

The 'Tsarevich' Nikolai Chebotarev and his links to British Intelligence.

Peter Luce

The recent review of Kevin Coogan's *The Spy Who Would be Tsar: The Mystery of Michal Goleniewski and the Far-Right Underground*¹ prompted me to re-read the work of another claimant to the Russian imperial succession. In 1998 Michael Gray, a former Technical College principal from Northern Ireland, argued his own claim in his book *Blood Relative*.² He joined at least nineteen other persons who had claimed to be one or other of the Tsar's children, who were supposedly massacred with their parents by the Bolsheviks in 1918.³

What makes Gray's case unusual is that, unlike Goleniewski or the more famous Anna Anderson ('Anastasia'), he did not set out to claim his royal identity, but was led to this belief by what appears to have been a small group of closely-connected people, most if not all of whom had links to the British intelligence services.

His own theory as set out in the book can be summarised as follows. The Tsarevich Alexei Romanov survived the supposed massacre of the royal family in 1918 (as also did the Tsar, Tsarina, and at least one daughter, the Grand Duchess Maria). The Tsarevich survived till 1987 under the name of Nikolai Chebotarev, living in France, Ireland, America and finally in England. In 1947 he secretly married Princess Marina of Greece, the widow of the Duke of Kent, and fathered a child with her, who was adopted by a Northern Irish Protestant couple. This child is Michael Gray, who is therefore the lawful heir to the crown of Russia.

Mr Gray has researched his claims very extensively, but his evidence mostly suggests what *could* have happened, which is a long way from proving what *did* happen. Throughout the book he shows a very selective

¹ Reviewed at
<<https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/free/lobster83/lob83-spy-who-would-be-tzar.pdf>>

² Michael Gray, *Blood Relative* (London, Victor Gollancz, 1998)

³ Such impersonators of vanished royalty are a strong tradition in Russia. During the 'Time of Troubles' (1598-1613), following the death of Ivan the Terrible, four 'False Dmitris' claimed to be his son Dmitri, who had died under mysterious circumstances. The Cossack rebel Pugachev, leader of the 1773 Pugachev Rebellion, claimed to be the deposed Tsar Peter III, as did Selivanov, founder of the Skoptsi, a self-castrating Christian sect.

pattern of attention, regarding both his facts and his sources. For instance, he discounts the DNA studies of Dr Peter Gill of the Aldermaston laboratory because this establishment is linked closely to the British state, yet takes as authoritative Queen Victoria's assertion that haemophilia 'is not in our family'. (Queen Victoria had no scientific education and lived at a time when hereditary disease was an immense social stigma even for commoners, let alone for royals whose status is defined entirely by their bloodlines.) He notes that his own blood group is the same as the Tsar's, a fact which impresses his ally Professor Bill Maples – yet 31% of Russians and 28% of British people share this blood group.

Gray's theory

His theory requires support from several other extraordinary claims: that the Bolshevik government allowed the escape of the Romanovs in exchange for diplomatic recognition by the British government, under the terms of a secret treaty; that this treaty also required the Romanovs to live separately under assumed names for the rest of their lives; that the British government still adhered to this treaty as late as 1947; and hence forcibly prevented Princess Marina from leaving the country with Chebotarev because the news of their marriage would lead to the revelation of Chebotarev's true identity. Since Chebotarev was not a haemophiliac, Mr Gray also has to argue that neither was the Tsarevich, and nor for that matter any of the European royals.

Reviewing all of Mr Gray's evidence without his selective attention, Nikolai Chebotarev emerges as a typical White Russian émigré of the period, rumoured to be a prince, and vaguely linked to the Romanovs as a 'cousin' of some sort. Until 1946 he was paid a modest pension by Hilda Richardson, a wealthy widow living at Moyallon House in Northern Ireland who had Russian connections. He may have had some additional source of income as he frequented expensive restaurants and had 30 pairs of shoes!⁴ Despite an abortive romance with a very beautiful young Englishwoman, he mostly lived with much older women. It is true that within the Russian émigré community in France in the 1920s there were persistent rumours of his being the Tsarevich. A great many émigrés wanted to believe that the Romanovs had survived, and could easily persuade themselves that this was true. Chebotarev seems to have been embarrassed by these rumours – or did he feign embarrassment to reinforce the idea that he feared discovery, and thus enhance his status

⁴ His stipend was £240 per annum, a good working-class wage in the 1930s but surely not enough for 30 pairs of shoes!

even while denying it? Though generally modest, while passing Buckingham Palace he did remark casually to his girlfriend that his boyhood home 'had been much bigger'.

Mr Gray rather downplays the evidence of Chebotarev having a real family. He had a sister Lydia, married to a much older Russian army officer, and a niece whom he fetched from Yugoslavia aged 14 and placed in the care of his employer's sister while Lydia remained in Bosnia till the 1950s. He also had an aunt, or possibly a great-aunt, the 'Baroness de Huene', with whom he lived for long periods. (Gray believes that Lydia was Grand Duchess Maria and de Huene was the Tsarina, but offers minimal evidence.) In 1946 Chebotarev, now aged about 43, finally got a proper job as a translator with the United Nations in New York, returning to England after retirement and eventually living with his sister and niece until his death in Norfolk in 1987.

However improbable its claims may be, the book is fascinating and well written. Mr Gray has researched his story very extensively, and I get the impression that he honestly believes his own claims and is not motivated by a desire for money or status. In fact his researches seem to have attracted some very unwelcome attention and a great deal of personal troubles.

Sources

This might seem like a case study in obsession, but there is evidence of something much more sinister. Mr Gray was first put onto the story by a Bill Phillips, an old acquaintance who had known him since their schooldays. Both men were based in Lurgan, Northern Ireland. In 1993 Phillips informed him, out of the blue, that a haemophiliac Russian prince called Chebotarev had lived nearby at Moyallon House during WWII. (The discovery of the supposed remains of the Romanovs had been revealed in 1992, to great publicity, but the bones of Alexei and one sister were admitted to be missing.) Thereafter Phillips began to pass on more information about Chebotarev, in such quantities that Gray later realised he must have obtained it in bulk from an unknown source rather than gradually researching it himself. Phillips then dramatically declared on seeing Gray's eight year-old son that the boy was the spitting image of the Tsarevich.⁵

Here's where it gets personal. Gray comments that Phillips 'was not to know that I had been racked with doubts about my own parentage for

⁵ *Blood Relative* p. 5 "'Have you seen your son?" he exclaimed. [. . .] "It's his appearance, don't you see? It's like seeing the Tsarevich in 3D."

years'. But it seems likely that Phillips did indeed know of Gray's doubts about his origins and his uneasy relationship with his parents. During Gray's childhood his father had openly questioned his wife as to who Gray's real father was. He had even cast doubts on Gray's paternity in his speech at Gray's own wedding! So it was rather public knowledge in Gray's small hometown that these doubts existed, even if Gray had not revealed them in conversation during his schooldays. It is probably relevant that Gray's paternal grandmother, and probably his mother, were members of the Plymouth Brethren. They were an exceptionally strict religious sect in 1970s England when I was familiar with them, let alone in 1940s Ireland. Members of such sects would go to great lengths to conceal an illegitimate pregnancy. Gray's parents were indeed married after his conception, and swiftly moved to Birmingham soon after the marriage, returning to Northern Ireland up to two and a half years later. His parents' lifelong evasiveness and inconsistency, combined with certain minor details of his history, have led him to speculate much further than the objective evidence supports. These details are each explicable in themselves – their combination has incited Gray's suspicions, but random combinations of unusual events are not impossible.

For instance, his paper medical records for all of his childhood are missing; a different NHS number was written on his duplicate medical card; the original card supposedly shows a ghostly impression of a previous rubber stamp under that of his first GP; his mother had no GP in Birmingham where his birth certificate says he was born; and two surviving residents of the Birmingham boarding house where his parents lived have no recollection of them. But records do get mislaid, a handwritten upper case Q can look like an R (on medical cards MQ means born in Birmingham, MR in Peterborough), and the ghostly underlying stamp (of which a magnified image is included in the book) is visible only to 'the eye of faith'. Many healthy young adults don't bother changing their GP when they move, and the boarding house residents whom Gray questioned were recalling people they had known 47 years previously.

Just as he focuses on these details, Gray discounts other details which do not support his theory. For instance, his father did have a Birmingham GP and his parents were both on the electoral roll there. Gray dismisses this evidence on the grounds that his father's Birmingham GP was known to Nikolai Couriss, himself the centre of a web of Intelligence operatives, White Russians, Irish Republicans and Fascists to whom Chebotarev was closely connected. The interesting point here is not Gray's own far-fetched conclusions, but the curious little group of

Intelligence-connected folk who have led him down this path.

The game begins

It was Bill Phillips, who had started the whole ball rolling, who 'deciphered' the rubber stamp impression on Gray's NHS card. Phillips put Gray in contact with a group of elderly people who had known Chebotarev at Moyallon House and later at a language school at Collon in the Irish Republic, run by Nikolai Couriss from 1932 to 1977. Couriss was also a close friend of Sean MacBride, Chief of Staff of the IRA. Dame Elizabeth Hill, professor of Slavonic studies and formerly director of the Joint Services School for Linguists, would send her students to him.

The elderly survivors of this circle appear to have engineered the gradual process of creating Gray's belief that his real father was Chebotarev/Alexei Romanov. Prominent players in this game were Kathleen McCarthy (Couriss's former housekeeper);⁶ Alix Hill (her extended family were English merchants who had lived in Russia for generations, intermarrying with Russian nobility and supplying several noted intelligence agents);⁷ Dame Elizabeth Hill (see above: she was Alix's cousin, and worked closely with British intelligence);⁸ and Zoe Cooke (related to the Hills, married to an intelligence officer, who worked in Churchill's War Room during WWII, so clearly had very high security clearance even at an early age).⁹ Even Bill Phillips, Gray's original informant, claimed to have travelled extensively in Russia during the Cold War, which may suggest intelligence connections.

In 1994 Phillips claimed to have been contacted by a man calling

⁶ *Blood Relative* p. 195. 'Kathleen recognised the two adults straightaway (in a photo found in Gray's mother's handbag of two adults with a baby about 6 months old, whom Gray had instantly identified as himself). They were, she said with certainty, Prince Alexander Lieven and Dr Martha Apraxine. It was one of those electric moments, a point in the train of events when you know something has irrevocably changed. All the strands of my enquiries seemed to have come together.'

⁷ *Blood Relative* p. 196. 'I showed Alix the photographs. She . . . turned to confirm the identity of Lieven at once . . . "But who is this baby?" she puzzled. I replied that it was me, and saw the effect my words had on her . . . At that moment she knew for sure. She had seen her friend Nikolai Chebotarev in me in so many ways.'

⁸ *Blood Relative* p. 160. 'By the time I met Dame Elizabeth for the first time early in 1996 Alix Hill was certain that I was Chebotarev's son and she had discussed the matter in detail with her cousin. Dame Elizabeth's first words to me were memorable. "Do you know what they said about your father? That he was the heir to the throne? Some said he was an imposter. I don't think so."'

⁹ *Blood Relative* p. 194. 'Zoe Lytle, who as Zoe Cooke had lived in the same house as Chebotarev for nearly four years – kept telling me how much I shared his mannerisms.'

himself 'Timothy Rearden', who offered to put Gray in touch with Prince Michael of Kent, who was said to be very interested in his researches. However Zoe Cooke voiced her suspicions of Phillips, which prompted Gray to refuse Rearden's offer, and to access Phillips' work telephone records,¹⁰ whereby he discovered that Phillips had been in contact with Rearden earlier than he had stated, and possibly prior to Phillips' first mentioning of Chebotarev. At the same time Gray's own life hit the rocks, with disciplinary proceedings being instituted against him regarding some trivial-sounding financial irregularities at the college where he worked, which resulted in his dismissal. His relationship with his parents also deteriorated, culminating in his father trying to get his wife to leave him and disinheriting him before his death in 1995.¹¹

Developments

Since the publication of the book there have been further developments. In 2007 another two skeletons were found at the same site as the original 'Romanov bones'. These were supposedly identified in 2008 as being those of Alexei and his missing sister, and the 'case closed' verdict was trumpeted by mainstream media just as confidently as they announced the original identifications.¹² However a closer study of the original reports and their references reveals ongoing controversy and serious limitations in the use of DNA identification in the absence of other data.¹³

¹⁰ *Blood Relative* p. 238 '. . . I gained access to his office telephone bills through a local alderman who was on the governing board of the museum' (where Phillips worked).

¹¹ 'In the midst of all this' – his dismissal from his job for some unpaid telephone bills, which he appealed, but was advised to drop the case because the amount he might recover would barely cover his costs – 'my surrogate father telephoned my wife to encourage her to leave me and take the children with her . . . Knowing what I do now about his gambling habit, I suspect that he had been paid by someone to make the call.' p. 242

Gray uses the word surrogate where adoptive would be more usual, because no legal adoption took place. His 'surrogate father' is the man who brought him up, who is named on his birth certificate as his father, and was married to his mother.

¹² M D Coble et al (2009) 'Mystery solved: The Identification of the Two Missing Romanov Children Using DNA Analysis' at <<https://tinyurl.com/2xhu967h>> or <<https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.490.8927&rep=rep1&type=pdf>>.

¹³ S M Edson et al (2004) 'Naming the Dead — Confronting the Realities of Rapid Identification of Degraded Skeletal Remains', Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory Rockville, Maryland, United States of America at <<https://tinyurl.com/2xhu967h>> or <<https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.490.8927&rep=rep1&type=pdf>>.

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In conclusion, it seems clear that Michael Gray was deliberately led to believe that his genetic father was the Tsarevich Alexei Romanov, by a small group of closely-connected people who already possessed copious information which would support this theory. Most if not all of them appear to be linked with British Intelligence services. The original informant, Bill Phillips, seems also to have been working with a different faction linked to Prince Michael of Kent. The question remains as to why this whole exercise was conducted, to the great personal detriment of Mr Gray?

Prince Michael's own interest in the Romanovs and in Russia generally is well-known. Through his mother Princess Marina he is a great-great-grandson of Tsar Alexander II, and thus a possible claimant to the Russian throne.¹⁴ The most prominent active claimant at present is Grand Duchess Maria Vladimirovna, whose grandfather was brother to Marina's mother. Based in Madrid, she was married to a Prince of Prussia (House of Hohenzollern, the former German Imperial Family), and has one son. There are several other claimants.¹⁵ It seems possible that some part of the British Intelligence Services wished to create another, more direct line of descent from the last reigning Tsar, using a patriotic British citizen who, lacking previous links to European royalty or Russian factions, would be

Note 13 continued

'It should be emphasized that mtDNA sequence data alone are not a means of positive identification for an individual. Given that mtDNA is a maternally inherited genome, all descendants of a particular maternal line will have the same mtDNA type, barring mutation. (We use) the mtDNA sequences generated at AFDIL *in conjunction with anthropological and circumstantial evidence* to make the overall identification.' (emphasis added by author).

¹⁴ Prince Michael 'offers specialist consultancy advice to a number of commercial concerns operating in countries and in sectors in which he himself has a close interest and wide experience. (He is) a qualified Russian interpreter.' From his own website <<http://www.princemichael.org.uk/the-prince/business/>>.

In 2021 the Channel 4 Dispatches programme secretly recorded his business partner, the Marquess of Reading, offering to use the Prince's supposed relationship with Vladimir Putin to benefit a fictitious South Korean company, for a fee of \$200,000.

¹⁵ Nikolai Kirillovich Romanov (AKA Prince Kark Emich of Leingen) is recognised by the Russian Monarchist Party as Tsar Nikolai III. He lives in Germany, but is involved in the attempted creation of the 'Romanov Empire' micronation on various small plots of land outside of Russia. Another theoretical claimant, Rostislav Romanov, is a young artist based in England. He appears, from his own website, to be unsuited to the formal lifestyle of an Orthodox Tsar. <<http://www.rostislavromanov.com/about/>>

more easily controlled. ¹⁶

Peter Luce is a psychotherapist.

¹⁶ Michael Gray appears to be a moderate Unionist, and has been a press spokesman for a Unionist MP. He has also worked for UKIP and evidently formed close relationships with numerous veterans of British Intelligence.