It was madness. One of the squad got badly powder burned from the man shooting next to him. The noise was incredible. Women screaming and bullets flying around the room. We couldn't understand why there were so many ricochets in a room that had been chosen specifically because of its soft plaster walls.

It seemed to go on for ever. Eventually the Commandant gave the order to cease firing, and then the choking smoke lifted a little. Now we saw the result. Two girls crouching by the side wall, their arms wrapped around their heads. The boy still sitting in his chair, shaking and crying. He'd pissed himself. I remember the pool on the floor, spreading into the slick of blood from his mother. The Doctor was alive, too. He was on the ground next to the shredded body of the Emperor, but he was still moving. The Commandant walked up to him and shot him in the head. Then Nikulin moved towards the boy with his weapon raised. Even in the smoke and the darkness I could see that his hand was trembling and he'd gone completely white. My ears were ringing from the gunfire but I could hear him shouting something about how he'd used up a whole clip of bullets and the boy was still alive. The Commandant just growled 'nerves, Grigory', walked up to the boy as cool as you like, and shot him in the head with his Mauser. The shot blew open the child's skull and threw him from the chair. Then the girls started screaming again. The two crouching by the side wall tried to stand up, but were too badly wounded and their legs buckled under them. The Commandant finished them both with shots to the head. Then he and Kudrin went from one corpse to the next, trying not to slip, rolling them face up with their boots, checking for signs of life. Someone from the outer guard ran in yelling that the shots had been heard on the street.

And then we heard a woman shriek. 'Thank you, Lord! I'm saved!' It was the maid at the back of the room struggling to her feet. The other two daughters were behind her, and they were alive too, moaning on the floor. Ermakov grabbed a bayonet from his belt and marched up to them. He started to stab one of the girls, but the blade would not penetrate her bodice. She was the youngest of the four, I remember. She was screaming like she used to do when I'd hear them play in the garden. The bayonet wouldn't silence her. I thought it was because Ermakov was drunk. Evidently so did the Commandant, because he pushed him aside and shot the girl, then turned to her sister and did the same. By this time, Ermakov had started on the maid, and she was trying to parry his bayonet with the little cushions she was holding. Eventually, Ermakov wrenched them away from her and stabbed her in the chest. We didn't know it then, but the cushions were like the girls' bodices, stuffed with jewels.

At last it was still, apart from the engine of the truck rumbling outside. Pavel Medvedev, in charge of the outer guard, told a dozen of his lads to take the bodies to the truck. They had to carry them through the basement

of the house and out to the yard in front, blood dripping on the floor all the way. I went to help him get something to make stretchers with, and found him in the lumber room, vomiting. I can't say I was surprised. The stench of blood and cordite in that airless chamber was overpowering. As the eleven bodies were taken away on improvised stretchers, some more lads from the outer guard came with buckets of sand and rags to start cleaning up the slime of royal blood and brains on the wooden floor. We had another shock when we were rolling the youngest girl on to a stretcher. She stirred and moaned, still not dead. Ermakov spun round and went for her again, trying to finish her in the same way, but he couldn't push the bayonet through her breast-bone, so in the end he pulled his third revolver from his belt and shot her in the head.

While this was going on, some of Medvedev's stretcher party had started pilfering the trinkets that the prisoners had brought with them to the cellar – cushions, handbags, stuff like that. They were searching the pockets for anything worth taking and ripping jewellery off the bodies. When he realized what was going on, the Commandant demanded it all back or else he would have them shot. The lads surrendered their loot. They knew that we from the Special Detachment wouldn't have hesitated. One of them gave up the Emperor's cigarette case. That thing was worth a fortune, solid gold inlaid with diamonds, just to carry tobacco in. Another lad reluctantly pulled the Doctor's gold watch from his jacket pocket. It was this business, I think, that convinced the Commandant he had to supervise the burial. To see that it was done properly. Ermakov was supposed to dispose of the bodies, but he'd already proven himself unreliable by turning up drunk and two hours late. He still had a half-empty bottle of vodka tucked in his trousers. I know, because he offered it round after the shooting. I never liked the man, but I was grateful for that swig of vodka.

The next part of the night was worse in a way. I didn't want to go along, but the Commandant needed reliable people, with Ermakov as incapable as he was. I was one of the three from the Special Detachment that he ordered to ride in the back of the truck with the bodies. One of the others, would you believe it, was András. Maybe it was the Commandant's way of teaching him a lesson. And he left Nikulin in charge at the House. I remember that we were pulling a tarpaulin over the corpses and the driver was revving the engine when one of the lads ran out of the House with something impaled on the end of his bayonet. He tossed it into the truck muttering 'dogs die a dog's death'. It was the little white and tan spaniel that one of the children kept for a pet. A harmless enough creature, I suppose, although I never could see the point of having a dog as small as that.

It must have been about three in the morning when the truck pulled out of the yard. It was a heavy Fiat, with a 60-hp engine and a closed cab. The Commandant and Ermakov sat up front with the driver, Lyukhanov,

who was the official chauffeur assigned to the Merchant's House. We three climbed into the open back with the bodies. We lit up. I needed that smoke. But as we set off down Voznesensky Prospekt, I realized that there were no spades, no picks or tools of any kind. I knew then that it was going to be a long night.

We went slowly west out of town along the Upper Isetsk road towards the Zlokazov factory. Ermakov had worked there once. Now he was Military Commissar for the whole area, and full of self-importance. We swung north, turning off the main road along what was really just a track that led through the forest. It was slow. The vehicle was overloaded with the weight of all those bodies in the back. I had no idea where we were going, but after about two hours of crawling along, the truck stopped. It was where the railway line from the local factories cut across the path. A group of about two dozen men was waiting for us, some on horseback and some in light carts. It turned out that Ermakov had organized a welcome party from Upper Isetsk for the prisoners. The men had been drinking. It got ugly when they realized that all we'd brought them were corpses. Ermakov's lads had expected to get them alive so they could have some fun before they killed them. They'd been looking forward to having some Romanov women. They were going to show Nicky what his German bitch got up to with Rasputin behind his back.

The Commandant tried to take control. He ordered Ermakov's men to lift the bodies on to the carts, so that we could take them deeper into the forest. Ermakov had said there were some disused mineshafts there where we could dump them. At this point, the looting began again. These corpses were expensively dressed with trinkets in every pocket and around every wrist and Ermakov's men couldn't resist. Then, when they were swinging the bodies off the Fiat and on to the carts, someone saw a diamond flash in the bodice of one of the girls where her clothes had been ripped. We all crowded round to look, and then I saw what was hidden in the undergarments of the female prisoners. The men began pawing at the dead women's clothes. One of them raised the Empress's lilac skirts and sniggered that he could die happy now that he'd touched the 'royal cunt'. Then another did the same. It was beginning to fall apart. The Commandant ordered them to back off, and when they hesitated he used us – the members of the Special Detachment – to make them. We levelled our revolvers, forcing the men back. The Commandant dismissed the two who had groped the Empress and any others he'd seen looting. They grumbled, but they obeyed, and things calmed down a little. He told the rest of the men to fan out along the road and stop anyone approaching from either direction. And after they'd gone he tore into Ermakov for having 'jeopardized the operation'.

The Fiat set off back to town. It was too heavy to make it down the path ahead. Actually, it was a relief to be rid of the truck. It had already got stuck a couple of times, and we'd had to struggle to free it. We went

deeper into the forest with three carts containing the corpses, leading the horses on foot. It was already getting light. Ermakov eventually brought us to the disused mine, which was in a large glade at a place called the Four Brothers. He didn't seem too sure of the way, but he pointed out where the 'brothers' had once stood – four pine trees that grew out of a single trunk, he said, although now there were only a couple of stumps left. The mine shaft didn't live up to its name either. It turned out to be just a shallow pit from a prospecting mine. There were lots of pits like that nearby, the region was rich in copper. It was obvious that the bodies wouldn't stay hidden for long if we dumped them there. But we were exhausted and it was already dawn so the Commandant had no alternative. He ordered us to strip the corpses and burn the clothes. He told Ermakov to smash in the faces. This was harder than anyone imagined, and the drunkard only managed to disfigure a couple, before giving up, complaining that he was exhausted.

We stripped the bodies in the dawn light to a chorus of birdsong. We tried to do it fast, desperate for that night's work to be over. I remember thinking: how can a woman wear so many clothes? Under the dark blue suits those girls had blouses, petticoats, frills, ruffles, and then, on top of yet more chemises, those bloody doubled corsets. As I wrenched apart the metal fastenings at the front, jewels came tumbling out from between two layers of stiffened fabric. Diamonds, sapphires, rubies, each one wrapped in wadding. Whole necklaces and bracelets. Rings, brooches, medals, earrings, all packed closely together to form a kind of body-armour made of the most priceless things. It was then we finally understood why the girls had taken so long to die in the cellar. With Ermakov's thugs dismissed, the Commandant had reliable people with him, and we worked properly, ripping the doubled corsets to get at the valuables which we placed in a sack that the Commandant himself carried from one body to the next. I was shocked at the quantity of jewels they'd hidden. Next to her skin the Empress was wearing several ropes of large pearls that she, or someone else, had sewn inside a cloth belt. She also had a spiral of thick gold wire wrapped around her upper arm underneath her chemise. I couldn't begin to guess its value. Even the buttons of their clothes turned out to be enormous precious stones covered with fabric. The boy wore a kind of undergarment lined with valuables, and he had jewels sewn inside the band of his cap. When the Commandant's sack was full, it weighed about eight kilos.

I can say this with pride: all the valuables were collected. Not one of us took anything for himself. At least, we took none of the precious items. In the chamber, the Commandant had tossed Nicholas's cap to Kudrin, 'as a souvenir', he'd said. It was a regular army cap so Kudrin just ripped off the cockade and pocketed that. I admit, we did want to share out the footwear. Boots were almost impossible to come by at that time, you see, and it seemed criminal to burn such good ones. But they were soaked in