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HIST 610
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#2

An interesting paper. You may have looked for a recent issue of the movie so you wouldn't need to guess about location and lighting. Otherwise, the paper was well written and contained an excellent analysis of the filmmakers' attempt to capture an exciting figure in Russian history. Many movies seem to resort to sex and violence to boost their audience. *Rasputin*, a 1996 release from HBO Pictures, does not have to resort to these; they are an integral part of what really happened to Gregory Rasputin. The movie takes place against the

backdrop of late imperial Russia and the outbreak of World War I. As in real life, the movie Rasputin is a scoundrel and manipulator and the scraggy-bearded Alan Rickman plays the part well.

The real Gregory Rasputin was a peasant from Siberia. The movie touches on his background only briefly. The movie introduces him as a clairvoyant child in a tavern, guessing what the patrons are hiding behind their backs. As an adult, he claimed to have had a vision of the Virgin Mary, who instructed him to go to St. Petersburg to heal the tsarevich, Alexei, who suffered from hemophilia.

Rasputin was able to do what the doctors could not, and cured Alexei's legs so he could walk again. The movie creates a Jesus-like image of Rasputin as the tsarevich's savior by the use of selective lighting, highlighting his eyes several times, and prayerful dialogue during the healing scenes. By healing Alexei, or at least by alleviating his symptoms, Tsaritsa Alexandra Feodorovna came "under his spell" and began to trust him implicitly. Through his influence on Alexandra, the former Princess Alix of Hesse-

How do you know this - the footnote listed would not provide information.

Darmstadt, Rasputin was able to influence cabinet appointments and damage the reputation of Tsar Nicholas II. This Rasputin accomplished by accident; Nicholas did just about anything he could to appease his wife.¹

The movie does not address Rasputin's political influence over Alexandra and, through her, Nicholas. During the course of the movie, there is only one scene in which Rasputin makes a recommendation to Nicholas through his wife, recommending to Nicholas that he send the Russian army north to Prussia rather than south to Galicia. Though Nicholas followed many of Rasputin and Alexandra's recommendations for political appointments², he did not use Rasputin's military advice.

The real-life damage Rasputin did to the reputation and standing of the court was to bring about attacks on the honor of the Tsar and his wife. Nicholas tolerated Rasputin's presence at court because of his devotion to his wife, but others were not so tolerant of Rasputin's antics.³ In a stately dinner party scene, one of many during which Rasputin appears drunk, the Tsar's nephew rises to defend the Tsaritsa's honor, impugned obliquely by Rasputin. Rasputin in turn attacks the nephew's masculinity and makes another enemy.

¹ Edward Crankshaw, *The Shadow of the Winter Palace: Russia's Drift to Revolution, 1825-1917*. (New York: The Viking Press, 1976), 385-7.

² Crankshaw, 385; Adam B. Ulam, *Russia's Failed Revolutions: From the Decembrists to the Dissidents*. (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1981), 216, 249.

³ Ulam, 215, 217.

Rasputin focuses on the relationship between Alexandra and her sick son more than Nicholas's devotion to his youngest child, only son, and heir. Rasputin tells her that she is to blame for the boy's illness, that her lack of faith in God has brought down this curse on him. The film does little to reinforce the fierce devotion Nicholas had toward his son. Alexei was so important to Nicholas that when he abdicated the throne in 1917, he did so in favor of his brother Michael in order to preserve the togetherness of his family.⁴

Rasputin's murder on 17 December 1916 happens in the movie as it did in history. A grand duke and the Tsar's offended nephew conspired together under the urging of Vladimir Purishkevich, a cabinet minister. They lured Rasputin to Prince Michael's home, where the nephew lived in the basement apartments. After a failed attempt to poison the self-proclaimed man of God, they shot him. Though the movie does not address the fate of the murderers, ^{history goes.} real life did. The nephew went to serve in Persia and the grand duke accepted early retirement as his punishment.⁵

The one real inconsistency of the movie is also part of its attraction. The filmmakers obviously shot partially on location in Russia. Through the magic of sets built on sound stages, it is possible the interior scenes were shot anywhere in the world, possibly England considering the large number of British actors in the film. Russia is the ^{Might want to be sure of this} only place to capture the exterior shots of the Winter Palace in all its grandeur. It is a

⁴ *Ibid.*, 298.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 272-3.

beautiful building, surrounded by snowy gardens and a high gate. Unfortunately, Nicholas disliked the building intensely and spent as little time as possible there. He preferred to live in a smaller palace in a St. Petersburg suburb.⁶

In addition to the location shooting, the clothing is accurate as well. ~~In the~~ ^{wear} military men, including Nicholas, ~~the beginnings of~~ the familiar brown uniform of the Russian army ~~is apparent~~. The women and non-military men dress in an ornate and extravagant fashion. For official functions, the Tsaritsa and her four daughters wear gowns of stately beauty, trimmed with gold fabrics, intricate sashes, and quite a bit of jewelry. The Russian propensity for medals among the men is also accurately portrayed, with even the Tsarevich sporting a medal on his chest.

There are two small details of *Rasputin* that are fairly important to its accuracy. On the positive side, the Russian Orthodox mannerisms are correct, most noticeable in the "backwards" fashion they cross themselves. This kind of small detail is important because it shows one small aspect of the vast cultural differences between Russia and the western world in the early 20th century. The negative detail is only a minor point. It is easy to spot the British actors in the movie because they sound like Brits. Rickman, as Rasputin, and Creta Scacchi, as Alexandra, are the only actors to speak with a successful Russian

accent.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 245.

Of course it's a Russian accent so the language is right impossible to get right anyway

The story of Rasputin and his few years of influence over the Mother of all Russia, Tsaritsa Alexandra, is a good one, full of political intrigue and mystical, perhaps mythical, mysteries. The story in *Rasputin* is also good, following the historical timeline accurately and only fudging on small details. The movie *Rasputin* does not deal with Rasputin's political machinations or the widespread adoration of him, but this does not harm the movie or take away from its portrayal of the influence he had. The final note on the movie is that it ends correctly. Rasputin gets murdered. Nicholas abdicates the throne and moves to Siberia, where the victorious Bolsheviks brutally murder Nicholas, Alexandra, and their five children.

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