

The following excerpts are quoted from:

King, Greg. 2006. *The Court of the Last Tsar. Pomp, Power and Pageantry in the Reign of Nicholas II.* Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Part Four: Pageantry

Chapter 22: The Coronation

In May of 1896, Russia celebrated the coronation of Nicholas II. Nicholas and Alexandra arrived in Moscow on Monday, May 6, the emperor's 28th birthday. By tradition, they did not enter the city center but instead retired to the suburban Petrovsky Palace, to pray in preparation of the coming ceremony. Dowager Empress Marie Feodorovna arrived in Moscow on May 8.

On Thursday, May 9, the imperial family made its state entrance into Moscow and the Kremlin. *"It was calm and warm, the sun was shining joyfully, as if wishing to join the Muscovites in greeting the Emperor"* wrote Grand Duke Konstantin Konstantinovich. Finally, the emperor appeared, riding his favorite English horse, Norma, a light dapple gray mare that wore shoes of silver. Nicholas wore the full-dress uniform of a commander in the Preobrazhensky Guards, with the sash of the Order of St. Andrei across his chest, along with gold aiguillettes and two rows of shining medals. As he passed, people dropped to their knees, shouting fervently, *"We would die for our Tsar!"*

The women of the imperial family followed in elaborate gilded coaches. Dowager Empress Marie Feodorovna rode alone in the Imperial State Coach, made for Catherine the Great and topped with a gilded replica of the Imperial State Crown. She wore a Russian court gown of silver tissue embellished with embroidery in golden thread; atop her head, a diamond tiara flashed fire as she bowed from side to side to the gathered crowd. Grand Duke Konstantin Konstantinovich noted that she cried the entire afternoon.

Empress Alexandra Feodorovna followed in a gilded state carriage. Alexandra wore a Russian court gown of silver brocade, with a diamond tiara and a superb diamond necklace. She took no joy in the occasion. Her cousin Crown Princess Marie of Romania recalled her expression as one of *"almost painful earnestness, as if she were holding Fate off at arm's-length, as though darkly guessing that life might be a foe, she must set out to meet it sword in hand."*

"May the Merciful Lord help us, may He strengthen us tomorrow and bless us for a lifetime of peaceful works," the emperor wrote in his diary (the day before the coronation).

Tuesday, May 14, 1896, the day of the coronation, Nicholas and Alexandra had been up since dawn, preparing for the intricate ritual. He wore the dress uniform of a colonel of the Preobrazhensky Guards Regiment. His thigh-length tunic, of dark blue broadcloth, had a red broadcloth collar and cuffs, embroidered with oak leaves in gold thread. Gold epaulets were trimmed with heavy gold bullion and decorated with the diamond initials of his father, Alexander III. His trousers were white, worn with black knee-high boots lined with white leather. Across his chest stretched the light blue Sash of the Order of St. Andrei, worn with its matching Diamond Star, as well as the Diamond Star of the Order of St. Vladimir and several row of medals.

Alexandra's coronation gown, in the style of a Russian court dress, was of smooth silver brocade over silver tissue and had been woven and embroidered by the nuns of the Ivanovsky Convent. The full overskirt was split down the front in an inverted V-shape, revealing a smooth, white silk underskirt. The long, split sleeves, as well as the bodice and the outer skirt, were entirely covered with leaves and

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flowers embroidered in silver thread and studded with more than 10,000 pearls. The boat-shaped neckline was trimmed with gauze and lace, and the outer skirt fell back in folds to form a 15-foot train, also decorated with embroidery of silver thread and pearls. The crimson Sash of the Order of St. Catherine stretched across her breast, held in place by its Diamond Star. Alexandra wore a single strand of pink pearls round her neck and matching pink pearl earrings, engagement gifts from her husband. Her low-heeled court shoes were of unadorned white satin, and her stockings of pure white, semitransparent silk.

The Dowager Empress wore a gown of silver cloth, embroidered with silver thread; upon her head rested a small diamond crown, and she wore a purple mantle, lined, and edged with ermine. From her neck hung the famous Imperial Riviere, its five strands of large oval diamonds flashing fire in the brilliant sunshine. Above these, she wore a single strand of large, perfectly matched pearls. *“Our hearts bled when we saw her”*, recalled Grand Duke Konstantin Konstantinovich, who noted that she appeared *“like a victim prepared for the sacrifice. Her face expressed suffering.”*

Beyond the dais stretched a sea of heads. The gowns worn by the women were particularly splendid: Alexandra’s sister Grand Duchess Elizabeth Feodorovna stood to one side, wearing a Russian court gown of cream-colored velvet embroidered with fuchsias in gold thread. Nearby was the wife of their brother Grand Duke Ernst Ludwig of Hesse, Victoria Melita, and her sister, Crown Princess Marie of Romania, both attired in white satin and cloth-of-gold gowns embroidered with flowers of silver and gold thread. Standing at the front of the group, Grand Duchess Alexandra Iosifovna left a vivid impression. *“Exceedingly tall and still astonishingly upright for her age,”* recalled Marie of Romania, *“her hair was snow white; clothed from head to foot in silver she wore a sparkling diadem like frosted sun rays... Having a too great wealth of pearls to wear them all round her neck, she had fixed half a dozen ropes at her waist with an enormous diamond pin; they hung down along her gown in a milky cascade. She was so pale and shining white that seen against the golden walls of the cathedral she seemed to be covered with hoar-frost.”* *“The air,”* recalled Grand Duke Kirill Vladimirovich, *“was heavy with incense, the Cathedral resplendent with the flash of golden vestments and the sparkling of precious stones.”*

By tradition, a Russian sovereign crowned himself, a sign that his power came neither from man nor from the Church, but from God Himself. Nicholas wore Catherine The Great’s Imperial State Crown, which weighed nine pounds.

Nicholas took the smaller empress’s crown, of two thousand diamonds, and gently set it atop his wife’s hair. With the crown secured, Alexandra rose and kissed her husband, who took her hand and led her to her place on Ivan the Terrible’s throne.

As Nicholas and Alexandra sat upon their thrones, their family within solemnly approached the dais to pledge their loyalty. During her homage, once correspondent noted, Queen Olga of the Hellenes *“scowled at the young couple like Lady Macbeth.”*

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On the evening of May 16, Nicholas and Alexandra presided over 7,000 guests at the Coronation Ball. They lead the first polonaise through the Halls of the Orders of St. George, St. Alexander Nevsky and St. Andrei, before switching partners, the emperor taking the hand of this aunt Queen Olga of the Hellenes, while Alexandra danced with the Turkish ambassador. Seven times they circled these halls, changing partners on each round, to include the most important royal and diplomatic guests present. One American guest was dazzled by the fabulous display of jewelry that evening: *“When one has been to such balls as Russia gives, jewels elsewhere are nothing. On all sides, women were wearing necklaces, pins, tiaras, etc., that almost covered their heads and necks. Some of the jewels were as large as robin’s eggs. Strings and strings of enormous pearls hung from the neck to the waist of many of the women. Grand Duchess Xenia wore emeralds, as did the Grand Duchess Elizabeth, and some of them were an inch long. Such a blaze makes one’s eyes fatigued.”*