

The martyr cult of Grand Duke Sergei Aleksandrovich

Introduction

This article explores the myth making following the death of Grand Duke Sergei Aleksandrovich on 4 February 1905, when he was killed in the Moscow Kremlin by a bomb thrown by Ivan Kaliaev from the Socialist Revolutionary (SR) Party. Sergei had been uncle to tsar Nicholas II and governor-general of Moscow: as a significant figure in Russian public life, the deceased Romanov was honoured with a series of commemorative practices and activities following his assassination. The thesis advanced is that a vision of Sergei as a royal martyr played a central role in the scenarios of power as advanced by the Russian autocracy and was also key to the consolidation of the conservative community through a recasting of tsarist autocracy as under assault. This example near the start of Russia's year of revolutionary unrest was part of a wider trend for the celebration of the autocratic figures of late imperial Russia, as can be seen from the frequent funerals, requiems, coronations and anniversaries held for tsars, Grand Dukes and Duchesses from the end of the nineteenth century, examples of which have been ably explored in the work of Richard Wortman, Svetlana Limonova and others.¹

Whilst late imperial Russian conservatism has received much recent attention, most of these studies focus on conservative ideas in texts, and the words of key thinkers or statespeople. There is scant literature on the public presentation of conservative values, a

¹ See Richard Wortman, *Scenarios of Power. Myth and Ceremony in the Russian Monarchy*. 2 vols. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995 and 2000); K. N. Tsimbaev, 'Fenomen iubileimanii v rossiiskoi obshchestvennoi zhizni kontsa XIX-nachala XX veka', *Voprosy istorii*, 11 (2005), pp. 98-108; idem., 'Pravoslavnaia tserkov' i gosudarstvennye iubilei imperatorskoi Rossii', *Otechestvennaia istoriia*, 6 (2005), pp. 42-51; idem., 'Die Orthodoxe kirche im Einsatz für das Imperium. Kirche, Staat und Volk in den Jubiläumsfeiern des ausgehenden Zarenreichs', *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, Vol. 52, No. 3 (2004), pp. 355-70; and S. A. Serova (S. A. Limonova), 'Chernye obeliski: tseremonii pokhoron imperatora, velikikh kniazei i kniagin' v kontse XIX – nachale XX veka', *Rodina*, No. 2 (2012), pp. 85-88.

lacuna considering the ways in which these played an important role in the day-to-day operations of the Russian autocracy, in an era in which mass politics and public engagement became live issues.² Supporters in church and state developed an image of the slain duke designed to draw emotional connections with supporters, identifying principles of Russian Orthodoxy, Russian nationality and autocracy. As has been demonstrated, commemorative practices developed by the Russian autocracy were not only symbolic, but functioned as an important mechanism of rule, demonstrating the tangibility of central elements of autocratic ideology and absolutist political practice, underscoring a vision of dynastic continuity in an age of great change. Hence, central pillars of the Russian state, including representatives from the Russian Orthodox Church, army and Imperial Court, were present at many of the rituals and ceremonies held for Sergei, which they organized in many cases.

In addition to the state, Slavophile cultural groups, conservative political pundits and a variety of forces on the right of Russian politics disseminated an image of the duke as a noble, murdered martyr across a variety of texts and public ceremonies, during and after 1905. It should be noted that Russian conservatism was far from heterogeneous in this era, with debate and conflict between different individuals and groups concerning ideas, strategies and tactics.³ But, all conservatives shared a belief in the central principles of Orthodoxy, autocracy and nationality as the foundations of autocratic Russia. These principles were held by significant individuals like Nicholas II, leading figures within the Russian Orthodox Church – such as the Ober-Procurator of the Holy Synod from 1880 to 1905, Konstantin Pobedonostsev – and this was true also of groups like the Union of the Russian People (URP) that appeared in response

² The outstanding study on imperial ideology and the use of ritual the era remains Wortman, *Scenarios*, Vol. 2; on right-wing ritual, see Heinz-Dietrich Löwe, 'Political Symbols and Rituals of the Russian Radical Right, 1900-1914', *Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 76, No. 3 (1998), pp. 441-66; Vydra, *Život za Cara?*, ch. 8.

³ An insightful intervention is Gary M. Hamburg, 'The Revival of Russian Conservatism', *Kritika*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (2005), pp. 107-21.

to the officially-issued October Manifesto of 1905.⁴ Nevertheless there were important differences in the interpretation and implementation of such principles, and a variety of subspecies existed under the umbrella term Russian conservatism.⁵

To highlight differences in emphasis and political desiderata amongst conservative tendencies, this analysis will employ the term ‘rightists’ to refer to the parties and groups on the right of the Russian political scene that organized independently from the state during and after 1905. This included the aforementioned URP, as well as associations like the Russian Monarchist Party (RMP) and the Union of the Archangel Mikhail (UAM) that feature below.⁶ Key to their distinctiveness was that rightists often disagreed with the trajectory of Russian political life as advanced by the state. For instance, the October Manifesto was promulgated by Sergei Witte, whose commitment to Russian statecraft was nothing other than conservative; yet, many newer parties and groups on the right viewed the civil rights enshrined in the Manifesto with utter dismay, perceiving an attack on Russian traditions of governance. There were also important distinctions in terms of practice: notably, the extra-legal violence adopted by the URP was jarring with the Russian state’s desire to control the public monopoly on force, as Russia’s rulers sought to consolidate order in the empire following revolutionary unrest. The result was a somewhat demagogic combination of anti-capitalism, anti-bureaucratism, anti-cosmopolitanism and antisemitism which together

⁴ On this point, see Mikhail N. Luk’ianov, *Rossiiskii konservatizm i reforma, 1907-1914*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag, 2006); idem., ‘Conservatives and “Renewed Russia”, 1907-1914’, *Slavic Review*, Vol. 61, No. 4 (2002), pp. 762-86.

⁵ Conservatism is subject to a broad treatment in Paul Robinson, *Russian Conservatism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019).

⁶ English-language scholarship on the right includes Hans Rogger, *Jewish Policies and Right-Wing Politics in Late Imperial Russia* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986) and Don C. Rawson, *Russian Rightists and the Revolution of 1905* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). Major Russian-language studies include Iu. I. Kir’ianov, *Pravye partii v Rossii, 1911-1917* (Moscow: Rosspen, 2001); I. V. Omel’ianchuk, *Chernosotennoe dvizhenie v Rossiiskoi imperii, 1901-1914* (Kiev: MAUP, 2007); S. A. Stepanov, *Chernia sotnia. Chto oni sdelali dlia velichii Rossii* (Moscow: Iuza-press, 2013). See also Zbyněk Vydra, *Život za Cara? Krajní pravice v předrevolučním Rusku* (Prague: Pavel Mervart, 2010).

constituted a novelty on the Russian political scene. And yet there were areas of common interest: as the below assessment will demonstrate, myth making concerning the martyred duke during and after the revolution of 1905 relied on ideas and emblems adopted by conservative forces both inside and outside the autocratic establishment.

The emotional locus for commemoration was the image of Sergei as a suffering martyr slain by terrorists, and an altruist who had cared for the people during a lifetime of public service. The vision of the martyr and their persecution invites public sympathy: depictions of martyred saints and non-saints as altruists and servants have been used to create a bond between the notable individual and the community they departed.⁷ In modern Europe, nationalist groups have ably used martyrdom, with a vision of the fallen warrior sacrificing themselves for a fatherland or patria proving widely resonant.⁸ In the Russian context, Sergei's death was the latest in a series of assassinations of autocratic figures, including his father tsar Alexander II. Focus on their sufferings and persecution invited sympathy with the individual but was also an attempt to affirm bonds of loyalty between people and regime.⁹ This article will assess the shifting cultural meanings of violence in government and conservative milieus, drawing out such messages by considering martyrdom as a locus in the struggle for Russia.

Contesting autocratic martyrdom

⁷ In the context of modern Russia and Eastern Europe, a good starting point are the essays in Uilleam Blacker and Julie Fedor (eds.), 'Martyrdom and Memory in Eastern Europe', Special Issue, *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (2015); see also Michael Cherniavsky, *Tsar and People: Studies in Russian Myths* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1961).

⁸ Lucy Riall, 'Martyr Cults in Nineteenth-Century Italy', *Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 82, No. 2 (2010), pp. 255-87; Mary Vincent, 'The Martyrs and the Saints: Masculinity and the Construction of the Francoist Crusade', *History Workshop Journal*, No. 47 (1999), pp. 69-98.

⁹ Mikhail Dolbilov, 'Loyalty and Emotion in Nineteenth-Century Russian Imperial Politics', in Jana Osterkamp and Martin Schulze Wessel (eds.), *Exploring Loyalty* (Munich: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017), pp. 17-43.

Sergei was assassinated in central Moscow on 4 February 1905 by Kaliaev whilst passing through the Nikol'skaia Tower of the Kremlin on his way to Chudov monastery for a religious service. The afterlife of any 'martyr' necessarily involves discussion of the life itself: their personality and feats (*podvigi*). As a Romanov Sergei had been a major figure in the firmament of autocratic Russia and was a state servant with very conservative (to detractors, reactionary) politics, having been tutored by Pobedonostsev and coming to share his views, including the importance of religion and the fallibility of democracy. Sergei's feats involved his life of state service: especially significant were his position as governor-general of Moscow (1891-1905), appointment to the State Council in 1894, and promotion to lieutenant general and subsequently commander of the Moscow military district in 1896; he had also been patron of a wide range of civic associations.¹⁰

But Sergei's actions in his lifetime and personal politics presented problems for those who wished to commemorate him. In 1891, he had expelled over 20,000 Jews from Moscow as a result of an imperial decree. Antisemitism was common in late imperial Russian life, but, even so, the move was widely criticized – writing in his memoirs, Sergei Witte derided this as emblematic of Sergei's 'ultra-reactionary and near-sighted policy, [which] drove Moscow into the arms of the revolutionists'.¹¹ Five years later, the Grand Duke's conduct following the Khodynka tragedy of 1896 led to widespread criticism of the Romanov regime. Spectators had gathered to see Nicholas II crowned tsar in Khodynka field just outside Moscow, which had resulted in a crowd crush that led to many deaths. As governor-general and immediate supervisor of the chief of police, the role of Sergei would doubtless come under scrutiny. Yet, he did not appear to take any personal responsibility for the tragic events – despite helping to

¹⁰ A. N. Bokhanov, 'Velikii kniaz' Sergei Aleksandrovich', in A. N. Bokhanov (ed.), *Rossiiskie konservatory* (Moscow: Russkii mir, 1997), pp. 323-71.

¹¹ Sergei Witte, *The Memoirs of Count Witte*, trans. and ed. Abraham Yarmolinsky (Garden City, NY; Toronto: Doubleday, 1921), p. 377.

organize the coronation – nor did he put in an appearance at the funerals of the victims.¹²

Family memoirs reveal a difficult individual widely regarded with hostility, even when one considers that these were written in the emotional time immediately following news of his assassination. His niece Maria Pavlovna stated of Sergei that ‘he demanded of us...exact and immediate obedience...even his intimates feared him’.¹³ Grand Duke Aleksandr Mikhailovich (known as Sandro), husband of Nicholas II’s wife Xenia Aleksandrovna, went further, writing in his diary that ‘try as I will, I cannot find a single redeeming feature of his character ... [he is] obstinate, arrogant, disagreeable’. This was much in contrast to the positive views of his widow Elizabeth Fedorovna (Ella) that emerge from the same accounts. Sandro was by no means alone when he wrote, ‘Ravishing beauty, rare intelligence, delightful sense of humour, infinite patience, hospitality of thought, generous heart, all gifts were hers. It was cruel and unjust that a woman of her calibre should have tied up her existence to a man like Uncle Sergei’.¹⁴

Sergei’s negative reputation endured following his death. His former adjutant and mayor of Moscow from 1908-13 Vladimir Dzhunkovskii wrote in his memoirs that Ella entrusted him with the many letters she received after Sergei’s death. Though many of these offered condolences, a number signed anonymously were ‘full of curses addressed to the late Grand Duke, and in some there were threats about the Grand Duchess’, causing Dzhunkovskii to intercept and burn such communications before Ella could see their contents.¹⁵ Sergei was an awkward and abrasive character, but, even so, his violent death was doubtless shocking to many contemporaries. A view of the death as a catastrophe and potentially a reckoning for Russia emerged in the press immediately following Sergei’s assassination. Widely circulating

¹² Helen Baker, ‘Monarchy discredited? Reactions to the Khodynka coronation catastrophe of 1896’, *Revolutionary Russia*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (2003), pp. 11-12.

¹³ Maria Pavlovna, ‘Memoirs’, in Andrei Maylunas and Sergei Mironenko (eds.), *A Lifelong Passion. Nicholas & Alexandra. Their Own Story* (New York; London: Doubleday, 1997), p. 265.

¹⁴ Sandro, ‘Memoirs’, cited in Maylunas and Mironenko (eds.), *A Lifelong Passion*, pp. 266-67.

¹⁵ V. F. Dzhunkovskii, *Vospominaniia*, Vol. 1 (Moscow: Izd-Vo Im. Sabashnikovykh, 1997), p. 43.

newspapers such as *Russkoe slovo* (*The Russian Word*) carried graphic descriptions of Sergei's death and the crime scene outside of the Nikol'skaia gate on 4 February. Readers were informed 'It was possible only to see a part of the uniform on his chest, an arm, pointing upward, and a leg. His head and everything else was shattered and scattered in the snow'.¹⁶ A detailed account illustrates how the surrounding scene was littered with his remains. Upon reading this report Xenia Aleksandrova commented in a diary entry of 6 February 'There is a terrible description of the blast in Moscow in *The Russian Word*, it's too painful to read'.¹⁷ Similarly, reports in *Moskovskie vedomosti* (*The Moscow News*), edited by Vladimir Gringmut – who would a few months later play a leading role in founding the Russian Monarchist Party (RMP) – provided vivid illustration of the death scene and reiterated it was a 'catastrophe'.¹⁸ This shock is apparent too in family diaries: Nicholas II recorded on the day of the assassination, 'A terrible crime was recorded in Moscow...poor Ella, bless her and help her, Lord!'.¹⁹ Many conservatives in particular saw the death of Sergei as a catastrophe, associating it with the recent era of crisis (*smuta*).²⁰ General Aleksei Kireev wrote in his diary of his horror at the 'scattered parts of the slain and puddles of blood!' following the explosion, fearful what such events could mean for Russia's future. Kireev, an influential member of St Petersburg society with connections to several Slavophile circles, typified the deep unhappiness with the Russian present visible amongst conservative elites.²¹ Lev Tikhomirov – formerly a revolutionary, but now an ardent monarchist who would later edit the widely-circulating daily newspaper *Moskovskie vedomosti* – noted the 'heavy' atmosphere following

¹⁶ 'Ubiistvo ego imperatorskogo Vysochestva Velikogo Kniazia Sergiia Aleksandrovicha', *Russkoe slovo*, 5 February 1905, 34, p. 2.

¹⁷ Xenia, 'Diary', in Maylunas and Mironenko (eds.), *A Lifelong Passion*, p. 268.

¹⁸ 'Muchenicheskaiia konchina Velikogo Kniazia Sergeiia Aleksandrovicha', *Moskovskie vedomosti*, 5 February 1905, 36, p. 2.

¹⁹ S. V. Mironenko (ed.), *Dnevnik imperatora Nikolaia II (1894-1918)*, Vol. 1 (Moscow: Rosspen, 2013), p. 19.

²⁰ Mikhail N. Luk'ianov, 'V ozhidanii katastrofy: eskhatologicheskie motivy v russkom konservatizme nakanune pervoi mirovoi voiny', *Russian History*, No. 31, Vol. 4 (2004), pp. 419-46.

²¹ A. A. Kireev, *Dnevnik, 1905-1910 gg.* (Moscow: Rosspen, 2010), pp. 29-30.

the death. Like Kireev, Tikhomirov interpreted the assassination as a ‘catastrophe’, citing a reader’s letter to *Moskovskie vedomosti* describing the bloody site of the terrorist attack.²²

Many conservatives inside and outside state structures claimed that Sergei was a martyr, associating him with Christian qualities of submission, altruism and charity. The word martyr (*muchenik*) has deep connotations concerning different types of religiosity. In Russian Orthodox tradition, the martyr is a suffering figure who passively accepts the violence brought upon them and is also religious; if not a saint themselves, then they embody saintly qualities or virtues. However, Orthodoxy historiography has tended not to be very critical in its use of the term martyr, rarely distinguishing between those who sought out death and therefore chose to die, and those to whom death came uninvited.²³ Whilst he had not been a saint, the Grand Duke was devoutly Orthodox and a frequent church goer. But, whilst the link to official religion was clear, as a member of the Romanov dynasty the Duke had power and influence far beyond most martyrdom examples from history, which tend to come from oppositional cultures.²⁴

There was in fact a powerful antecedent of an autocratic non-saint ‘martyr’: Sergei’s father, the ‘tsar-liberator’, Alexander II, which provided a link for those who wished to disseminate the myth of the ‘duke-martyr’ to expound upon. The tsar had been widely discussed and interpreted as a martyr following his own death in 1881, with influential journalists such as Mikhail Katkov and figures within Russia’s religious establishment using the term *muchenik* in the wake of the regicide in interpreting a suffering, martyred tsar.²⁵

²² L. A. Tikhomirov, *Dnevnik, 1905-1907 gg.* (Moscow: Rosspen, 2015), pp. 49-51.

²³ Simon Dixon, ‘Reflections on Modern Russian Martyrdom’, in Diana Wood (ed.), *Martyrs and Martyrologies. Papers Read at the 1992 Summer Meeting and the 1993 Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. 401.

²⁴ Olmo Gölz, ‘The Imaginary Field of the Heroic. On the Contention Between Heroes, Martyrs, Victims and Villains in Collective Memory’, in N. Falkenhayner, S. Meurer and T. Schlechtriemen (eds.), *Helden.heroes.héros, Special Issue 5: Analyzing Processes of Heroization. Theories, Methods, Histories* (2019), pp. 27–38.

²⁵ Cherniavsky, *Tsar and People*, pp. 186-88.

Christian motifs of martyrdom, sacrifice and resurrection were widely discussed within the Orthodox Church following the tsar's death. For many within the clergy, the tsar had been a ruler in an idealized Orthodox Christian sense, kind-hearted and selfless.²⁶ There were many parallels between the two cases – both had been Romanovs and were described by supporters as selfless and altruistic in their public work. The theme of popular sorrow was widely discussed following the death of Sergei, with newspapers including *Moskovskie vedomosti* claiming the event, like his father's death in 1881, lay heavily on the minds of the Russian people as well as a numerically small aristocratic entourage.²⁷ Therefore, the cult of the royal martyr was not a novel feature of the struggle with revolutionaries, but drew on a rich lineage stretching back into the nineteenth century. Rival groups positioned themselves for the aureole of martyrdom too, including the revolutionaries behind Sergei's assassination, who attempted to legitimize their struggle through presenting leading figures such as the Duke's assassin Ivan Kaliaev as noble martyrs and heroes of revolution – a distinct echo of how the leaders of the People's Will including Andrei Zheliabov and Vera Figner were depicted.²⁸

Martyrdom narratives always involve some form of conflict, and the violent nature of the Grand Duke's death was a key part of the presentation, linked to a central feature of all martyr stories: victimhood. Focus on violence increases sympathy for the victim and their cause, here contrasting the late Romanov's nobility with the senseless violence committed by revolutionaries. Aleksei Suvorin's influential mass-circulation newspaper *Novoe vremia* (*New Times*) reflected on anti-state violence in Sergei's lengthy obituary of 5 February:

²⁶ Iuliia Safronova, 'Vchera ubit na ulitse Gosudar' Aleksandr Nikolaevich' (vospriatie monarkha kak "misheni" dlia terroristov)', in V. Lapin et al. (eds.), *Aleksandr II. Tragediia reformatora. Liudi i sud'bakh reform, reform v sud'bakh liudi* (St Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo Evropeiskogo universiteta v Sankt-Peterburge, 2012), pp. 214-39 (p. 217).

²⁷ 'Spasenie Rossii', *Moskovskie vedomosti*, 7 February 1905, 38, p. 1.

²⁸ For this reading see the fictionalized account of the assassination, Boris Savinkov, *Pale Horse*, trans. Michael R. Katz, introduction by Otto Boele (Pittsburgh, PA: Pittsburgh University Press, 2019).

The terrible murder of Grand Duke Sergei Aleksandrovich is a direct challenge that has rocked all of Russia...This is a disgusting shedding of blood, the murderer is a robber, one without motive and an executioner...a person, however, who is simply unbearable for peaceful citizens. As more details on the murder become clear, it will become apparent whether there were other participants.²⁹

Little was known one day after the murder, with *Novoe vremia* only reporting that the assassin was around 30-35 and a member of the combat organization of the SRs.³⁰ The article used the trope of the mentally disturbed terrorist, one common in conservative commentary on revolutionary violence: 'Over the last ten years the revolutionary parties have widely used terror...most of whom are unwell, and the majority of these [people] are criminals.'³¹ Many nobles were much concerned at Russia's current trajectory: one example was Count D. Tsertelev, outlining his concerns in an article *The Plot Against Russia*, published in *Moskovskie vedomosti* two days after Sergei's death. Describing the 1905 revolutionary period as a new 'time of troubles', he compared the current era to that between the reign of Ivan IV (the terrible) and the installation of the Romanov dynasty, seeing a new time of crisis and disorder for the Russian people and nation.³²

Sergei's charitable and civic work were presented as examples of his feats (*podvigi*); among his many memberships was chair of the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society, which he had helped to found in 1882 after a pilgrimage to the Holy Land in the previous year. The All-

²⁹ 'Ubiistvo velikogo kniazia Sergiia Aleksandrovicha', *Novoe vremia*, 5 February 1905, 10388, p. 3.

³⁰ 'Telegrammy', *Pravitel'stvennyi vestnik*, 5 February 1905, 28, p. 4.

³¹ 'Ubiistvo velikogo kniazia Sergiia Aleksandrovicha', *Novoe vremia*, 5 February 1905, 10388, p. 3; this is also apparent in the historiography on the subject, with one author describing revolutionaries as 'half-cracked': Anna Geifman, 'Psychohistorical Approaches to 1905 Radicalism', in Jonathan D. Smele and Anthony Heywood (eds.), *The Russian Revolution of 1905. Centenary Perspectives* (London; New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 13-33, idem., *Thou Shalt Kill. Revolutionary Terrorism in Russia, 1894-1917* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

³² 'Zagovor protiv Rossii', *Moskovskie vedomosti*, 6 February 1905, 37, p. 2.

Russian Archaeological Society sent a telegram reproduced in the newspaper *Novoe vremia* commenting on Sergei's 'martyr's end', drawing connections between Sergei's death and the leadership of Nicholas II. Referring to recent mourning ceremonies:

The assembly on 9 [February] for the timeless martyr and former chair of the All-Russian Archaeological Society Grand Duke Sergei Aleksandrovich recognized the motivation of his dear soul and the preservation of his reputation for posterity...given that [Nicholas II's] leadership of the Russian land was strong and he was victorious over our enemies, both foreign and domestic; regarding our dear motherland, we wish for a calm soul for his imperial highness after a heavy time for the imperial family.³³

Whilst making the erroneous claim that Nicholas had always been a successful leader – the ongoing and catastrophic war against Japan (1904-5) was not mentioned – the telegram claimed the Duke to be a martyr, who had as his 'motivation' a mission to protect the Russian land and people.

Popular support and celebrating values

We should note from the outset that the position of Sergei as a martyr was contested, and that many in society did not share this view. Two obstacles were his personality as well as his reactionary politics. Yet, for the devout as well as Slavophiles like Kireev, the Duke was re-imagined as a suffering martyr, which placed him in the tradition of murdered Russian saint-princes Boris and Gleb, the cults of Russian saints, Alexander II from 1881 and, more recently, assassinated state servants including Viacheslav von Pleve, the Minister of the Interior killed by the SR assassin Egor Sazonov on 15 July 1904. These martyr cults from

³³ 'Utrenniaia pochta', *Novoe vremia*, 17 February 1905, p. 1.

Russian history stressed the passive position of the martyr and their sufferings, their ‘victimhood’, and how violence had been visited upon them by malevolent forces, themes that transcended the historical significance of the personality in question.³⁴

Like that of Alexander II after 1881, the myth of Sergei drew on a sense of shock and humiliation that accompanied the assassination, and a feeling that God’s anointed – and a member of the Romanov dynasty – had not been protected from evil in society.

Unsurprisingly given the links between autocracy and the official Church, this feeling was particularly pronounced amongst the devout. Five days after the assassination, Bishop Antonii delivered a speech at the Alekseevskii Church in central Moscow near the Kremlin Cathedral which discussed guilt and shame. ‘Russian society is guilty of the bloody death of the Grand Duke...the martyred Grand Duke, like the blood of the ancient martyrs who served the purposes of faith and truth, has the seeds of repentance for a morally sober society’. He went on to ask God for forgiveness concerning the death of Sergei, and to ‘not hold us in condemnation’.³⁵ Calling Sergei a martyr repeatedly suggested flexibility in the Church’s criterion of how this category was ascribed, and Antonii’s view of the ‘shame’ of the event directly parallels speech following the death of Alexander II. Ioann Ianyshev – rector of St Petersburg Religious Academy – in a sermon at St Isaac’s Cathedral dwelled on the ‘shame’ that the entire population was said to have felt at the tsar’s assassination, and how they had not protected ‘an angel of the Russian land’.³⁶ One day after Sergei’s assassination, an article by columnist Nikolai Naumov in *Moskovskie vedomosti* titled *A Letter to the Russian People* likewise speculated on shame and blame. The passivity of the population in the face of the revolutionary threat was a form of collusion which had led to terrible events like the death of the Grand Duke. Naumov described condemned the inactivity of Russia’s people, ‘I’ll call

³⁴ Cherniavsky, *Tsar and People*, p. 188.

³⁵ ‘Provintsial’naia zhizn’, *Grazhdanin*, 13 February 1905, 13, p. 17.

³⁶ Wortman, *Scenarios*, Vol. 2, pp. 198-99.

them criminal inactions, for the blood of our own August martyr!’ The piece continued, ‘Is it possible that the liberal fog has so clouded our eyes that you do not see its foul shroud, what we are coming to, and the situation that we are now in?’³⁷ Considering Sergei’s ‘martyr’s end’ whilst noting the precedent of tsar Alexander II’s assassination, a contributor to *Moskovskie vedomosti*, Iv. Rzhanov (writing as ‘Old Katkovets’) claimed it was an attack on Russian religion and urged all people to unite: ‘all truly Russian people truly wish that these vile robbers who bring evil on our fatherland are strongly opposed by our unshakable conscience’. He added, ‘we all must unite with the tsarist autocracy with our help, freedom and strength!’³⁸

Supporters of the autocracy writing in the press perceived Sergei as a martyr for the Russian nation as well as the people and autocracy. Evidence of this can be seen in press comment on the potential non-Russianness of the attacker, as well as the need to defend the Russian people and nation. A 5 February report in *Moskovskie vedomosti* noted that he was an SR activist – not yet known to be Ivan Kaliaev – and described a man dressed in worker’s clothes and speaking in a non-Russian accent, the latter detail separating the ‘truly Russian’ people sad at Sergei’s demise from the internal, non-Russian enemy. The accusation that the assassin was not – or could not – be Russian had past parallels: after the shooting at Alexander II by Dmitrii Karakozov in 1866, several conservative commentators suggested that the would-be assassin was not Russian, later followed by ‘shame’ that he was Russian and that one of the tsar’s ‘true subjects’ would attack him. An accusation of the non-Russianness of the assassin again recurred in 1881.³⁹ Emphasis on the alien nature of assassins can be seen in comment concerning Kaliaev’s shared Russian and Polish parentage, such as when Dzhunkovskii wrote in his memoirs of the assassin’s ‘excellent knowledge of

³⁷ ‘Pis’mo k Russkomu narodu’, *Moskovskie vedomosti*, 6 February 1905, 37, p. 2.

³⁸ ‘Novaia zhertva iskupleniia’, *Moskovskie vedomosti*, 7 February 1905, 38, pp. 1-2.

³⁹ ‘Muchenicheskaia konchina Velikogo Kniazia Sergeiia Aleksandrovicha’, *Moskovskie vedomosti*, 5 February 1905, 36, p. 2; Wortman, *Scenarios*, Vol. 2, p. 110; for the 1866 attempt see Claudia Verhoeven, *The Odd Man Karakozov. Imperial Russia, Modernity, and the Birth of Terrorism* (Ithaca, NY; London: Cornell University Press, 2009).

Polish' as a result of his background, and his induction into radical politics outside of Russia.⁴⁰

From 5 February a series of mourning rituals were held across different parts of the Russian empire to commemorate Sergei, including in regional centres like Kiev as well as Moscow and St Petersburg.⁴¹ These emphasized key themes in what Wortman terms the 'scenario' of the departed personality – here, altruism, kindness and sincerity – as well as demonstrating the connection between divinely ordained autocratic authority and official religion. The Holy Synod was responsible for organizing a series of requiems (*panikhida*) held in memory of Sergei in the week following his death, which took place twice daily whilst his body lay in state in the grounds of the Chudov monastery at the Alekseevskii Cathedral.⁴² A requiem on 5 February was attended by marshals of the nobility, members of the general-governor's office, grenadier guards, members of the Moscow military district, and representatives from the Preobrazhenskii guards – in life, Sergei had been a commander of this regiment. Choral music accompanied the liturgy, and above the grave were two crosses, one adorned with an image of Ella, and the other with the face of the murdered Grand Duke. At the same event, members of the Kiev Grenadier Guards (Sergei had been commander-in-chief during his lifetime) formed a procession with banners and were accompanied by choral music in the Chudov monastery near the Kremlin armoury in central Moscow.⁴³ Sergei himself was presented in such a way as to hide the full extent of his injuries: in the casket was a mock-up of body draped in a black mourning flag, with material layered over a mass of

⁴⁰ Dzhunkovskii, *Vospominaniia*, Vol. 1, p. 47.

⁴¹ For instance, 'Iz vlechenie iz zhurnal komiteta ministrov', *Grazhdanin*, 10 February 1905, 12, p. 19.

⁴² 'Provintsial'naia zhizn'. Ubiistvo Velikogo Kniazia Sergiia Aleksandrovicha', *Grazhdanin*, 6 February 1905, 11, p. 15; 'Opredeleniia Sviatishogo Synoda', *Tserkovnye vedomosti*, 12 February 1905, 7, p. 50.

⁴³ 'Panikhidy', *Novoe vremia*, 6 February 1905, 10389, p. 5.

wool that represented his head.⁴⁴ These daily ceremonies continued until his funeral service on 10 February, after which his remains were interred in the Andreevskii Church in the Chudov Monastery following a Church ceremony, where they remained until their transfer to Alekseevskii Cathedral a little over one year later.⁴⁵

The relationship – real and imagined – between Sergei and the Russian people (*narod*), was a vital part of the cult's presentation that emerged following his death. One article in *Moskovskie vedomosti* commented on the large numbers of Russian people who turned out to observe the arrival of Ella at a requiem the day following Sergei's assassination: at the 'magnificent sight' of her arrival many onlookers burst into tears.⁴⁶ This view of the people and especially the peasantry as having an emotional connection to Russia's leaders had precedents. A novel feature of the funeral culture that emerged after March 1881 was the presence of peasants amongst the cortege, with newspaper accounts focusing on large groups of peasants, said to have benefitted from the changes wrought by Alexander II including the Emancipation Edict of 1861. They 'accompanied their tsar-liberator to the place of rest from his imperial labours and terrible grief'.⁴⁷ The tsar's reform work was not something that could be replicated given the different context surrounding the Sergei cult, but, similarly, the press reported on the presence of peasants at many of the requiems held following the Grand Duke's death, focusing on the assassination as a lodestone for popular sorrow. The daily record from 7 February in *Moskovskie vedomosti* observed peasant support at the requiem, religious songs and the involvement of peasant choirs, as well as attendance from important figures from Russian religion including Vladimir – Arkhimandrite of Moscow and

⁴⁴ A. B. Grishin, *Tragicheskaiia sud'ba velikogo kniazia* (Moscow: Veche, 2008), p. 265; *Grazhdanin*, 10 February 1905, 12, p. 12.

⁴⁵ 'Otpovanie tela v Boze pochivshogo Velikogo Kniazia Sergeiia Aleksandrovicha', *Tserkovnye vedomosti*, 19 February 1905, 8, p. 339.

⁴⁶ 'Muchenicheskaiia konchina Velikogo Kniazia Sergeiia Aleksandrovicha', *Moskovskie vedomosti*, 5 February 1905, 36, p. 2.

⁴⁷ Wortman, *Scenarios*, Vol. 2, p. 200; two newspaper reports citing peasant presences are *Novoe vremia*, 8 March 1881, p. 1, and *Moskovskie vedomosti*, 10 March 1881, pp. 3-4.

Kolomenskoe.⁴⁸ Certainly, many of those attending were members of the central pillars of the autocratic state including the military, Church and the Imperial Court, but many people were ordinary Muscovites. Newspaper reports stressed peasant support but occasionally discussed workers, a more uncertain estate given the unrest seen recently on ‘Bloody Sunday’ in January. On 5 February, a telegram was sent by workers’ representatives in central Moscow to the city’s mayor E. N. Volkov, describing the sadness many workers felt at the Grand Duke’s assassination and also expressing their sympathy for Ella; following this, a procession of 1,500 workers marched through central Moscow.⁴⁹

Those who had been close to the Grand Duke such as his former adjutant Dzhunkovskii clearly felt a sense of personal loss and pointed to large crowds at officially-approved ceremonies as a sign of support elsewhere.⁵⁰ Concerning the wider public, the journal *Mirnyi trud* (*Peaceful Work*) – a publication of the nationalist cultural group the Russian Assembly (*Russkoe sobranie*) – republished a number of letters that appeared in newspapers following the death. Such letters were carefully selected, designed to stress connection between the dynasty and Russian people. A letter in the newspaper *Den’* (*Day*) appeared under the section ‘voice of the peasantry’ commenting on the ‘tragic’ passing of the Grand Duke.⁵¹ The editor F. N. Berg claimed he had received many letters from peasants in the wake of Sergei’s death denouncing its evil and folly:

Why wasn’t the criminal killed there, on his own, and when will his trial occur? He has shed the blood of the imperial ruler, for which he may be tried in court? We are just simple Russian people looking at this: if we were present at the time that the Grand

⁴⁸ ‘Moskoviia zhizn’. Panikhidy po velikom kniaze Sergee Aleksandroviche’, *Moskovskie vedomosti*, 7 February 1905, 38, p. 3.

⁴⁹ ‘Iz vlechenie iz zhurnala komiteta ministrov’, *Grazhdanin*, 10 February 1905, 12, p. 18.

⁵⁰ Dzhunkovskii, *Vospominaniia*, Vol. 1, p. 43.

⁵¹ ‘Otkliki russkikh liudei na sovremennia sobytia’, *Mirnyi trud*, 1905, 3, pp. 104-15.

Duke was killed in Moscow, we would have torn the assailant into pieces and thrown these into a cesspool. Because a Russian that raises his hand [in this way] is unworthy of burial.

Berg later stated, 'This was hardly an isolated letter, but representative of wider thoughts'.⁵² To Berg, the letter was emblematic of how Russian people supported autocracy and denounced revolutionary terror.

Ella's appearance at requiems following Sergei's death made a strong impression on audiences, as did her visit to her late husband's assassin Ivan Kaliaev days after Sergei's death. She went to visit Kaliaev whilst he was held in the Serpukhov police house – Dzhunkovskii wrote in his memoirs she was 'driven by a Christian feeling of forgiveness... she felt the need to say a word of consolation to Kaliaev'.⁵³ Following the funeral ceremonies held on 9 and 10 February, Sergei's cousin Grand Duke Konstantin Konstantinovich remarked in his diary, 'Ella had gone to visit Sergei's murderer...such courage, such greatness of spirit are simply unbelievable. She is a saint'.⁵⁴ Following Sergei's assassination, Ella was herself considered a martyr for her stoical response to her husband's death, her charity work, and, later, the tragic manner of her own murder by the Bolsheviks in 1918.⁵⁵

The response amongst Church, state and private interests immediately after Sergei's death and in subsequent years emphasized values including altruism, kindness and sincerity, like the 'scenario of love' that emerged following the assassination of Alexander II.⁵⁶ The

⁵² Vladimir Purishkevich (ed.), *Kniga Russkoi skorbi*, Vol. 1 (St Petersburg: Rossiia, 1908), p. 7.

⁵³ Dzhunkovskii, *Vospominaniia*, Vol. 1, p. 43.

⁵⁴ 'Dnevnik vel. kn. Konstantina Konstantinovicha', entry 10 February 1905, Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (GARF), F. 660, op. 1, d. 56, ll. 41-51; see also Grand Duke Konstantin Konstantinovich, 'Diary', cited in Maylunas and Mironenko (eds.), *A Lifelong Passion*, p. 268.

⁵⁵ Christopher Warwick, *Ella. Princess, Saint and Martyr* (Wiley Blackwell: London, 2006); Lubov Millar, *Grand Duchess Elizabeth of Russia. New Martyr of the Communist Yoke* (Redding, CA: Nikodemos Orthodox Publication Society, 1991).

⁵⁶ Wortman, *Scenarios*, Vol. 2, pp. 198-202.

attachment of the Russian people to Sergei was likewise discussed in Christian terms, and comment on his ‘martyrdom’ was reminiscent of that which followed the death of the tsar. A corpus of texts produced by publishing houses and under different patrons supported a view that the late Grand Duke was a man of faith who had a mission and duty to look after the people of Russia; his memory would ‘live on’ for years to come given the strength of his commitment to the people of Russia. Popular concern for his subjects was a distinct echo of the care Alexander II was said to have had for the ‘welfare’ of his people; a pamphlet published in 1905 by the Moscow Historical-Genealogical Society – an organization the Grand Duke had patronized – claimed that the Grand Duke had suffered for the Russian people: the same message carried by many textual tributes that appeared following the death of the tsar in 1881. The biographical sketch provided at the outset reinforced themes seen elsewhere – Sergei was a loyal friend of the Russian people, had undertaken years of state service for both people and nation, and was a caring figure.⁵⁷ Repeatedly stressing the charitable societies Sergei had patronized is not incidental: martyrdoms throughout history have sought to imbue the deceased with altruistic qualities representing links between the dead and the community they have left behind.⁵⁸

Sergei’s status as a family man was not forgotten either: the emotive nature of familial links featured in comment following his death. One letter sent to Ella by the Historical-Genealogical Society in Moscow addressed her as ‘her royal highness’ and claimed an atmosphere of ‘sorrow’ existed since the Grand Duke’s passing and spoke of how ‘martyr’s blood’ had been shed in defence of the state.⁵⁹ In publishing a telegram sent to a family member, the work developed the emotional side of the legend, humanizing the martyr to an

⁵⁷ *Nezabvennoi pamiati ego imperatorskogo vysochestva Velikogo Kniazia Sergeiia Aleksandrovicha* (Moscow: S. P. Iakovlev, 1905), pp. 6-8.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

audience by directly reflecting upon what they meant to those closest to them. It was intriguing that this discussion touched upon the people of Russia but mostly focused on Sergei's close family, thus emphasizing the dynastic significance of the crime, and, on a human level, its personal significance, encouraging empathy.

The Sergei cult following his death could claim support from private associations such as the Historical-Genealogical Society, as well as the official Church and state which planned commemorative activities. There was also evidently a desire by varied propagandists to show that 'the people' also cared about Sergei's death. Earlier patterns of 'folk tsarism' seen in peasant responses to the assassination of Alexander II in 1881 left deep roots in Russian society and culture, and religiosity and belief still permeated their world view up to and after 1905, even after 'Bloody Sunday' in January had further challenged belief in popular monarchism.⁶⁰ However, the historical context of insurrection in 1905 showed deep discontent concerning Russian governance, and, at any rate, it is impossible to be certain to what extent such activity represented wider views amongst the people. What is clear is that a variety of voices from within the state as well as private initiatives were working to channel a vision of the slain 'duke-martyr' who had worked for the people and provided leadership and guidance. The priest Ioann Vostorgov – who would join the URP, which first appeared in November 1905 – continued to speak out on such themes in his speeches on Sergei. In an address delivered at the Moscow branch of the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society on 7 October 1907 – an organization Sergei had co-founded and patronized – Vostorgov commented on Sergei's pilgrimage to Jerusalem in 1881, the good work he had done for the Society in years past, and his service to the Russian people. Sergei's patronage of a society dedicated to providing provisions for Russian pilgrims in the Holy Land provided ample

⁶⁰ Leonid Heretz, *Russia on the Eve of Modernity: Popular Religion and Traditional Culture under the Last Tsars* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2008). See in particular his exploration of the assassination of Alexander II, ch. 5.

opportunity to comment on his religiosity, including charity, welfare and devotion.⁶¹ In an echo of the activities of nationalist journalists such as Mikhail Katkov following Alexander II's death, the theme of martyrdom was used to justify autocratic authority, with the strength of the autocrat contrasted with the weakness shown by its enemies, which had led to spiritual crisis and political uncertainty in Russia.⁶²

Burial and memorial

By claiming Sergei's martyr status shortly after his death on 4 February 1905, conservative commentators, Church figures and his own family depicted a figure who represented the vital values of autocracy, Orthodoxy and nationality. A central element of Sergei's cult was his membership of the Romanov family; this had been the case too for his father the 'tsar-liberator', who was honoured with a wide variety of architectural tributes that appeared across diverse regions of the Russian empire following his own assassination. Among the most prominent sites were the Cathedral of the Spilt Blood, constructed 1883-1907 where the tsar was assassinated in St Petersburg, and a large monument in the grounds of the Moscow Kremlin built from 1893-98 under the auspices of Moscow City Council and opened by Nicholas II.⁶³ Architecture was a central way of honouring the feats (*podvigi*) of the monarchist-heroes of conservative Russia.

A secret transfer and burial of the Grand Duke's remains was held on 4 July 1906, one day before the Orthodox Church celebrated Sergii Radonezhskii and the uncovering of his relics. This involved the night-time transfer of his remains from the Andreevskii Church in Moscow, where they had been interred since February 1905, to the nearby Alekseevskii

⁶¹ Ibid., Vol. 3, pp. 350-3. This learned society, founded 8 May 1882 with the approval of Alexander III, was the largest organization for the study of the Middle East in Russia at this time and boasted a sizeable membership – in 1902 it held over 30,000 individual meetings.

⁶² *Nezabvennoi pamiati*, p. 1; Wortman, *Scenarios*, Vol. 2, p. 200.

⁶³ Wortman, *Scenarios*, Vol. 2, pp. 284-85.

Cathedral. The ceremony started at 9pm in and included close family members. Grand Duke Konstantin Konstantinovich, Elizabeth Mavrikievna and Grand Duke Aleksei Aleksandrovich (Sergei's older brother) were all present, as were religious figures such as Arkhimandrite Arsenii of the Chudov Monastery, and the priests N. V. Blagorazumov and K. P. Zverev.⁶⁴ Once this service had ended, a procession continued to Alekseevskii Cathedral, where a memorial service was held. Then, the procession continued to Tsarskaia (Ivanovskaia) Square, where members of the 5th Kiev grenadier regiment had gathered. The Grand Duke had been a member of this regiment during his own lifetime, so their presence reflected his experience and the theme of state service: the military element was common to many funerals and services of this kind. The requiem finished in the nearby Cathedral at the same time, and, by half-past eleven in the evening, the ceremonies were complete, and the retinue returned to the nearby Nikolaevskii Palace. Surviving reports of the ceremony depict a sombre scene: many had 'tears in their eyes' during the transfer of the Duke's remains.⁶⁵

Further commemoration followed in April 1908, with the construction and unveiling of a large memorial cross in the centre of Moscow which was dedicated to Sergei. The cross was designed by the well-known Russian artist Viktor Vasnetsov, who had specialized in folk art since the late nineteenth century. His art often contained images or allusions to national revival and nationalist values – though earlier eschewing involvement in organized politics, Vasnetsov joined the URP late in 1905. The cross was a massive construction in the traditional Russian Orthodox style, made out of solid bronze, with enamelled detailing recreating events from the Grand Duke's life and depicting a number of religious images, including icons of the Virgin Mary. It was positioned on a heavy pedestal manufactured from black granite, with the lower column bearing the full title of the murdered Duke. The detailing

⁶⁴ 'Pokhorony velikogo kniazia Sergeia Aleksandrovicha', *Istoricheskii vestnik*, August 1906, Vol. 105, p. 657.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 657.

on the front was elaborate, with religious images detailing Christ, the sorrows of the Virgin Mary and other Russian Orthodox emblems. The theme of forgiveness was apparent: the inscription on the base cited the words allegedly uttered by Ella following her visit to Kaliaev after the assassination, repeating the words of Jesus (from Luke 23:34): ‘father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do’. This therefore emphasized the merciful nature of Ella, unlike the defiance and anger shown by many commentators in the immediate aftermath of the assassination in February 1905. Further messages etched on the cross emphasized the contribution of the Grand Duke to life in Russia, and also his memory and martyrdom. One went, ‘Whilst we live, we live with the Lord, when we die, we die with the Lord. Whether we live, whether we die, the lord is all’. An expensive, detailed memorial, the cross cost 16,000 roubles to produce. Sergei’s religious activities, including his pilgrimage to Jerusalem, were a source of further comment when the cross was unveiled.⁶⁶

A series of ceremonies organized by the Imperial Court and the Moscow city administration were held whilst the monument was unveiled. On 1 April 1908 at 4pm, members of the 5th Kiev grenadier regiment, which Sergei had previously commanded, assembled near the Chudov Monastery, and marched from there in two columns, holding aloft icons with pictures of the tsar, whilst a band played the march of the regiment. Staff from the Nikolaevskii Palace in St Petersburg were present, as were, of course, close family members, most notably Ella, Grand Duke Dmitrii Pavlovich, Grand Duchess Maria Pavlovna, a number of princes and princesses from Ella’s family, the House of Hesse-Darmstadt and other highly ranked members of the Russian royal family.⁶⁷ These people were also present on 2 April when the cross was officially unveiled. It was dedicated to the memory of Sergei and his ‘martyr’s end’ (*muchenichskoi konchiny*). A large number of representatives of the city

⁶⁶ ‘Osviashchenia v Moskve pamiatnika-kresta’, *Istoricheskii vestnik*, May 1908, Vol. 107, p. 767.

⁶⁷ ‘Moskovskaia zhizn’, *Moskovskie vedomosti*, 2 April 1908, 77, p. 4.

governance were in attendance on that morning, such as Sergei's former adjutant Dzhunkovskii and representatives from the State Council such as S. A. Sheremetev, A. G. Bulygin and I. F. Tiutchev.⁶⁸ In addition to the dynasty, the military and Church presence exemplified other pillars of Russian autocracy. The Aleksandrovskii Guards regiment and other members of the army had gathered on Senate Square by 12pm, and the ceremony started when a bell tolled from the Cathedral in the grounds of the Chudov monastery. Arkhimandrite Vladimir of Moscow and Kolomenskoe headed the procession and was one of a number of highly ranked clergy at the dedication. Once again, the role of the peasantry was described through their presence at the unveiling, stressing a connection between the Romanov dynasty and the Russian people, with a peasant choir gathering to sing military songs on Senate Square. A liturgy was held near the monument and a period of silence ensued, before a peasant band from Kiev began to play the march of the regiment.⁶⁹ The memorial cross was unveiled shortly after this, and it was blessed with Holy Water by Arkhimandrite Vladimir. After this, the choir fell silent and proceeded to the Chudov monastery, with members of the Moscow military regiment accompanying them, together with the 5th Kiev grenadier regiment.

As well as the presence of the peasantry, newspaper reports commented upon the presence of many townsfolk, stressing the commitment of the Russian people to Sergei's memory. According to an editorial in *Moskovskie vedomosti*, Sergei's memory 'would never die within the Russian people'. This unveiling occurred in the centre of Moscow, so had clear visibility, with city space being recovered for the autocracy in full public view. This was much in contrast to the secret burial of the Duke's remains two years earlier, demonstrating a

⁶⁸ The full list is of attendees (which stretches for several columns and includes dozens of names) is in 'Moskovskaia zhizn'. Osviashchenie pamiatnika-kresta', *Moskovskie vedomosti*, 3 April 1908, 78, p. 3.

⁶⁹ 'Osviashchenia v Moskve pamiatnika-kresta', *Istoricheskii vestnik*, May 1908, Vol. 107, p. 766; 'Torzhestvennoe osviashchenie pamiatnika-kresta', *Novoe vremia*, 3 April 1908, 11516, p. 4; 'Moskovskaia zhizn', *Moskovskie vedomosti*, 2 April 1908, 77, p. 4.

renewed confidence in supporters for public demonstration by 1908.⁷⁰ The cross stood in a prominent public place and was central to the nexus of power in the middle of Moscow: its unveiling encouraged a variety of commentators to comment and speculate on the meaning of Sergei's life as well as death. Like discussion seen from 1905-6, his death was claimed to be a martyrdom in the service of the Russian people, land and state.⁷¹ Themes of forgiveness and love were present in the scenario, the latter reminiscent of the poetry that followed the assassination of Alexander II in 1881, such as Maikov's verse which identified the tsar with Christian love for his people, whilst connected to strong political action.⁷²

⁷⁰ On the battle over public space between revolutionaries and the autocracy see Christopher Ely, *Underground Petersburg. Radical Populism, Urban Space, and the Tactics of Subversion in Reform-Era Russia* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2016).

⁷¹ 'Moskovskaia zhizn'. Osviashchenie pamiatnika-kresta', *Moskovskie vedomosti*, 3 April 1908, 78, p. 3.

⁷² Wortman, *Scenarios*, Vol. 2, p. 200.



Памятник на месте убийства Великого Князя Сергея Александровича.
Le monument du Grand Duc Sergei Alexandrovitch, où il été tué.

Undated postcard depicting Sergei's memorial cross, designed by V. M. Vasnetsov,

Wikimedia commons, public domain.

[<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vasnetsov_Sergei_Alexandrovich_Cross.jpg>](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vasnetsov_Sergei_Alexandrovich_Cross.jpg)

[accessed 04/01/2020].

Cults of commemoration

From the moment of his assassination, it was apparent that many of Sergei's most ardent public and private supporters were from the political right of Russian society. This included cultural associations such as the Russian Assembly to, later, groups like the URP and the UAM.⁷³ Many rightists were present at the mourning ceremonies held for the murdered Grand Duke; for example, figures from the Russian Assembly attended the requiems during February 1905.⁷⁴ The right interpreted the death as a political tragedy; for example, in the journal *Vestnik Russkogo sobraniia* (*Messenger of the Russian Assembly*) a liturgy held in honour of Sergei on 29 April 1907 in the Chudov Monastery appeared under the 'political review' section. A ceremony held for Sergei on the same day in the Church at Khodynka – seen of the tragic crowd crush in 1896 – included figures such as the journalists Vladimir Gringmut (of the RMP) and Pavel Bulatsel (URP).⁷⁵ The Muscovite revival that celebrated popular piety and religion was associated with the last two tsars but also the political right after 1905; Sergei's cult emerged alongside this trend, which sought to reaffirm religiosity.

Indeed, rightists continued commemorative activities for Sergei well after the full force of the 1905 revolution had subsided. Whilst rightists appeared happy to take the lead of the Church and the Imperial Court in quickly proclaiming Sergei to be a martyr (thus

⁷³ On the appearance of the right, see Hans Rogger, Hans, 'The Formation of the Russian Right, 1900-1906', *California Slavic Studies*, Vol. 3 (1964), pp. 66-94.

⁷⁴ 'Otkliki Russkikh liudei na sovremennyya sobytiia', *Mirnyi trud*, 1905, 3, pp. 104-15.

⁷⁵ 'S.-Peterburg, 11 Maia', *Vestnik Russkogo sobraniia*, 11 May 1907, 17, pp. 1-3.

suggesting the flexibility of the term), their scenario surrounding Sergei's death and its interpretation was slightly different from the autocratic one. Many of the official mourning ceremonies organized by the Imperial Court as well as the private initiatives of the charitable associations Sergei patronized pointed to Christianity and love as central thematic elements in his martyrdom, a shadow of the imagery which emerged following the assassination of Alexander II in 1881. For rightists, what was instead most important was Sergei's tough stance against revolutionaries. What had led to much private disdain in political circles such as his actions as governor-general of Moscow from 1891-1905 was instead interpreted by rightists as strong and decisive leadership, a necessity in the struggle against revolutionaries. Sergei appeared as a prominent entry in the first book of the multi-volume martyrology *The Book of Russian Sorrows* in 1908, edited under the guidance of the leader of the UAM and deputy to the Third and Fourth State Dumas, Vladimir Purishkevich. Indeed, it is only the assassinated tsar Alexander II who is placed in front of him in this collection: Sergei follows immediately after, and the positioning of the two in close proximity stresses connection. Like the hundreds of the conservative, right-wing and autocratic figures featured in these volumes, Sergei was described as a 'victim' of revolutionary violence, but as a member of the imperial family he was subject to ongoing commemoration and his stature was raised above many of these comparatively anonymous figures.⁷⁶ His entry – which runs for a full nine pages – describes the Duke as a 'friend and defender of the Russian people', and, as governor-general, a 'defender of law and order' – a strong figure, denoting decisive leadership in the struggle against revolution.⁷⁷ The entry discusses his charitable work, service and repression of the revolutionary movement, as well as, conversely, his love for the Russian people.⁷⁸ Both Sergei and his father are presented as stalwarts of Russian autocracy: the latter's reformist

⁷⁶ Purishkevich (ed.), *Kniga Russkoi skorbi*, Vol. 1, pp. 1-9.

⁷⁷ Ibid., pp. 2-3.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 8.

phase of the early 1860s is considered in the context of his 'love' for the Russian people as well as his 'strong' and 'decisive' leadership.⁷⁹

The association of Sergei with law, order and a steadfast opposition to revolution encouraged the political right to take a leading role in the martyr cult that appeared after his death, with memorials resulting from private initiative. One such venture was a church designed specifically to commemorate the 'victims' of revolution, which would be erected on the fields of Khodynka.⁸⁰ Ivan Kolesnikov, an honorary member of the Russian Monarchist Assembly and state councillor from the Don region, submitted a petition on 2 December 1906 to the Moscow governor-general for a church to honour 'the soldiers who defended Moscow from revolutionary terror in December 1905'. This would include figures of Church and state – like Sergei – who had stood firm in this struggle, thus representing the memory of those who died in service of 'tsar and fatherland' from 1905-8.⁸¹ The church, built at Kolesnikov's expense, was designed over the next few months, and construction started on 29 April 1907 – Sergei's birthday.

The church was designed by the architect Adamovich and was constructed in a Byzantine style. It was designed to hold 500 people, with a two-tier marble iconostasis 'the last supper' bearing an icon designed by the artist Viktor Vasnetsov, who had also designed the cross in Moscow.⁸² Kolesnikov's petition requested that the building would include a series of marble plaques inscribed with the names of 'victims of terror'. As a member of the Romanov family, Sergei was afforded a prominent position in this tribute to the victims of

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 8.

⁸⁰ *Russkoe znamia*, 1 May 1907, in Iu. I. Kir'ianov (ed.), *Pravye partii. Dokumenty i materialy*, Vol. 1, 1905-1910 gg. (Moscow: Rosspen, 1998), p. 317.

⁸¹ A. Stepanov, 'Khram-pamiatnik Russkoi narodnoi skorbi', in A. D. Stepanov and A. A. Ivanov (eds.), *Chernaia sotnia. Istoricheskaia entsiklopediia. 1900-1917* (Moscow: Institut Russkoi tsivilizatsii, 2008), pp. 572-74.

⁸² A. I. Vaseva, 'Osmyslenie obraza velikogo kniazia v obshchestvennom soznanii', in *Velikii kniaz' Sergei Aleksandrovich na sluzhbe Mosvke o otechestvu. Materialy mezhregional'noi nauchnoi konferentsii 29-30 maia 2013 g. Khram Khrista Spasitelia, Krasnyi zal* (Moscow: Soiuz dizain 2015), pp. 220-31 (p. 227).

revolutionary violence, and his service to the Russian state was commented upon in the memorial's designs.⁸³ The foundations of the church were laid in a ceremony on 29 April 1907, with a large procession gathering on the fields of Khodynka (site of the crowd crush in 1896), which included many figures from Church and state as well as members of the Fourth All-Union Congress of the Russian People – a major congregation of groups on the political right held in Moscow from 29 April to 1 May 1907. Religious figures including Ioann Vostorgov, who had spoken out on the importance of Sergei's memory following his assassination, also attended the ceremony.⁸⁴

After a period of construction lasting almost exactly two years, the 'Memorial Church of the Sorrows of the Russian People' was officially opened on 5 April 1909, with Ella opening the building in front of Moscow notables and delegates representing a variety of monarchist organizations.⁸⁵ The church was dedicated to the martyred Grand Duke: his contribution to Russian statehood was noted in the opening ceremony, with Nicholas II sending a telegram recording his personal thanks, both to Sergei and the 'truly Russian people' who had fallen in the struggle against revolution.⁸⁶ Thereafter the church became a site of pilgrimage, with Sergei a prominent figure in the culture of commemoration surrounding the 'victims of revolution' that developed. These ceremonies were organized by right-wing groups such as the Russian Assembly and the URP and were attended by their supporters, including sympathetic members of the clergy such as Ioann Vostorgov.⁸⁷ Images in the illustrated journal *Niva* from the middle of 1909 show many figures involved in such

⁸³ 'Khram – pamiatnik Russkoi narodnoi skorbi', *Vestnik Russkogo sobraniia*, 12 November 1909, 30, pp. 1-5; V. A. Obraztsov, *Torzhestvo Russkogo ob"edineniia: osviaschenie "narodnago doma" Ekaterinoslavskogo otdela Soiuza Russkogo naroda, 5-go Oktiabria 1910 g.* (Khar'kov: Mirnyi trud, 1912).

⁸⁴ Stepanov, 'Khram-pamiatnik', p. 573; 'S.-Peterburg, 11 Maia', *Vestnik Russkogo sobraniia*, 11 May 1907, 17, pp. 1-3.

⁸⁵ 'Khram – pamiatnik Russkoi narodnoi skorbi', *Vestnik Russkogo sobraniia*, 12 November 1909, 30, p. 2; 'Khronika', *Tserkovnye vedomosti*, 11 April 1909, 15, pp. 674-76.

⁸⁶ 'Khronika', *Tserkovnye vedomosti*, 11 April 1909, 15, p. 675.

⁸⁷ Stepanov, 'Khram-pamiatnik', p. 573.

processions, including large numbers of priests as well as figures from monarchist congregations.⁸⁸ The martyr narrative surrounding Sergei dwelt on his years of state service, his role as governor-general of Moscow, as well as his patronage of civic and learned societies, all described as showing his care for the people of Russia.⁸⁹ Ella's appearance at several of these occasions furthered the narrative of the 'martyred' nature of the Romanov family, alongside the enhanced status of the murdered 'tsar-martyr', Alexander II. A 'marble martyrology' to the 'victims' of revolution designed by Vasnetsov consisted of a series of plaques surrounding the iconostasis. This list of nearly 2,000 names included members of the imperial family like Sergei and Alexander II, as well as major state servants assassinated in the early twentieth century including Pleve (d. 1904), Nikolai Bogolepov (1901) and Nikolai Bobrikov (1905). The remaining names were sailors, soldiers and policeman who had died in conflict with revolutionary forces, showing how martyrdom was beginning to take on a more inclusive nature amongst the autocracy's supporters.⁹⁰

For rightists, Sergei's violent demise and suffering represented the current ferocity of struggle with revolutionaries, and his martyr status was closely tied to their broader ideology and political visions. As a victim of terrorist violence, Sergei's death showed that Russia's representatives who stood for Orthodox religiosity, strong state power and national identity were under attack, in spite of the service they had undertaken for the *narod*. The latter point concerning national identity was linked to the right's populism: they, rather than Russia's revolutionaries, represented the 'truly Russian' people, and their martyrs who had laboured for 'the people' represented this particular aspect of right-wing ideology. Given belief in their post-revolutionary victimhood and wide choice of subjects to venerate, the concept of

⁸⁸ *Niva* 1909, 19, p. 357.

⁸⁹ 'Nashe zakonostroitel'stvo', *Vestnik Russkogo sobraniia*, 7 May 1909, 19, pp. 1-2.

⁹⁰ 'Khram – pamiatnik Russkoi narodnoi skorbi', *Vestnik Russkogo sobraniia*, 12 November 1909, 30, pp. 3-5.

martyrdom was much relevant to rightists, as seen in the martyrology created inside the Khodynka church and from reference to figures from Russian history like the ‘tsar-martyr’ Alexander II as well as Sergei.⁹¹

Afterword

Before the revolutions of 1917, there was a growing turn in sections of conservative society towards the public veneration of major figures, one example being the production of the martyr cult surrounding Sergei. The vision of the Grand Duke as suffering martyr had traction, as we can see from contemporary journalism; rituals during 1905; mourning ceremonies; the memorial cross; the congregation of right-wing figures who wished to honour him after 1905, and his position within the 1909 memorial church on the fields of Khodynka. Presenting the Grand Duke as suffering martyr and victim – two words continually evoked in the discourse surrounding his passing – demonstrate Church, state and conservative attempts to create an emotional link between the tsarist state and the Russian people.

This commemorative legacy was dismantled following the Russian Revolutions of 1917. In May 1918, Vladimir Lenin personally participated in a ceremony in which the 1908 memorial cross was pulled down and subsequently removed in front of a group of followers.⁹² This was representative of the Bolsheviks’ approach towards the symbols of the old order, and their anti-religious ideas in particular. Following discussions amongst Bolshevik leaders and conservators in 1928-9, the Chudov Monastery – where the Grand Duke’s remains had been interred since 1906 – was destroyed, which contained within it many irreplaceable works of Russian Orthodox religiosity.⁹³

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 2.

⁹² D. B. Grishin, ‘Pochitanie pamiati velikogo kniazia Sergeïia Aleksandrovicha v Moskve’, in *Velikii kniaz’ Sergii Aleksandrovich (1857-1905) v istorii Russkogo gosudarstva i kul’tury* (Moscow: Palomnicheskogo tsentra Moskovskogo Patriarkhata, 2007), pp. 22-40 (p. 34).

⁹³ Limanova, ‘S chrezvychainoiu storogos’iu i tainoiu’; see also Catherine Merridale, *Red Fortress. The Secret Heart of Russia’s History* (London: Allen Lane, 2013), pp. 307-8.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union there has been a resurgence of interest in Sergei and the values he embodied, intersecting with wider debates about the meaning of Russian conservatism, the standing of the Romanov dynasty, and the emotional and spiritual legacy of the Russian autocracy. There has been a spike in interest in the Grand Duke's life and work, and in his martyred widow Ella. Sergei has been the subject of studies, projects and conferences within the Russian Federation which discuss his life, demise, status as a servant of Russian autocracy and fate within a much larger 'tragedy', the fall of the Romanov dynasty.⁹⁴ A view of the revolutionary era of Russian history as a 'time of troubles' (*smuta*) was a key image in the public unveiling of a reconstruction of the 1908 cross. Patriarch Kirill and Vladimir Putin attended the ceremony held in Senate Square in the grounds of the Kremlin on 4 May 2017, addressing a delegation assembled at the precise site where the original cross had stood prior to the revolution. Putin commented:

This cross was among the first monuments destroyed after the revolution. The Chudov Monastery in the Kremlin and countless other monuments around the country met the same fate. In the end though, truth and justice always prevail. Today, we see how churches are rebuilt, monasteries open anew, and holy places that were lost are returned. Russia's history is regaining its unity... These are our national spiritual roots.

This unveiling promoted what has become in modern Russian a standard historical-cultural narrative, with archetype elements of patriotism, religion and the necessity of state (conservative) power. Contrasting the sufferings of the Romanovs with the unlawful tactics of

⁹⁴ The hagiographic bent of some works can be identified from their titles: for instance, Grishin, *Tragicheskaiia sud'ba*. Of interest too is the ongoing multivolume publication undertaken by secular and clerical enthusiasts: *Velikii kniaz' Sergei Aleksandrovich Romanov: Biograficheskie materialy*, 5 Vols. (Moscow: Novospasskii monastyr', 2006–18).

revolutionaries, Putin contended that ‘there is never any justification for violence and murder, no matter what political slogans they use’.⁹⁵ This shows that the imagery advanced following the Grand Duke’s death in 1905 – with conservative stability contrasted with the chaos and violence of revolution – has clear reverberations into the present day. Such views and values have hardly been consigned to the Russian past but are still live issues, subject to contestation and debate as Russia’s history is continually interrogated and rewritten.

⁹⁵ ‘Unveiling of monument to Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovich’, *President of Russia* (English translation), 4 May 2017’ <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/54447>> [accessed 5 August 2019].