

THE KNIGHT OF THE HOLY RUS

CENTENARY OF THE DEATH OF GRAND DUKE SERGEI ALEXANDROVICH

"Eternal memory is to you in the Holy Rus, our dear Grand Duke, loved by us so deeply! Remember us in your devout prayers before the Throne of the Almighty; let the Lord send peace and quiet onto our land, the land that caused you so much grief and concern while you were still with us."

"Moskovskiye Vedomosti", February 1905



Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovich, son of the Tsar-Liberator, brother of the Tsar-Peacemaker, uncle of the Tsar-Martyr. One of the most tragic figures of the eve of the Russian catastrophe, a person of a complex dramatic destiny, not understood and even slandered both alive and after death. An adherent to firm political principles and convictions, he was a highly cultured man and one of the most educated people of his time. A fearless knight, he was fighting with the enemies of faith and motherland both on the battlefields and at the invisible front of the confrontation of ideas. Being the zealot of the Orthodox Church he became the first martyr of the Russian Imperial Dynasty in the 20th century.

An entire century passed since the day of his death but a heavy cloud of obscurity still covers the life and deeds of Sergei Alexandrovich. It is only after his wife, Grand Duchess Elizaveta Fyodorovna, was canonised (in 1981 abroad and in 1992 in Russia), the image of Grand Prince began to take shape on the pages of books and articles. Slowly but surely, like an ancient icon in restorer's hands, the portrait of this man was being cleansed from the ideological dirt of the recent era, and from crude amends and additions of his contemporaries when his opponents resorted to the most incredible lies to make the general public dislike this personality.

However, vile conjecture and slander against the Grand Duke, which became common at the beginning of the last century among people thriving on vulgarity, has not yet sunk into oblivion, and from time to time it can be found on the pages of today's publications. It is not by accident that this muddy froth has started to come up again as soon as the truth began to be restored and the question has risen about remembrance worthy of such a name, for Grand Duke Sergei has long been a model of faithfulness to the ideals of the Russian national state.

The question today is whether we, having rebuked all foul insinuations, can understand fully the life epic of heroism of the Grand Duke - the heroism of his service to Russia, the heroism of his sacrifice. It is a question of rising to the expectations of those who were convinced a century ago that Sergei Alexandrovich "is going to grow in the eyes of our descendants and when the Russian people set firmly on their way, the memory of the deceased, surrounded by the halo of a

martyr, will shine from the annals of history and witness strongly that even at the times of instability and general confusion there were stoics in Rus, people with the soul of strength ready to die for their faith."

The Grand Duke Sergei was born on 29 April 1857 and even as a young child he knew very well the meaning of such concepts as duty, honour and faithfulness. Also from the very beginning, and throughout his life, he felt responsible for his given name, the name of St Sergius, given to him by his parents as a pledge and a sign of hope for protection from the Miracle-Worker from Radonezh at the time when Russia was stepping onto a new historic path.



Grand Duchess Elizabeth Fyodorovna

This historic path marked the beginning of a life journey for Sergei Alexandrovich. As it led him through years of study and moral growth, onto the frontline of the Russian-Turkish war, where he showed himself a real hero and was awarded St George's Cross, and further on to become commander-in-chief of the Preobrazhenski Regiment House Guards, he matched his life against the values of his faith. He saw the Russian monarchy as one of the dogmas of faith for a Russian, and rejecting it equalled sacrilege for him. Honest service, respect for the law, worship of God and love for his country were indispensable parts of the Russian state thinking which the Grand Duke understood as God's will.

The world outlook for Sergei Alexandrovich was based on the Orthodox faith. He carried deep sincere faith instilled in him from childhood through his whole life, becoming a model of Christian humility, piety and faithfulness to the Russian church. It is a known fact that it was the Grand Duke's devotion that brought his wife to an independent decision to become Orthodox. Since that moment their family turned into, in accordance with the teachings of the Holy Fathers, a real little church, which made their feeling of responsibility even greater. They would keep the pure image of the Saviour in their hearts to the end of their lives, and He would always remain the ultimate truth for Sergei Alexandrovich. It was his faith that helped the Grand Duke to endure the suffering and blows of fate, helping him not to complain or bend down under the Cross that befell him.



The Imperial Palestine Orthodox Society, founded with the support of Sergei Alexandrovich and chaired by him throughout his life, became widely famous and highly regarded. It allowed thousands of Russian pilgrims (especially the needy ones) to visit the Holy Land; it also carried out missionary work and published research works. In 1884 the archaeological excavations in Jerusalem, initiated and

sponsored by the Grand Duke, brought sensational result - the threshold of the Judgment Gate was discovered thus confirming the authenticity of the site of Golgotha.

His own Golgotha was, of course, unknown to him then, but he was ever approaching it, unbending as he was, noble, honest, and demonstratively ignoring the threats. In a way, this bravery is reminiscent of the courage of the faithful Russian princes rising against formidable enemy hordes. It is reminiscent of the heroism of the monks Alexander and Andrei (Peresvet and Oslabya in the world) who fell at the Kulikovo battle, having been blessed by St Sergius to fight in the Russian army in the hour of decisive confrontation with the enemy. Now the deeply pious son of a tsar who even before birth was dedicated to the Holy Superior of St Sergius Trinity Lavra, equally unexpectedly, and just as obediently, became a knight in the new battle for the future of Russia, an invisible but, nonetheless, cruel battle. As ever, Moscow was going to become the crucial turning point in it.

In 1891 Sergei Alexandrovich was appointed Governor-General of Moscow, in other words, tsar's deputy ruler with huge administrative powers over the whole of Central Russia. He was fulfilling this hard duty, which so unexpectedly had come his way, for nearly fourteen long years. The Grand Duke always loved Moscow deeply, he really felt close to the city. The Governor-General wanted to see the first capital of Russia as a stronghold of Orthodoxy and monarchy, as a Russian national centre and a bastion of national principles, and, striving to

implement this idea into practice he introduced appropriate changes in the city, removing everything that stood in its way.



Nikolskiye Gate of the Kremlin, place of Grand Duke Sergei's death

He did a lot for the education of the almost illiterate population, he tried to bring Russian history closer to the people; he became a chairman of numerous charities and various public bodies and cared for the preservation of old and the creation of new monuments. The city's cultural life was of his primary concern, and it is due to his efforts that such centres of culture as the famous Art Theatre and the Museum of Fine Arts (whose organising committee he headed for many years) were opened...

A new wave of terror and violence rose in Russia in the beginning of the 20th century. The most faithful sons of the country were under threat from the enemy's sword, and Grand Duke Sergei turned out to be one of the first victims of the treacherous lawlessness. He was killed by a terrorist's bomb which exploded near St Nicholas Gate in the Kremlin on Friday 4 February 1904 at 2.47 p.m. He was forty seven years old.

"Why was he killed?" was the question asked by the author of a brochure dedicated to the memory of Sergei Alexandrovich. His answer was, "Our criminals would not leave him alone... They took revenge on him for being faithful to his duty in the past, for never having swayed from his responsibility of the tsar's servant and loyal subject. That is why the satanic malice of the monsters killed him. But there was another reason why the criminal plotters raised their

hand on the Grand Duke. They could not but realise that the cause they had started upon - the undermining of tsarist autocracy - could not possibly be a long lasting success, that sooner or later the Russian people would stand up in its full gigantic height and together free Russia from the revolutionary subversion. All Russian people would have undoubtedly taken part in this liberating battle which the Grand Duke would have lead as a model of courage and selfless devotion to Tsar and Russia. The dirty aim of our revolutionaries is to deprive Russia of its strong and staunch defenders not just for the present but also for the period of the future revival."

Soon the all-destructive power eradicated the Memorial to Grand Prince, with his Kremlin shrine being desecrated and the Crucifix erected on the place of his death demolished. It looked as if even the memory of the fearless knight of the Holy Rus had disappeared, but the elemental forces of evil turned out to be powerless in the face of the Truth. There came a time when the tomb of Sergei Alexandrovich was found and later transferred to the Novospasski Monastery to be venerated by the people, and the famous Crucifix Monument, a masterpiece by Victor Vasnetsov, was given a new life there as well. (The Most Holy Patriarch Alexis II characterised this event as "the restoration of historical justice".) "Today", says the monastery brochure, "the honouring of memory of Sergei Alexandrovich whose image was intentionally distorted for so long is being revived, thank God."

Thank God, indeed! However, the new political winds are bringing discord again - we celebrate the centenary of Grand Prince's martyrdom in the era of renewed confrontation with terrorism. Yes, it does appear to be different, or rather, differently coloured, but in essence this evil remains the same, as does its purpose on our land - the destruction of the Russian state. This simple truth seems to be clear to everyone now, the bloodthirsty monster has been condemned by all, but still attempts of "justification" are being made from time to time or calls for "dialogue" are heard.

"People of Russia, when shall we come to our senses?.. The country is in danger, people are dying at war and at home, despicable and filthy murder is out of the dark corners and into the streets, yet the best sons of the country, who are thought to be its intellectual elite, keep talking about their utopian overseas ideals..."

These words were not spoken today; they are from a speech by the Holy Martyr Ioann Vostorgov at the funeral service for Grand Prince Sergei in February 1905. But don't they sound topical and up-to-date?

Let us be more aware of our past, our heroes, and our roots. That is what Sergei Alexandrovich called for when he was gathering Russia's true defenders under the banners of Holy Rus.

Let him rest in peace, our faithful tsarevich, Grand Duke-Martyr Sergiy! The veneration of his memory will never cease among the people, as will never end the stream of people coming to his shrine. And residing now near the Throne of God let him solicit help and protection so needed for us with his prayers and become one of the Heavenly Patrons of the Russian State.

D.B.Grishin,
PhD History, Head of the *Pogost* Program of the *Radonezh* Brotherhood.

Published in the *Vestnik of the German Diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad* magazine, No 3, 2005 with the permission of the *Radonezh* Orthodox Review No 2 (154), 2005, pp 4-5.

Translated into English: February 2007