Screenplay for the film "1916 — Empress Alexandra Feodorovna. Historical Chronicles with Nikolai Svanidze" *written by Marina Zhukova, translated by AI, and preceded by a summary also written by AI*

Screenplay Summary:

The story takes place in 1916–1917 around Empress Alexandra Feodorovna, Rasputin and the imperial court on the eve of revolution.

It begins with the night of 16–17 December 1916: Prince Felix Yusupov lures Rasputin to his palace on the Moika to murder him.

We see the detailed preparation: poisoned cakes and Madeira, long waiting, Rasputin's apparent immunity to the poison, then a gunshot, his uncanny revival, escape into the snowy courtyard and final killing by Purishkevich's bullets.

His body is thrown into the Neva, while the Empress demands the conspirators' execution and the Tsar, instead, seems strangely cheerful.

The film then broadens its focus: it presents Zinaida Yusupova, Felix's immensely wealthy, clear-sighted mother, close to the imperial family and allied with Grand Duchess Elisaveta, Alexandra's sister.

In flashback, we see years of obsessive search for a male heir driving Alexandra into the arms of charlatans — Doctor Philippe, the possessed Daria, the seer Mitka — who invade the imperial bedroom.

These often grotesque and disturbing episodes expose the Empress's fragile psyche, her distorted religiosity, congenital hysteria and dependence on "holy fools" and prophets.

Rasputin appears on this well-prepared ground: introduced by Anna Vyrubova, he becomes for Alexandra healer, guru and channel to God, especially because of Tsarevich Alexei's hemophilia.

The script shows Alexandra adopting Rasputin's harsh, contemptuous style in letters to Nicholas, demanding the closure of the Duma, repression and fear of the monarch.

Around them swarm other murky figures, like the Tibetan doctor Badmaev, who treats with herbs but also intrigues politically to place his protégés in government.

Official Russia is portrayed as a world in full-blown mystical-political delirium: a weak Tsar, a sick and exalted Empress, ministers rotating constantly, no coherent policy, a discredited church.

In parallel, the film reminds us that at the front Russia shows real military strength (Brusilov offensive, Caucasus successes), while the home front drowns in rumours and indifference to the war itself.

Food shortages, misguided economic controls (fixed grain prices, failed requisitions), queues at state bread shops all fuel popular anger.

Inside the Romanov family, grand dukes warn Nicholas that Alexandra and Rasputin isolate him from reality and are driving the Empire toward disaster.

The Empress, nicknamed "Valida," is seen by some as the real ruler, by others as mad; Nicholas is already despised within the family as "the Colonel."

The final sequence centres on Rodzianko's audience with the Tsar: the Duma chairman urges Nicholas to remove Alexandra from politics, or the people will be forced to choose between the sovereign and the welfare of the Motherland.

The Tsar, shattered, asks whether he could really have been wrong for twenty-two years, and Rodzianko answers: "Yes, Your Majesty, for twenty-two years you have been on the wrong path."

The script closes on this judgment: Rasputin's death has solved nothing, autocracy is hollowed out, and the fall of the regime has become unavoidable.

Screenplay :

On 16 December 1916, old style, at about two in the morning,
Prince Felix Yusupov, Count Sumarokov-Elston,
left his palace on the Moika by automobile
and headed toward Gorokhovaya Street.
He was going to fetch Rasputin.
On the Moika, everything was ready for Rasputin's murder.

Felix had met Rasputin in 1909.
Felix displayed homosexual tendencies.
Rasputin treated him —
laying him across a threshold,
conducting hypnotic sessions.
Yusupov later wrote:
"Rasputin's hypnotic power was enormous."

Later, Yusupov broke off contact with him,
because Rasputin opposed his marriage
to the Tsar's niece, Grand Duchess Irina Alexandrovna.
When Yusupov resolved to kill Rasputin,
he renewed their acquaintance.

Rasputin spoke frankly during their meetings.
He said he intended to disperse the Duma:
"I'll scatter them," he said,
"and send them to the front.
That'll teach them to wag their tongues."
"The Empress," he said,
"is a true sovereign.
She has the mind and the strength.
A second Catherine.
Even now she rules everything.
And as for him — like a small child.
Is that a tsar?
He should stay home smelling flowers
instead of ruling.
Power is not for him."
He said the Empress herself oversaw
the herbal infusions served to the tsar:
"He drinks his grace-tea
and becomes kind and cheerful at once.

I tell you — we'll get our way.
We'll proclaim Alexandra regent
for the young heir.
And him — we'll send to rest in Livadia.
He's exhausted, poor man — let him rest.
Among the flowers, he'll be closer to God.
He has much to repent.
He could pray forever
and never atone for this war.
Enough war — time to stop the slaughter."

Had Rasputin managed to instill in either imperial spouse
the idea of ending the war,
Russia's history would have taken a different path,
and Rasputin himself
would have become a national hero
of the 20th century.
But that did not happen.
Either his influence was exaggerated,
or the idea of ending the war two years after it began
did not possess him as strongly as claimed.
He simply continued doing what he was accustomed to do.

"You want?" he offered Yusupov.
"I'll appoint you minister."

On the night of 16–17 December,
Rasputin dressed in a silk shirt
embroidered with cornflowers,
a thick crimson cord for a belt,
velvet trousers,
and high shiny boots.
When Yusupov entered his apartment,
he smelled strong cheap soap.
He later wrote:
"I had never seen him so clean and combed."

Rasputin had slicked down his hair.
They drove to the Moika.

In a hastily furnished basement of the Yusupov palace,
Felix and Rasputin were alone.
The other conspirators were upstairs,
pretending to hold a party
in honor of Princess Irina Alexandrovna.
A record of *Yankee Doodle* played continuously.
The entire murder took place to its accompaniment.

Agitated, Yusupov first offered Rasputin
a plate of unpoisoned pastries
and poured him tea.
Only afterward did he offer éclairs
with potassium cyanide.
Rasputin ate one.
Then another.
The poison did not work.
Then he drank poisoned Madeira,
smacking his lips, savoring it.
He drank from various glasses, all poisoned.
Then he suddenly stood, walked a few steps,
said his throat tickled,
and sat again.
They sat facing each other,
silent, drinking.
Then Rasputin asked Yusupov
to sing and play the guitar.

Finally Yusupov could not bear it.
He left Rasputin, went upstairs,
said the poison wasn't working,
took a revolver,
and returned to the basement.
Rasputin was examining a crystal crucifix.
Felix fired.
Rasputin cried out and collapsed.

Hearing the shot,
the conspirators ran in.
Dr. Lazovert pronounced him dead.
Three conspirators left.
Yusupov and Purishkevich
talked about Russia's future.
Felix returned to the basement,
felt the pulse again.
Moments later, Rasputin opened his eyes
and sprang to his feet.
Foam and blood streamed from his mouth
as he lunged at Yusupov.
A struggle followed.
Yusupov broke free
and ran for Purishkevich.

Rasputin crawled up the stairs toward the street,
then stood and ran outside.
Purishkevich fired.

Four shots.
Rasputin fell into the snow.

Later, in a brightly lit lavatory,
Yusupov stood over the washbasin,
holding his head,
spitting endlessly.

A city policeman,
who had heard the shots, arrived.
Purishkevich shouted:
“Yes, shots were fired — Rasputin is dead.
And you, if you love the Tsar and the Fatherland,
will keep silent.”
The policeman replied:
“You did right.
I will be silent.
But if an oath is demanded,
I will tell.
Lying is a sin.”
And he left.

Rasputin’s body was loaded into a car,
taken to the Little Neva,
and thrown from the Pokrovsky Bridge.

The Empress summoned the Minister of the Interior Protopopov
and demanded the immediate execution of the conspirators.
Only the Tsar could decide their fate.
But for a week he said nothing.
On the Empress’s orders,
Yusupov, Grand Duke Dmitri Pavlovich,
and Purishkevich were placed under house arrest.

According to Nicholas II’s entourage,
upon hearing of Rasputin’s murder,
the Tsar said not a word,
but became unexpectedly cheerful.

On 23 December, the punishment was announced:
a lenient one — exile for Felix and Dmitri Pavlovich.
Purishkevich left for the front
under parliamentary immunity.

Already on 18 December at 8:52 a.m.,
almost immediately after the murder,
the Empress’s sister,
Elisaveta Feodorovna,
a deeply religious woman,
sent a telegram to Felix’s mother,

Princess Zinaida Nikolaevna Yusupova:
“All my deep and ardent prayers surround you all
for the patriotic act of your dear son.”
Signed: Ella.

Princess Zinaida Yusupova,
the recipient, was extraordinary.
First, because her lineage traced back
to a nephew of Muhammad.
Second, because she possessed
the largest fortune in Russia —
greater than the Tsar’s.

Infanta Eulalia of Spain,
aunt of the king,
retained vivid memories of the reception
held by Princess Yusupova:
“At dinner, the hostess wore
a formal gown embroidered with diamonds
and marvelous Oriental pearls.
Statuesque, graceful.
Her kokoshnik — a diadem —
was also set with pearls and diamonds.
With strings of pearls,
heavy gold bracelets
with Byzantine motifs,
turquoise-and-pearl earrings,
and rings shining in every color of the rainbow,
she looked like an ancient empress.”

On this literally brilliant background,
another recollection mattered:
“A woman of rare beauty
and deep spiritual culture,
she bore with courage
the burdens of her immense fortune.”

She also possessed acting talent.
Stanislavsky invited her to join his troupe.
She was perceptive, principled, independent,
and could have run a political salon.

In 1917, the court dentist Kastritsky
returned from Tobolsk,
where the imperial family was held,
bringing a letter from Nicholas II.
Among other things, it said:
“When you see Princess Yusupova,

tell her that I understand
how right her warnings were.
Had they been heeded,
many tragedies would have been avoided.”

The princess was close to the imperial family.
Her son Felix, whom she fully supported
in the murder of Rasputin,
was married to a grand duchess.
She had a special friendship
with the Empress’s sister, Elisaveta Feodorovna,
her neighbor at their summer estates.
Their bond was not only spiritual,
but political — and dangerous —
for it stood against
the first lady of Russia,
Empress Alexandra Feodorovna,
who seemed to rule alone in 1916.
In reality, no one ruled the country.
The peasant Rasputin could not either.
But the Empress’s entourage
certainly merits attention.

In 1901, the daughters of the King of Montenegro,
Anastasia and Militsa,
married to Russian grand dukes,
brought from Paris to the Winter Palace
Doctor Philippe.
In Paris, he had been forbidden to practice
after complaints of charlatanism.
In Russia, he was placed under the care
of the palace commandant Hesse,
and under the personal responsibility
of Interior Ministers Sipyagin and Plehve,
both later assassinated by terrorists.
Such high supervision
was due to the mission entrusted to him —
the Empress must bear an heir.

Monsieur Philippe oversaw the situation
directly in the imperial bedroom
at the most decisive moments.
Eventually it was announced
that the Empress was pregnant.
Grand Duchess Militsa declared
she was experienced in obstetrics,

and court obstetrician Dr. Ott
was dismissed from attending the Empress.

Former Prime Minister Witte recalled
that in the last months,
Alexandra Feodorovna stopped wearing a corset,
changed into dresses she had worn
before giving birth to her daughters,
and that everyone noticed
she had grown visibly larger.
The Tsar rejoiced.
An official announcement was made.
St. Petersburg expected at any moment
the cannon salute
announcing the birth of a son.
The Empress lay in bed constantly.
Yet the labor never came.
Finally, Professor Ott examined her
and announced that she was not pregnant
and had never been.

Witte wondered:
if any random charlatan
can convince a woman she is pregnant
and transmit this illusion to her husband —
a man who exercises unlimited power
over a vast empire —
then what else can such adventurers
instill in these people?

The *Government Herald*
was forced to issue an explanation.
Among the people, rumors spread at once
that the Empress had given birth
to a horned monster
that had to be strangled.
Straight out of Pushkin's tale
of Tsar Saltan:
"The tsarina, in the night,
bore—not a son, not a daughter,
not a mouse, not a frog,
but an unknown little creature."
Pushkin, indeed, was a prophet.

As for Monsieur Philippe,
contrary to law and common sense,
War Minister Kuropatkin

granted him a medical doctorate
from the St. Petersburg Military Academy
and the rank of Actual State Councillor.
Monsieur Philippe went to the military tailor
and ordered himself a military medical uniform.
Incidentally, Rasputin also cherished the dream
of obtaining an official position at court,
but, strangely enough, he never succeeded.

And another detail about War Minister Kuropatkin,
dismissed after the defeat
in the Russo-Japanese War.
In 1914, already during the World War,
the Dowager Empress Maria Feodorovna
came to visit Princess Zinaida Nikolaevna Yusupova
in her palace on the Moika.
The senior porter of the Yusupovs, Grigory,
approached her and said:
“Why, Your Majesty,
was General Kuropatkin
not appointed to the army?
It is high time he atone for the past.”
The Empress repeated this conversation
to her son,
and two weeks later
General Kuropatkin received a division.
It should be added that in 1905,
after the disgrace of the Russo-Japanese War,
another servant of the Yusupovs, Pavel,
refused to wait on Kuropatkin at table,
spat and turned his back on him.

After Doctor Philippe,
the Romanovs began to look for prophets
in their own land.
At court, news spread that
on the estate of Aide-de-camp Orlov-Davydov
lived a “possessed woman” named Daria,
specialized precisely
in the field that interested
the imperial family —
how to give birth to an heir.
At the personal request of Nicholas II,
Aide-de-camp Orlov-Davydov
brought Daria to the palace.
In her village, Daria attended births,
cast curses on enemies,

and was, in addition,
a chronic drunkard.
In her cups, she became extremely violent.
In the village, people said that it was precisely
in her violent fits
that her gift of foresight appeared.
In the palace, she became confused,
her gift did not appear,
but she gave the Empress
quite a fright.

Another aide-de-camp, Nikolai Obolensky,
came from the Kozelsk district
and in turn told the court
about Mitka Kozelsky,
who in epileptic fits
gave reliable predictions.
Rumor had begun the day
Mitka shouted something inarticulate
about some fire.
At the time, no one paid attention
to his words,
but a month later
someone's hut burned down.
Then everyone remembered Mitka's howling.
In short, Mitka Kozelsky
was brought to the palace to the Tsar.
Mitka was accompanied
by a certain Elpidifor as interpreter.
Upon seeing the Tsar,
Mitka began to moo.
Elpidifor was asked
what that meant.
He translated:
"He wants to see the children."
The imperial children
were brought in at once.
Then Mitka began to scream terribly.
Elpidifor was asked to translate.
He said:
"He says he wants tea.
With jam."

At that time,
Alexandra Feodorovna was pregnant.
She regularly attended
Mitka Kozelsky's fits

in the hope of learning
her child’s future.
This went on for several months.
Eventually, Alexandra Feodorovna fainted,
and the faint ended
in a premature birth.
The doctors said that if the Empress
had carried to term,
a boy would certainly have been born,
and it would have been thanks to Mitka.

Mitka prayed,
at the Empress’s request,
for the birth of an heir,
then gave communion to everyone,
including the grand duchesses.
He gave communion from his own mouth,
that is, he spat out
and with what he had spat out,
he communicated them.
Mitka Kozelsky spat,
and the grand duchesses
had to swallow.
Grand Duchess Olga felt sick,
she said it smelled bad.
The Empress thought
Olga was being capricious.
The grand duchess developed a rash,
Mitka was dismissed,
but after a while
he was again summoned to the palace.
Incidentally, Grand Duchess Olga,
the Empress’s eldest daughter,
later was not favorably disposed
toward Rasputin
and did not go to his funeral.

Alexandra Feodorovna was in general
strict with her daughters.
She had their dresses sewn on instalment plans,
though she could hardly explain
what she gained by this.
Rasputin even reproached her:
“Don’t be stingy with clothes,
brides are growing up.”

Then suddenly Rasputin
would show another side
and say:
“Why should they (the grand duchesses)
deck themselves in gold?
They are modestly dressed,
their faces are angelic.
Of course, everyone wants
a little something extra.
But why get used to it?
Who knows how things will turn out.”

Once, before sending
her girls’ old dresses
to a charity bazaar
for poor orphans,
Alexandra Feodorovna
ripped off the expensive mother-of-pearl buttons
and replaced them
with bone ones.
The substitution was discovered.
Nobody said anything
to Alexandra Feodorovna herself,
but the Dowager Empress Maria Feodorovna
asked her son Nicholas:
“I hope Alexandra
did not prick her fingers too much.”

And what did not go
to the charity bazaar,
the Empress also found a use for.
She would summon to the palace
a rag-and-bone man
from the Alexandrovsky market,
bargain with him,
and hand over for sale
her daughters’ old dresses
or those completely out of fashion.

From the interrogation
of Court Historiographer Dubensky
before the Extraordinary Commission
set up by the Provisional Government,
9 August 1917:
“Nicholas looked at his wife
as a boy at his governess.
She spoke for him,

he kept silent.
In her presence
the Tsar had no opinion of his own.”

From a letter
of Alexandra Feodorovna to Nicholas,
4 April 1915:
“Humility is the highest gift,
but a monarch must more often
show his will.
Be confident in yourself
and act.
Never be afraid.
You will never say too much.”
Alexandra Feodorovna
differed from her husband
by an indisputable will,
and it is just as indisputable
that the Empress was very ill.
The French Ambassador in Russia,
Maurice Paléologue, wrote in his memoirs
that Alexandra Feodorovna,
together with her sister Elisaveta Feodorovna
and their brother, the Grand Duke of Hesse,
had inherited from their mother,
who died young,
a nervous disorder.
It manifested itself
in chronic melancholy,
vague fears,
and alternating periods
of agitation and depression,
plus a severe heart neurosis.
Hence the lips of this beautiful young woman,
of a violet-purple color —
“snake lips,”
as eyewitnesses wrote.
That is why a special lift
was installed in the Nobles’ Assembly
in Moscow for her arrival
to the celebration
of the 300th anniversary
of the Romanov dynasty,
and even a wheelchair
was prepared for her.
With such poor health

and such a vulnerable psyche,
Alice-Victoria-Helena-Brigitte-Louise-Beatrice of Hesse
could not possibly bear
such a powerful experience
as Russia in the 20th century.

Her conversion to Orthodoxy,
for a young lady
with a solid philosophical education from Oxford,
turned into religious derangement,
which intensified her inborn hysteria.
Traditional Russian holy fools
became vitally necessary
to this young German woman.
Nicholas could easily do without them,
but quickly grew used to them.

The prophetess Aginushka
gave the Tsar and Tsarina
“pigeon water” to drink.
Alexandra Feodorovna
used it as a remedy
for sleepiness and despair.
The recipe was simple:
one part holy water,
one part well water,
add pigeon blood to taste.
What was not drunk
was sprinkled on the bed.

The imperial bed
was also sprinkled
with Bethlehem water
from four bottles
brought by four blind nuns
from Kiev.
They would say:
“Mother is undoubtedly a saint.”

Then there arrived
a fortune-teller named Grippa,
about thirty, very beautiful.
Nicholas said of this prophetess:
“In one night
she can receive three generations
of the imperial family
and then drink her hot chocolate in bed.”
Grippa often held conversations

with the Tsar,
calling him
“servant of the empresses”
and also “a case for orders.”
Nicholas repeated to Alexandra Feodorovna
his talks with the fortune-teller.
She reacted:
“Nicky throws my bread
to this dog.
So be it!
I am not jealous.”

St. Petersburg
was seized by a frenzied demand
for hypnotists, pilgrims,
and possessed women.
The impressions
of the first Russian revolution
gave the ladies of the high nobility
a new lifestyle,
a new fashion.
One might even say
that the revolution
threw the female part
of official St. Petersburg
into ecstasy.
They longed to combine
the languor of the spirit
with the languor of the flesh,
to cover it a little
with mysticism,
and, in general,
to set out in search
of simplicity, sincerity,
and authenticity.
The Empress, as befitted
the first lady of the Empire,
was the trendsetter
of this new fashion.
And by then there was no more question
of re-sewing buttons.
On the whole,
everyone was ready
for Rasputin’s arrival.

Rasputin understood unfailingly
what was expected of him.

“They drove me around
and showed me like a bird of paradise,”
he recalled.
“And I felt that although
my fate had risen high,
something had broken.
I understood that my peasant freedom
had come to an end.
That they would all
play at ‘little peasant’ with me.
And I would have to grasp
their tricks —
otherwise I was done for. Kaput.”

At last,
the “bird of paradise” Rasputin
was brought to the imperial palace.
His introduction to Alexandra Feodorovna
took place in the presence
of the Empress’s lady-in-waiting,
Anna Vyrubova (née Taneeva).
Felix Yusupov knew Miss Taneeva
and retained childhood memories of her:
“Taneeva, a tall, strong girl
with a thick, shiny face,
was completely devoid of charm.
She had no intelligence either.
Only cunning and fat.
No one wanted to dance with her.
Who could have thought
that fat Anna
would become close
to the imperial family
and help in Rasputin’s dizzying rise?”

One evening,
the Tsarina and Vyrubova
sat down to play four-hands
Beethoven’s *Moonlight Sonata*.
The *Moonlight Sonata*
always moved Alexandra Feodorovna
to tears.
It was nearly midnight.
The Empress sat at the piano
with her back to the door.
In the doorway stood Rasputin,

looking at her back.
The clock struck twelve.

“Don’t you feel, Sana,
that something special is happening?”
asked Vyrubova,
turning her head toward Rasputin.
“Yes,” answered the Tsarina,
then she too turned,
gave a scream,
and fell into hysterics.
Rasputin came up to her
and began stroking
her head, cheeks, and shoulders.
The Tsarina pressed herself
against Rasputin’s chest.

Alexandra Feodorovna’s sister,
Elisaveta Feodorovna,
could not stand Rasputin
and never met him.
The Tsarina could not understand her at all.
“You are disgusted by this man,”
she told her.
“And yet he is everything
that is truly Russian.”

Alexandra Feodorovna
deeply assimilated
Rasputin’s artistic
and political style.
It emerges clearly in her letters
to her husband:
“In the Duma,
they are all fools,
at Headquarters
nothing but idiots,
in the Synod
only animals,
the ministers are scoundrels.
Our diplomats should all be hanged.
Close the Duma quickly.
The Duma must be squashed.
They all must learn
to tremble before you.
They must fear you.
We are, thank God,

not a constitutional state
and must not become one.
Our people are not prepared for it,
and thank God for that.
Show your fist.”

Princess Zinaida Nikolaevna Yusupova,
knowing that the Empress
was entirely in the power
of adventurers, pitied her.
Zinaida Nikolaevna
came to Kamenny Island
to see the Dowager Empress Maria Feodorovna and,
in the presence of Nicholas’s sisters Xenia and Olga,
said that the only means
to save the sovereign, the children,
and Russia
was to place the Empress
in a sanatorium for the mentally ill.
An isolated, calm, quiet life
might still save her.

By all accounts,
Alexandra Feodorovna’s illness
receded with the outbreak
of the World War.
During the war, outwardly,
she was exceptionally beautiful.
The French Ambassador Paléologue wrote:
“She has never looked
so healthy.
The Empress is wholly absorbed
by her work at the hospital.”

“For the first time,
I shaved a soldier’s leg
around the wound.”
“We had to cut off
three fingers from one wounded man.”
“I had to dress the wounds
of poor fellows
with horrific injuries.
They will scarcely remain men in future,
so shot through is everything.
We may have to cut everything off —
so black it all is.
I washed everything, cleaned it,

smeared it with iodine,
covered it with vaseline,
bandaged it —
it all went quite well.
I prefer to do such things myself
under a doctor’s guidance.”

It must be said
that the idea of working
in a military hospital
was suggested to the Empress
by Rasputin.
“I find it perfectly natural,”
the Empress wrote,
“that the sick feel better
in my presence,
for as I stroke them
I am always praying
and thinking of our Friend.”
The Friend — Rasputin.
It is quite true
that she always thought of him,
for she knew how to care
for his children.

Rasputin wanted his daughter Matrena
to be educated
at the Smolny Institute at all costs.
The head of the institute,
the elderly Princess Lieven,
refused to admit Miss Rasputina,
who lacked the necessary preparation,
and demonstratively resigned her post,
which she had held
for more than twenty years.
After that, Rasputin’s daughter
was enrolled at Smolny
without documents
and without exams.
Rasputin’s younger daughter, Varvara,
studied at a private girls’ school.
Vyrubova wrote of her:
“A delightful girl.
There is something of her father in her.
The same eyes.
And when she laughs,
the same peasant cunning.”

Varvara’s friends said to her:
“You are lucky, Varya!
Your father can do anything.
Whatever you ask for,
you will be given.”

Rasputin’s son Dmitri
was personally exempted from the army
by the Empress during the war.
She wrote to her husband:
“Our Friend (that is, Rasputin)
is in despair,
for his son runs the household
in his father’s absence.
One cannot take
an only son.”
The orders concerning
Rasputin’s son
were issued by none other
than the Chief of the General Staff.

In 1916, Nicholas
spent most of his time at Headquarters.
Alexandra Feodorovna
was left, involuntarily,
to manage affairs in Petrograd.
She was in good form —
a kind of war syndrome.
Nicholas wrote to his wife
one of his most famous letters:
“You must be my eyes and ears
there, in the capital,
while I have to sit here.
It is your duty
to maintain harmony among the ministers.
By this you render
a huge service to me
and to our country.
O priceless Sun,
I am so happy
that you have at last
found a suitable occupation.
Now, of course,
I shall be calm
and shall not torment myself,
at least about internal affairs.”

In December 1916,
Grand Duchess Elisaveta Feodorovna
once again tried
to speak to her younger sister,
the Empress, about Rasputin.
Alexandra Feodorovna cut her short:
“They always slander saints.”
As she left, Elisaveta Feodorovna
threw back over her shoulder:
“Remember the fate of Louis XVI.”
King Louis XVI of France
was executed during the Revolution,
together with his wife,
Marie Antoinette.

The Empress wrote to Nicholas at Supreme Headquarters:
“The time of great indulgence and softness is over —
now begins the reign of will and power.
Because they know that I have a strong will!”

Alexandra Feodorovna had returned to her childhood.
At the most inopportune moment
she turned into a *Spitzbube*,
which means “little rascal” or “mischievous girl.”
That was what they called her in childhood
when, naturally reserved,
she relaxed in the circle of close friends.

By the end of 1916,
the hypnotist Rasputin
had become her only companion.
However much she might have wished,
she was incapable of ruling Russia.
Rasputin, for his part,
had no constructive proposals for Russia either.
There were, on the other hand,
many unconstructive ones.

From mid–1915
until the abdication,
six Ministers of the Interior
succeeded one another.
After Maklakov came
Prince Shcherbatov.
He lasted three months
and was dismissed over an article about Rasputin.

Then came Alexei Nikolaevich Khvostov —
seven months.
He fell over a plot against Rasputin.
For five months
the Interior Ministry was headed personally
by the Prime Minister Stürmer.
He was replaced by another Khvostov,
Alexander Alexeevich.
He held on for two months.
After him came Protopopov.

Now for the War Ministers:
Polivanov, Shuvaev, Belyaev.
Then came a game of musical chairs
at the Ministry of Justice.
After Shcheglovitov
came Khvostov —
Khvostov the second, Alexander Alexeevich,
who would later be appointed
to the Interior Ministry
in place of Stürmer.
After Khvostov,
the Justice Ministry
was headed by Makarov,
who had also previously served
as Interior Minister.
At the very end came Dobrovolsky —
already after Rasputin's murder.

"He has chaos in his head — political chaos."
These words of Interior Minister Protopopov
could easily be applied to Rasputin,
although they were said
about another figure
of St Petersburg high society, medicine,
and politics.
This figure was the doctor
of Tibetan medicine Badmaev,
who appeared in St Petersburg
long before Rasputin,
under Alexander III,
and retained his influence
until 1917.

Here is what Sergei Witte
wrote about Badmaev:
"In some cases

his treatment does good,
but his treatment is always connected
with various intrigues and with politics.”
And one must add — with money.
Badmaev was introduced to Nicholas.
The Tsar was treated by him with herbs
and consulted him
on affairs of state.
Badmaev had a sanatorium.
The surnames from the list of his patients
would then move
onto the list of cabinet ministers.
In other words,
Badmaev’s sanatorium
was a sort of early version
of the Central Clinical Hospital
of the late Soviet era.

Princess Zinaida Nikolaevna Yusupova wrote:
“How I would like
to spit on everyone and everything
and get away as far as possible
from this atmosphere of madness,
intrigue, and malice!”
And also,
in the same letter:
“I despise all those
who put up with all this and keep silent!
The Valida is mad herself
and has driven her spouse mad.”
By “Valida,”
Princess Yusupova meant
Empress Alexandra Feodorovna.
Valida comes from Latin *validus* —
“having force, valid.”
That is, the Valida
was the actual, real ruler of Russia.
Nicholas II,
in Yusupova’s letters,
she called simply “Validol”
(a play on the name
of a popular sedative).

Interior Minister Protopopov
was precisely Badmaev’s protégé;
they had known each other
for twenty-seven years.

So it is hard not to believe him
when he says
that in the Tibetan doctor’s head
there is “political chaos.”
Badmaev and Rasputin —
and Protopopov with them —
worked hand in hand
within the imperial family.
Rasputin dealt successfully
with suggestion;
Badmaev supplied a complex
of sedative pharmacological remedies,
first and foremost for the heir.

At first glance,
Alexandra Feodorovna’s fear
for her son’s health
is the only rational motive
in the Empress’s relationship
with Rasputin.
Maternal feeling
combined with a sense of guilt
for the fact that the disease
of nonclotting blood
came from her own family,
that of Alexandra Feodorovna,
can serve as justification
for many of the Empress’s actions
and as an explanation
for the free hand
given to the healer Rasputin.

The child’s physical suffering
provoked in Alexandra Feodorovna
the most intense pain
with facial spasms,
heart attacks,
and partial paralysis of the limbs.

But in the triangle
Empress–Tsarevich Alexei–Rasputin,
one other element is of interest.
Fear for her son’s health
did not in the least obscure,
in the mother’s consciousness,
the main idea:

her son Alexei
was the future Russian monarch.

Rasputin manipulated
this dream of the Empress to perfection,
and it is now hard to say
whether Alexandra Feodorovna
saw in Alexei
the heir of Nicholas
or his replacement.

The Empress had a very difficult labor
with her son.
The court doctor Timofeev
asked Nicholas for instructions:
in a critical situation,
whom should they save —
the mother or the child?
The Tsar replied:
“If it is a boy,
save the child
and sacrifice the mother.”
Later,
the Empress was told
about this supreme instruction.

In 1916,
at the height of the First World War,
the front lived
a life entirely separate
from the rest of Russia,
including official Petrograd.
Grand Duke Alexander Mikhailovich,
husband of Nicholas’s sister Xenia
and father-in-law of Felix Yusupov,
came from the front
to Petrograd for a short visit.
These were his impressions:
“The war does not interest Petrograd.
Petrograd lives on rumors.
Is it true the Tsar has taken to drink?
Have you heard that the Sovereign
is being treated
by some Buryat
who has prescribed him a medicine
that destroys the brain?
Do you know that Prime Minister Stürmer

is dealing with German agents
in Stockholm?
Have you been told
of Rasputin’s latest escapade?
And never a single question
about the army,
not a word of joy
about Brusilov’s victory.”

On 4 June 1916,
troops under General Brusilov,
having broken through
the positional defenses
of the Austro-Hungarians,
began an offensive
along the entire Southwestern Front
and advanced
to a depth of 60 to 150 kilometers.
Enemy losses were enormous.
In Brusilov and his army
Russia demonstrated
its new military
and strategic potential.
The surprise and breadth of the offensive,
the flawless communications
between units —
lessons learned
from the defeats of 1914 —
the artillery preparation,
the adequate supply of shells,
trenches dug
seventy-five paces
from the enemy lines.
And, above all,
a new quality of leadership
in the person of Brusilov.

The Russian army
was also developing its success
on the Caucasian front,
advancing deep
into Turkish territory.
The forces of General Yudenich
took Erzurum.
Before Yudenich —
as before most participants
of the First World War —

there still lay
the civil war.

The same Grand Duke Alexander Mikhailovich
wrote at this time:
“There will be an uprising
in our rear
precisely at the moment
when the army is ready
to deliver a decisive blow
to the enemy.”

The Russian army’s offensive
in the autumn of 1916
was not developed,
although the economy could have supported it.
The assertion
that the army suffered
from moral exhaustion
might be acceptable
if one did not know
that what followed
would be a fratricidal Russian civil war,
lasting three years
with terrible ferocity
and without moral exhaustion.

By 1916,
despite lost territories
and mobilization
from town and countryside,
Russia had increased shell production
by 2,000 percent,
artillery guns
by 1,000 percent,
and rifles
by 1,100 percent.
Overall economic output,
compared with the benchmark year 1913,
had grown by 21 percent.
The Bolsheviks inherited
18 million shells.
Each month,
222 airplanes were produced.
Telephone production
increased fivefold.
Five automobile plants

produced trucks
and were ready
to produce tanks of their own.

The main problem in 1916
was food.
Interior Minister Protopopov
became responsible
for provisions.
Russia was the only
warring country
that, from the very start,
did not introduce food ration cards —
except for sugar.
At the same time,
in order to prevent speculation,
the government imposed
fixed purchase prices for grain.
The results of this measure
proved extremely unfortunate.
Peasants accustomed
to a market system
sharply reduced sowings
and cut deliveries to the cities.
Queues formed
outside state bread shops,
and with the queues
came discontent.
In 1916,
grain prices were raised
but remained fixed.
For all other products,
prices rose four- to fivefold.
Grain was not brought
from the countryside
to the towns.
The decision
to introduce grain requisition (prodrazvyorstka),
adopted under Duma pressure
in September 1916,
had no effect.
On 16 September
the Empress wrote to Nicholas
with a Lenin-like intonation:
“The most important question for us now
is food.”

Yet Lenin’s brutal methods
of requisition —
total seizure of grain
and mass killing
of peasant producers —
occurred to no one.
The idea of total war communism
came to no one’s mind,
despite the fact
that fifteen grain-producing provinces
had been lost
in the great retreat of 1915,
despite countless refugees,
despite the bad harvest of 1916.

At the beginning of 1916,
the state grain reserve
stood at 900 million poods —
one-third of Russia’s annual need.
This reserve
was the last thing
by which the murdered Prime Minister
Pyotr Arkadievich Stolypin
helped his country after his death,
he who had been the author
of a successful but unfinished
liberal agrarian reform.

In 1916,
the government did not trust
the free market
and did not release bread prices.
The grain that had been collected
could not be transported
to the towns
and to the active army
because of the usual chaos
in the transport system.
In 1916 alone,
four prime ministers
succeeded one another:
Goremykin, Stürmer, Trepov, Golitsyn.

The supreme commander
of a fifteen-million-strong army,
Russian Emperor Nicholas Romanov,
sat in his Headquarters

at Mogilev.
The large Romanov family
finally could bear it no longer.
In November 1916,
Grand Duke Nikolai Mikhailovich,
when he met the Emperor,
handed him a letter
that expressed the general mood
of the imperial clan:
“More than once
you have told me
that you have no one to trust,
that you are being deceived.
You trust Alexandra Feodorovna,
which is quite natural.
But what comes from her lips
is the result of a clever manipulation.
Your first decisions
are always correct.
But as soon as other influences appear,
you begin to waver.
You stand on the eve
of an era of new disturbances —
I will say more:
on the eve of an era
of assassination attempts.
Believe me.”

Nicholas did not read the letter;
he forwarded it
to Alexandra Feodorovna.
She read it
and wrote to her husband:
“I am terribly outraged
by Nicholas’s letter
(that is, the Grand Duke’s).
He feels that they take account of me,
and that is unbearable for him.
Why did you not say
that you would send him to Siberia?
He is the embodiment
of all evil.
A vile man,
the grandson of a Jew.”
As to this “grandson of a Jew,”
a clarification is needed.

First, Grand Duke Nikolai Mikhailovich
was the grandson of Tsar Nicholas I;
and second,
in this case we gain an idea
of a “pearl” and a “diamond”
from the set of curses
used by the Russian Empress.

After Nikolai Mikhailovich,
Grand Dukes Mikhail Alexandrovich,
Georgy Mikhailovich,
Alexander Mikhailovich,
and Dmitri Konstantinovich
also spoke out.
All expressed dissatisfaction
with the state of the government
and with the interference
of Rasputin
and Alexandra Feodorovna.

Rasputin’s murder
in December 1916
did not change
the picture of powerlessness.
The brief enthusiasm and animation
that accompanied
deliverance from Rasputin —
whose removal
had been urged by everyone
for so long —
did not lead
to the consolidation
of Russia’s political elite.

Nicholas could not be
the center of such consolidation,
and, in any case,
no one was interested in him any more —
not even his family.
Within the family
they had quietly begun
to call him “the Colonel.”

On 7 January 1917,
the Chairman of the State Duma,
Mikhail Rodzianko,
was granted an audience with the Tsar
and made a report to him

on the situation in the country:
“It is no secret to anyone
that the Empress, apart from you,
issues orders for the government of the state;
ministers go to her with their reports,
and those who displease her
are quickly dismissed.
Hatred for the Empress
is growing in the country.
To save your family,
it is necessary for you, Your Majesty,
to remove the Empress
from any influence on politics.
Do not force the people
to choose
between you
and the welfare of the Motherland.”

The Tsar clutched his head in his hands,
then said:
“Is it possible
that for twenty-two years
I have been striving
to make things better,
and for twenty-two years
I have been mistaken?”
Rodzianko replied:
“Yes, Your Majesty,
for twenty-two years
you have been following the wrong path.”