

# The Dark Forces: Popular Analogies in Russian Politics

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In his biography of Nicholas II, Dominic Lieven observed that the end of the Soviet regime, by closing a chapter in Russian history, dramatically increased the relevance of the czarist legacies for many aspects of contemporary politics.<sup>1</sup> Whereas, if only two or three decades ago large parts of the prerevolutionary, even the pre-Stalin, past were seen by many as confined to the dustbin of history, today the story of imperial Russia, especially that of her last few decades, has been resurrected into the “living” past, linked with current political, economic, and social developments.<sup>2</sup>

To observers of Russia, this resurrection was most notable on television screens. There yesterday’s first secretaries proudly displayed imperial double-eagles in their offices, scrambled to attend the funeral ceremony of Nicholas II (“czar-martyr” replacing “Nicholas the Bloody” in their solemn speeches), and held black tie receptions in honor of the visiting Queen Elizabeth in the Kremlin, freshly renovated to restore the czarist interiors.

Czarist history has moved center stage in Russian political discourse, with events and figures from the past now routinely invoked to discuss contemporary developments. One analogy sticks out, however, both in terms of the frequency with which it features in the press and public debates and because it deals with executive power. Since the early 1990s, attention has been focused on the private individuals who allegedly exerted serious influence on President Yeltsin, and much of the terminology used to discuss those activities came from the reign of Nicholas II. As in Nicholas’s days, influential personalities have been labeled the “dark forces” and the “court camarilla,” and the image of Rasputin has been alluded to frequently. If there is one analogy that was invoked continually for the greater part of Yeltsin’s era, it is the “Rasputin” or “dark forces” analogy.

Studies dealing with the role of analogies in politics have focused mainly on their place in the decision-making process. Ernest May has described how experiences of the past have often been “misused” by decision makers and suggested

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ways to properly employ lessons of history.<sup>3</sup> In one of the most theoretically concise works, Yuen Foong Khong has combined findings of cognitive psychology with foreign policy analysis, developing an “analogical explanation” framework to describe the choices for war made in Vietnam and Korea. He demonstrates that analogies are not simply tools with which politicians seek to justify decisions already made and mobilize public support; rather they can play a key role in the decision-making process itself.<sup>4</sup>

In this article, I discuss the role of historical analogies in public discourse rather than in executive decision making. I focus on the “dark forces” analogy in Russia. I examine the role of “unofficial advisers” under Nicholas II and identify the ways in which the images of those individuals have been used in Russia. Finally, I explain why the “dark forces” analogy has recently gained such prominence and consider whether such analogies can be of use for serious political inquiry.

### **History in Public Discourse**

In public debates, historical analogies play a role similar to that in government decision making. Analogies are a useful tool to help interpret sensory data, retrieve knowledge from memory, and process information. According to the schema theory in social psychology, people match new situations with knowledge structures stored in memory; when no cognitive structure fits the data, people may invoke close matches. Like politicians, the general public uses analogies to make sense of current developments. Analogies perform a set of “diagnostic tasks”: they define the nature of the problem by comparing it to a familiar past event, highlight political stakes involved, and suggest possible solutions. They also predict the likelihood of success of a particular course of action, assess its moral rightness, and warn against potential dangers.<sup>5</sup> The first three tasks illuminate a given situation; the last three suggest the path of action.

The use of “popular analogies” (such as those directed at the general public) is a powerful device because it uses existing knowledge and experience. For an analogy to “work,” however, it needs to invoke not only a familiar event, but also one that is linked to a specific value outcome. The Munich analogy, for example, is compelling because it links particular actions to a known result: making concessions to Hitler did not prevent further aggression. We can hence conclude that appeasing an aggressor today is a bad idea.

A popular analogy must draw on a range of familiar historical experiences. The scale of this historical landscape is usually quite narrow: unlike elite memory, popular memory makes no effort to fill the blanks, it is less linear, more episodic.<sup>6</sup> Popular memory is anchored in a limited number of events and figures. In today’s Russia, the range of images from the czarist past, maintained in folklore by school, popular history, and art, consists of perhaps ten figures, among them Ivan the Terrible, Boris Godunov, Ivan Susanin, Peter the Great, Alexander Suvorov, Emelyan Pugachev, Mikhail Kutuzov, Nicholas II, and Grigoriy Rasputin.

It is necessary to distinguish between labels, metaphors, and symbols on one side and analogies on the other. The former category deals with a simple comparison; the latter opens up concrete “lessons.” The term “historical analogy”

itself signifies an inference that if two or more events separated in time agree in one respect, they may also agree in another.<sup>7</sup> Although metaphors and symbols may lead to some idea of what is “good” and “bad” today, they offer little by way of specific conclusions. The glorification of Ivan the Terrible in Stalin’s era and of Peter the Great in the last decade is a case in point.<sup>8</sup> Although they suggest that strong central power is “good” for Russia, these symbols do not go much further. Similarly, Yeltsin’s semimocking, semiserious references to himself as “czar Boris the First,” alluding to the image of Peter the First, offer no lessons.<sup>9</sup>

In other words, a metaphor performs only one “diagnostic” task of the six listed above: it may help to define a particular problem. Analogical reasoning does much more. Consider the passage below, taken from a popular Moscow weekly. Here the author relates contemporary developments to *smutnoye vremya*, the tragic time of troubles in late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries that followed the death of Ivan the Terrible in 1584, the rise of Boris Godunov, and the appearance of challengers to his rule. At least three pretenders claimed to be Dmitry, the youngest son of Ivan the Terrible. The most successful of them, False Dmitry the First, obtained aid from Poland and overthrew Godunov in 1605. Another, False Dmitry the Second, twice laid siege to Moscow in 1608 from his base in the town of Tushino, earning the nickname “the thief of Tushino.” The following text was written in autumn 1999:

We did pass through this in early 17th century. There was everything: power struggle in the besieged Kremlin, and tortured choice of an heir, and boyars-deserters who in the morning sat in the Kremlin Duma and in the evening in the marquees of the “thief of Tushino.” . . . And how about canvassers for “real” czar-impostors? And the 1613 election campaign—with little “public relations” tricks that are still a long reach for our spin-doctors? Today’s [Chechnya] with success attempts to replace Poland. Western states would not mind . . . repeating the feat of the Swedes who came to help and then grabbed a third of Russia. Yeltsin . . . due to versatility of his character combines the features of unpredictable Ivan the Terrible and rushing-about Godunov.<sup>10</sup>

This passage contains more than a metaphor: the comparison is designed to kill many birds with one stone. By alluding to the disastrous years of anarchy and foreign intervention, it provides a clear definition of the situation and of the stakes involved. The comparison also attaches moral values to actors: clearly the czar, the boyars, and the West are “bad.” And it leads to concrete conclusions and lessons: the current “versatile” monarch is illegitimate and the “helpful” West must not be trusted.<sup>11</sup>

### The Dark Forces

As mentioned above, the most frequently cited analogy in post-Soviet Russia has been that of the “dark forces”—a clique of people around the president who are perceived to be actual rulers of the country. A quick word-search for “Rasputin” in the Russian press database returns dozens and dozens of articles of varying political orientation and quality that invoke the image of the “mad monk” in discussing current politics. The western press has eagerly picked up the analogy as

well.<sup>12</sup> Similar results appear for another word coming directly from the court of Nicholas—the *camarilla*. Meaning “a little room” in Spanish, this term came to denote a group of unofficial advisers that formed around Spain’s Ferdinand VII in 1814 and often met in the king’s antechamber. The random backgrounds of those people, among them a clergyman, a porter, a former watercarrier, and a court fool, gave the word *camarilla* its distinctive, lasting meaning.<sup>13</sup>

In prerevolutionary Russia, *camarilla* was a much-used term throughout the reign of Nicholas II, who was perceived to be an easily influenced, indecisive monarch, often succumbing to stronger-willed individuals around him, such as his wife, Empress Alexandra Feodorovna. Lenin viewed this unofficial clique as a permanent institution of absolute monarchy. In an analysis that later defined Soviet historiography of the phenomenon,<sup>14</sup> Lenin wrote:

The point is that we, like any country with autocratic or semiautocratic regime, actually have two governments: one official—the cabinet of ministers, the other backstage—the court *camarilla*. This latter always and everywhere leans on the most reactionary layers of society, on feudal . . . nobility.<sup>15</sup>

It is easy to point out the confusion and bewilderment that have surrounded this terminology in Russia both before 1917 and in the 1990s. The anonymous forces around the throne were seen in dark, almost demonic colors even by those one would not imagine to be inclined to mystification. When in March 1917 the Provisional Government established the Extraordinary Investigative Commission to uncover the wrongdoings of czarist ministers and top officials, one section of the commission was charged with an inquiry into “irresponsible” influences at the court; the section was officially named “Examination of the dark forces’ activities.”<sup>16</sup>

Just at the time when the “dark forces” were supposedly at work, their precise composition was unknown even to such prominent insiders as the French ambassador to Russia, Maurice Paleologue, who wrote in 1916:

There cannot be the slightest doubt that the action of Russia is inspired by the Empress’s *camarilla*. [sic] But by whom is this *camarilla* itself inspired? From whom does it get its programme and leadership? Certainly not the Empress. . . . Alexandra Feodorovna is too impulsive, wrong-headed and unbalanced to imagine a political system and carry it out logically. . . . So with the individuals who flutter around her, Rasputin, the Virubova, General Voyeikov, Taneiev, Sturmer, Prince Andronnikov and the rest; they are only subordinates, supers, servile plotters or marionettes. . . . Then by whom is the Tsarskoie-Selo *camarilla* really inspired? In vain have I questioned those who seemed best qualified to satisfy my curiosity. All I have got is vague or contradictory replies, hypotheses and suppositions.<sup>17</sup>

The new terminology used in post-perestroika Russia is similarly unclear: For example, one hears much about Yeltsin’s “family” that extends far beyond his relatives and represents a powerful force in the Kremlin more than a year after Yeltsin’s resignation.

A proper conceptualization of the phenomenon seems tricky. What is an unofficial “black cabinet” or a “camarilla”? Influential people without official appointments? But even in Paleologue’s passage we see the names of Sturmer, the prime

minister, and Voeikov, the palace commandant. The uniqueness of “unofficial influences” can also be questioned. Every leader, whether presiding over an autocratic or a democratic system of government, interacts with individuals who surround him. Interaction implies that the leader’s perceptions, views, and ultimately decisions will be affected by others. Even at this minimal level, they influence their leader. There is, of course, a variety of other ways in which “unaccountable” actors, such as the bureaucracy, can affect a chief executive’s decision making: by regulating access of people and information to the leader; by confronting him with particular choices that may already be shaped by standard operating procedures; by blocking his preferred course of action. And, even more important, when the executive decision is taken, the leader may be unable to control its implementation.<sup>18</sup>

If we define “unofficial influence” as the ability of actors who hold no formal relevant positions within the government to affect governmental outcomes, we can separate the problem from that of “bureaucratic politics.” It also becomes clear that it is not the same as

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corruption, which involves deviation from accepted norms by public officials pursuing private gain.<sup>19</sup> Neither is it “oligarchy”—a political system dominated by a struggle among personal and family cliques that do not relate their private interest to a public good.<sup>20</sup> Unofficial influences go hand in hand with both corrupt public officials and rival private clans competing for public resources, but they exist around, manipulate, and extract benefits from the supreme source of power. The existence of a camarilla means that political institutionalization is inadequate and decision-making and implementation procedures are deficient.

That is what ultimately differentiates Robert Kennedy and Hillary Clinton from Grigoriy Rasputin and Tatyana Dyachenko, however diverse these figures are. Neither pre- nor post-Soviet Russia has had built-in institutional brakes that would limit the influence of family members, holy men, and bodyguards on political process. What also makes Russia different, in the two periods under consideration here, is the prevalence and breadth of the perception that “people from nowhere” run the country. And it is not only the sentiment of the general public; leading policymakers also believe that Russia stands out as a country where unofficial influences play a crucial role.<sup>21</sup>

### **“People from Nowhere” and Alexander III**

Unlike Nicholas I and Alexander II, who exercised strong control over their families and favorites, the last two Russian monarchs were open to a greater degree of influence of “people from nowhere.”<sup>22</sup>

Alexander III used outsiders as instruments to implement projects that he

could not pursue through official channels, and he also allowed himself to be persuaded by them. The most striking example of his use of unofficial actors was a bizarre scheme that involved the landing of a Russian detachment in French Ethiopia in 1888. Conceived by the procurator of the Holy Synod Pobedonostsev and approved by the czar, the plan included the establishment of a Russo-African company, which would colonize and then transfer the acquired territories to the Russian government. Because Foreign Minister Giers did not approve of the plan, the czar chose to by-pass him: under his directions, a detachment of 150 men was secretly organized, armed, and provided with a “volunteer fleet” vessel by the Naval Office. An anonymous Cossack, Nikolai Arshinov, was put in charge. The company duly landed in Ethiopia, occupied an abandoned settlement, and raised a Russian flag, only to be arrested by the outraged French. When it became clear that the mission had fallen through, Pobedonostsev pleaded innocence, pretending he had no knowledge of the venture, and Alexander, furious that his approval of the scheme was disclosed, demanded that Arshinov and his crew be removed from Africa.<sup>23</sup>

Five years later, in 1893, Alexander III reviewed another fabulous colonial plan, this time for Russian expansion in Asia. Once again, the idea was extraordinary: It involved an extension of the trans-Siberian railway to the Chinese heartland and secret promotion of Tibetan, Mongolian, and Muslim Chinese rebellion against the Manchu dynasty with a view to incorporate large chunks of China into the Russian empire. Even more unbelievable was the source of the plan, a junior Foreign Ministry official and a former practitioner of Tibetan medicine, Pyotr Badmaev, who obtained the support of Sergei Witte, the powerful minister of finance. The latter persuaded the czar, who was initially taken aback by the “novel, unusual and fantastic” plan, to endorse it. In November 1893, again behind the back of the Foreign Ministry, Badmaev received a credit for two million rubles, which he successfully spent even though the plan was never put into action.<sup>24</sup> Badmaev retained much of his influence throughout the reign of Nicholas II and later became a prominent member of Rasputin’s entourage.

### **Unofficial Influences and Russia’s Road to War with Japan**

The clash between Russia and Japan, which had such profound effect on the course of Russian history, resulted from a dispute over the influence of the two empires in the Far East, specifically in Korea. In the late 1880s and 1890s, Russia penetrated Manchuria, obtained Chinese approval for the construction of the Chinese-Eastern railway, and acquired Port Arthur, combining a forward policy in the Far East with relatively stable relations with Japan. In April 1898, Japan consented to construction of the Russian railway line in Manchuria in return for a free hand in Korea, and Russian military and financial advisers were recalled from that country.<sup>25</sup> The years 1898 to 1904 witnessed more bold, adventurous, and aggressive Russian conduct. To a large extent, Russia’s slide into the war centered around a shift of authority away from the top government officials, ministers of finance, foreign affairs, and war, Sergei Witte, Count Lamsdorf, and General Kuropatkin, to the czar’s unofficial advisers, A. Bezobrazov and V. M. Vonliarliarsky.

The latter two were retired Chevalier Guards officers, both quite wealthy and well connected in official circles, although their formal positions were relatively lightweight. Bezobrazov served in various capacities under Count I. I. Vorontsov-Dashkov, the influential minister of the Imperial Court, and later as a special assistant to Count A. P. Ignatiev, governor general of Western Siberia. Vonliarliarsky was an energetic businessman who also acted as a privy counselor in the State Council and as assistant secretary to V. K. Pleve, head of the Chancellery and later minister of the interior.<sup>26</sup>

In 1897, Vonliarliarsky came up with a scheme for establishing a timber concession on the Korean bank of the Yalu river, hoping to attract foreign capital and set up a Russian analog of the East India Company. From the beginning, the plan not only focused on making profit, but had a distinctive grand-strategic flavor. Vonliarliarsky enlisted Bezobrazov, who brought the plan to the attention of Nicholas II in February 1898. The czar was sufficiently interested in the plan to finance an expedition to examine the lands in question; the concession was later purchased by a court functionary with money from Nicholas's Private Cabinet.<sup>27</sup>

In the next three years Vonliarliarsky and Bezobrazov attempted to enlist various government departments into the scheme, while bombarding Nicholas with numerous memoranda on the concession in which they criticized the official policy of ignoring Korea. The correspondence between the duet and the czar bypassed official channels and was delivered by Vonliarliarsky's former batman. Over time, a circle of relatively prominent personalities formed around the venture: It included Bezobrazov's cousin, Admiral A. M. Abaza, and N. G. Matiunin, a diplomat of many years' experience in the Far East. Finally, in 1900, the venture was given new life under the auspices of the East Asia Development Company, and after a long and bitter struggle against the three ministers, Bezobrazov was issued a credit note for two million rubles, again covered by His Majesty's Private Cabinet<sup>28</sup>

Bezobrazov and company posed a consistent and menacing danger to Witte, Lamsdorf, and Kuropatkin, who put aside past disagreements and rivalries to save their authority over the Far Eastern developments. The success or failure of each camp depended on the judgment of the czar, who was torn between the official course and the radical changes proposed by a group of like-minded people with whom he clearly sympathized. Throughout 1902 and early 1903, the outcome of the struggle was unclear, as Nicholas embraced his ministers and tacitly approved Bezobrazov at the same time. As Kuropatkin commented in his diary, the result was the emergence of two policies in the Far East; one was *imperatorskaya*, the other *bezobrazovskaya*.<sup>29</sup> In the meantime, alarming signals were coming from Tokyo. The Japanese government learned about the Russian concession in Korea in 1900, and Marquis Ito, the foreign minister, made the grim implications of persistence with this venture clear to Russian Ambassador Baron Rosen. The latter kept cautioning St. Petersburg, only to be recalled and appointed to a secondary mission in Bavaria. At the same time, a Russian military agent in Japan who believed in the great potential of the Japanese army was replaced by an officer who considered it an underdeveloped force with poor technical support.<sup>30</sup>

The balance finally tilted against Witte in May 1903. Following a special conference on the Far East, chaired by Nicholas, the legality of the Yalu venture was accepted and newly appointed State Secretary Bezobrazov was given broad authority "to determine . . . the essence of [Russia's] politico-economic tasks in Manchuria and on the Pacific coast."<sup>31</sup> As Witte wrote in his memoirs, from that time on he believed that the Far Eastern cause was lost and that war was imminent; he consequently gave up the fight.<sup>32</sup> Three months later, Witte was moved from his ministerial post to a nominally higher, but largely ceremonial, position as chairman of the Committee of Ministers. Although Witte saw the influence of Bezobrazov as decisive in his removal, other forces were also significant.

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Grand Duke Alexander Mikhailovich accused Witte of accumulating excessive power, and V. K. Pleve, the minister of the interior, had complained to Nicholas of revolutionary sympathies manifested in Witte's support for unreliable elements such as the Finns, Armenians, Jews, and students.<sup>33</sup> An anonymous Petersburg wit caught the flavor

of the moment when he said that Witte departed from high politics through the efforts of Pleve and Bezobrazov, "spit upon and disfigured" [*oplevannyi i obezobrazhennyi*].<sup>34</sup>

With Witte brushed aside, chief decision-making powers in the Far East were concentrated in the newly established viceroyalty, to which Admiral Alekseev, a Bezobrazov sympathizer, was appointed. In the face of stiffening Japanese resistance to Russian pursuits in Korea, Alekseev was charged with conducting Russo-Japanese discussions. These did more harm than good, however, as by that time the whole decision-making structure in the Far East was in such a poor shape that it took weeks to review and reply to Japanese proposals. The existence of the viceroyalty as a "second government" in the Far East, with Bezobrazov playing a role of foreign minister, was only half the trouble. Bezobrazov's clique was simply not prepared to deal with Japanese claims constructively: Arrogance replaced accommodation, as Alekseev dismissed Japanese demands as "impermissible pretension," and Abaza recommended suspension of the discussions altogether, since any concession on the part of Russia would be seen as weakness by the Orientals. The czar seemed sympathetic to a tough line with "barbarous" Japan.<sup>35</sup>

Although diplomatic exchanges with Japan continued until early January 1904, no compromise was worked out despite the continuing efforts of Lamsdorf and Kuropatkin. Tokyo gradually became convinced that Russia intended to maintain its military grip on Manchuria and expand into Korea. On 25 January, Japan launched the war with an attack on the Russian squadron in Port Arthur.

Although the material and financial sides of the Yalu enterprise were not sig-



nificant (the East Asia Development Company was bankrupt by the time the war began), *bezobrazovshchina* directly contributed to turmoil in Russia's Far Eastern policies that exasperated the Japanese and at a minimum provided them with a plausible *casus belli*.<sup>36</sup> Consensus at the time definitely put the blame for the war on Bezobrazov. In Lamsdorf's words: "The complete disorganization of our political activity in the Far East, the occult intervention of a pack of irresponsible adventurers and intriguers had led us to a catastrophe."<sup>37</sup> As a result of this institutional breakdown, Russia was dragged into a war that, although not seen as disastrous (many shared Pleve's famous call for a small, victorious war to help cope with domestic pressures), was far from a preferred course of action.

### Rasputin's Influence

Although Rasputin is undoubtedly the most colorful historical figure of the last years of czarist Russia, the measure of his real influence is difficult to determine. So many legends surrounded the notorious *starets* in his lifetime and so much rubbish has been written about him since his death that evaluation of his role remains a challenging task. Both among his contemporaries and in subsequent literature, many visions of Rasputin exist. In the words of the poet Alexander Blok, Rasputin was "for some a 'scoundrel' who had 'an office to do business'; for others 'a great comedian', 'a convenient pedal of German espionage', or a stubborn, insincere, reticent man who never forgot offenses, revenged himself cruelly, and who once studied with a hypnotist."<sup>38</sup>

The czarina's inclination to mysticism was largely to blame for Rasputin's admission to the court. He was certainly not the first "holy man" to enter the exclusive world of Tsarskoye Selo. At least two famous charlatans reached prominence before him: Philippe, the French spiritualist, and Papus, who claimed to be his disciple.<sup>39</sup> Rasputin was introduced to the court by Bishop Feofan, the czarina's confessor, and first met Alexandra Feodorovna in summer 1907.

Having persuaded the empress that he could handle the incurable hemophilia of czarovich Alexis, Rasputin began to accumulate court power. His influence on appointments, in both governmental and church hierarchies, was marked from 1911: The first known episode was his trip to Nizhniy Novgorod to meet Governor A. N. Khvostov, a candidate for the post of minister of the interior. Rasputin was unhappy with the way he was received, and Khvostov was not appointed on that occasion.<sup>40</sup> Before 1915, however, Rasputin's sway was sporadic rather than permanent. His influence over the imperial couple peaked between August 1915 and his death in December 1916. Attributed to Rasputin, were the czar's assumption of supreme war command and the removal of Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaeovich in the summer of 1915, and the continuous government reshuffles that became known as "ministerial leap-frog."

In the sphere of appointments Rasputin's control was significant. Widely perceived as able to remove and appoint high officials, he was in a position to extract benefits from them for his many "clients." His involvement in political matters as such was less pronounced. At any rate, no serious trace of such involvement was left in Rasputin's famous notes to the court and government ministers, which con-

cerned, in the words of the investigator, “appointments, transfers, pardons, grants, railway concessions and other business; but decidedly no signs of Rasputin’s involvement in political issues have been found.”<sup>41</sup>

Rasputin did not seem to have any political program. His key motivation was consolidation of personal power and prestige, but not really in a “political” sense. In the words of a famous poet, Zinaida Gippius:

While continuously engaged in politics, one can say, *making* politics—Rasputin in essence was not engaged in it, or was engaged in something else: he did not have a first idea of politics, and had no policy himself. . . . [His] wishes are extremely simple without any resemblance of “politics.” Rasputin is not even “vain”: this is too fine a concept for him. If one tries to express in words what actually Rasputin desired, this would be approximately: “That I lived at my will and, of course, in high esteem. That no one could obstruct me, and that I would do whatever I want. And let others bite their elbows looking at me.” Apart from these “That I lived...” he has no other wishes.<sup>42</sup>

Rasputin was not interested in accumulating money and spent or gave away whatever he had. Yet he took assignments and accepted payment. He was at some point paid a monthly sum of 3,000 rubles by Minister of the Interior Khvostov and Chief of the Police Department Beletzky for help with appointments (the agreement collapsed and led to a scandalous conflict between the two).<sup>43</sup> Although Rasputin later charged far larger amounts for his services (he was reported to accept tens of thousands of rubles for help with state contracts),<sup>44</sup> he did not save any meaningful fortune. None of his bribe money reached his dependents when he was killed; he left only 3,000 rubles, and it was the empress who sent 30,000 rubles to each of his three children from her private purse.<sup>45</sup>

Rasputin’s primary motivation was maintenance of his position through manipulation of appointments. The advice that he gave to the czar on political issues reflected his common sense and interest in preserving the monarchy. For this reason he was against war with Germany and he mistrusted the Duma.<sup>46</sup> Without doubt, Rasputin’s influence over the empress was immensely greater than over Nicholas, and from the outbreak of the war Alexandra engaged in political matters, as witnessed in her correspondence with the czar. Yet ultimately it was Nicholas who was the decision maker and the arbiter.

### Uses of Rasputin Analogy

As noted earlier, a popular analogy goes much further than a mere comparison. Drawing on an event familiar to most people, an analogy points to a likely outcome of current developments that may look similar to that event. At the same time, unambiguous moral values are assigned to both events and actors. The Rasputin analogy has been used extensively precisely because it contains all of these ingredients. Not only is Rasputin a part of popular folklore, but his activity is perceived to have led to the destruction of the monarchy and ultimately to the number-one event in world history for most Russians—the October Revolution. And it leaves little doubt about the “good” and “evil” in today’s politics.

As a result, in the 1990s the Rasputin analogy became a favorite of Yeltsin’s

opponents, from the Communists to disillusioned “young reformers.” The former drew the analogy on numerous occasions, including the parliamentary impeachment proceedings in spring 1999, when allegations that Yeltsin was an American spy responsible for the genocide of the Russian people reached their zenith. Consider a paragraph from the Duma speech of Nikolai Gubenko:

Let’s speak directly: practically in all layers of society there has ripened a conviction that the president is not with Russia but against Russia, that treason is in the Kremlin. Participation of American advisers in the election campaign, issuance of IMF loans to specific persons designated in Washington, dual citizenship of bankers and entrepreneurs, declassification of state secrets, the flight of ideas and technologies to the countries whose weapons are pointed against Russia—are these not answers to the question of who the master in Russia is? The master is he who is bombing Yugoslavia. . . . Let us honestly admit: the moral environment that has formed in the president’s entourage causes an honest man’s disgust. It is worse than the court camarilla under Rasputin. Today the insane luxury of residences, dinners, handing out of posts and capital is demonstrated even with a sort of mocking to millions of impoverished and starving compatriots.<sup>47</sup>

The use of the Rasputin analogy by Yeltsin’s former associates points to an ambiguous image—that of the czar. For Communists this is clear, as the quotation above demonstrates: the czar is bad. But that feeling is not shared by all Russians, many of whom see Nicholas as a kindly ruler, martyred at the hands of bloodthirsty Bolsheviks. That is precisely what enabled those who sided with Yeltsin to employ the Rasputin analogy. Boris Nemtsov, a one-time darling of the Kremlin who was booted out of power in the wake of the August 1998 financial crisis, launched an attack on Boris Berezovsky, an alleged Yeltsin confidant, with an article entitled “Berezovsky Is Rasputin of Our Days.”<sup>48</sup> Nemtsov’s point, of course, was that the good czar was corrupted by the bad favorite.

### The Usefulness of Analogies

It is easy to write off these analogies as superficial, meaningless journalistic tricks that are of no help for someone interested in a serious analysis of contemporary politics. Besides, a proper comparison of Yeltsin’s government to the czarist one is impossible. The sources are few and unreliable, and the available evidence is stained by immediate interests, jealousies, and wounded prides.

Yet precisely because there is so little information, popular analogies can be useful and telling. First, we can ask ourselves why those particular analogies, and not others, arose. As mentioned above, one reason deals with existing folklore. There has been no such thing as a “Bezobrazov analogy,” because he is not a figure familiar to most Russians. Analogies also reflect real developments: In a country where the legitimacy of a ruler is unquestionable and his command of his entourage is firm, a Rasputin analogy cannot appear. Few would contest the fact that people such as Korzhakov and Berezovsky enjoyed enormous influence in Kremlin politics while being largely despised in society. In addition, popular analogies have an *effect* in society that is impossible to ignore. In this case, “Rasputin analogies” contributed to the erosion of Yeltsin’s support base and established the image of a vulnerable, impotent ruler.

Second, analogies are a helpful tool with which one can identify avenues of further inquiry. In the words of one scholar, "Analogies . . . when they are soft, belong to heuristic. This is their secret charm: they are vague in the limits of their applicability, they are suggestive . . . they stimulate one's thinking, they offer possibilities which scintillate between promise and disappointment. . . . They invoke hidden memories imprisoned in the dark recesses of our minds and which, once set free, will set our imagination soaring."<sup>49</sup> As Dominic Lieven suggested, "the world of 1990s is very different from the one that existed before 1914 but important similarities do exist and useful comparisons can be made."<sup>50</sup>

What useful comparisons could be made in our case? Quite a few. It would be interesting to compare the personalities of the last czar and the first president, as has been done rather clumsily in the Russian press.<sup>51</sup> A fascinating feature of Nicholas's character was fear that ministers might usurp his monarchical prerogatives; he did not encourage great initiatives on the part of ministers and could be jealous of their popularity (yet following unofficial advice was perfectly compatible with the exercise of personal power).<sup>52</sup> During the turbulent months of late 1998 to 1999, there was a public perception that Yeltsin fired Primakov and Stepashin for very similar reasons.

It is also worthwhile to look more closely at the circles of unofficial advisers: did they act as a united group of people with the same interests? If not, what could unite them? What motivated them? Money was not the primary, or at any rate the only, motivation for either Bezobrazov or Rasputin—hardly the case now, when in the sarcastic words of Moscow's *Segodnya*, the "madmen are not very popular, while the practical people are held in esteem."<sup>53</sup>

Great comparisons can be made with regard to the institutions surrounding the chief executive. For a monarch or a president to run the government effectively, he must have an efficient private office that can condense and filter information and supervise the execution of decisions taken. Nicholas's personal chancellery signally failed to fulfill the functions of the private office.<sup>54</sup> It would be interesting to see how the administration of the president dealt with this task. Moreover, how does established bureaucracy cope with the rise of "people from nowhere"? This crucially depends on the latter's influence over appointments. That is why there was fierce resistance to "bezobrazovshchina" and why the main challengers to Rasputin, and ultimately his assassins, came from outside the government.

There is also an aspect of cyclicity: The erosion of government authority that accompanies the activities of unofficial advisers is followed by tightening and government reform. In the aftermath of the Russo-Japanese war a united government with a more independent premier emerged; the anarchy of the Rasputin years ended with the Bolshevik terror. Putin's successful centralization of authority and reliance on security forces are part of the same trend.

Unlike Nicholas, Yeltsin proved capable of departing from power with dignity and guarantees, yet popular analogies discussed in this article remain relevant after the end of the Yeltsin era. The first year of Putin's presidency has witnessed continued debates invoking the theme of "dark forces." During the election campaign, the question of who would win the election was replaced by that of who

influenced Putin. Since then, Putin has eliminated open political competitors, yet he remains surrounded by at least three major power groups with radically different interests and agendas. One is the “family,” a set of old insiders such as Alexander Voloshin; the other is represented by Putin’s ex-FSB associates, most notably Sergei Ivanov; the third by the relatively “liberal” government ministers such as German Gref and Alexei Kudrin. Although occasionally the struggle between these groups breaks out into the open (most recently over restructuring of RAO UES, the country’s electricity monopolist), in most instances it remains hidden from the public.

So while not attempting to substitute, as Trotsky warned, historical analogies for historical analysis,<sup>55</sup> it would be unwise to ignore such a rich and spicy part of everyday politics as long as the question of who manipulates the central source of power in Russia remains open.

#### NOTES

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