

# Anastasia: The Last Grand Duchess Discussion Guide

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## To the Discussion Leader

The story of Anastasia Romanov, the last grand duchess of Russia, may be as old as 1914 but also as new as recent movies and newspaper headlines. For decades the world has been intrigued with her story. Carolyn Meyer, the author of *Anastasia: The Last Grand Duchess*, fell in love with the Anastasia story years ago. Meyer says, "The movies made her life seem so romantic, like a fairy tale. Years ago I saw a movie starring Ingrid Bergman as Anastasia. Recently, I saw the animated version of the story. Those movies made it seem as though everything turned out beautifully for Anastasia. I was broken-hearted when I found out the truth."

In this addition to the *Royal Diaries* series, readers learn about the last tsar of Russia, his family, and the tragic end of the Romanovs. Anastasia's diary describes the family's ornate palaces, expensive jewels, and life of great privilege juxtaposed against the increasing discontent among the Russian people as "Bloody Nicholas" and "the German woman" (Anastasia's parents) rule a land drawn into a war where Russian casualties are great and hunger and deprivation engulf the country.

During March of 1917 the Russian people revolt; Tsar Nicholas abdicates; a Provisional Government is formed; and eight months later the Bolsheviks, led by Vladimir Lenin, overthrow the Provisional Government and take over. The Bolsheviks later become the Communist Party and rule the Soviet Union until 1991.

Nineteen members of the Romanov family were executed in 1918, but a few survived the slaughter. In the 1920s, Anna Anderson claimed she was Anastasia Romanov and convinced many that she was the Last Duchess. Anderson died in 1960, but recent movies keep the story alive. In 1998 the remains of Tsar Nicholas II were officially placed in an honored tomb in Russia. The ceremony was attended by Russian President Boris Yeltsin. Those headlines served to fuel the interest in Anastasia one more time.

Did Anastasia really survive? Carolyn Meyer sees it this way. "I would love to believe that Anastasia escaped, but having read the grisly accounts of the execution and the disposal of the bodies, I simply don't think it was possible for anyone to have survived. But what if, against all odds and all evidence, she did manage somehow to escape? That is the romantic fantasy that is so appealing to so many people."

## Summary

Twelve-year-old Anastasia Romanov, youngest daughter of Tsar Nicholas II and Tsarina Alexander of Russia, lives in a palace of more than over one hundred rooms, surrounded by servants, rich food, jewels, and an endless number of elegant dresses. She seems to have everything: loving parents, three lively older sisters, a mischievous younger brother, and luxury beyond imagination. Life seems perfect, except for her brother Alexei's frequent bouts of internal bleeding, whenever he has the slightest injury. When "he is ill, life seems to hang suspended, as though we have all stopped breathing. Then when he's recovered, we start living again." They live in high style, sailing on the royal yacht, riding the imperial train, and vacationing in palaces on the Black and Baltic Seas. Everywhere they go it seems that people love the tsar, "the most important man in the world," even kissing the ground where his shadow passes.

But there are signs of unrest in Russia. Anastasia writes, "There are people who say the peasants are suffering and blame it on Papa. There are even some people who believe that others should share in the

rule of our country!"

Things begin to change when the Archduke of Austria-Hungary is assassinated, and not long after, Germany, an ally of Austria, declares war on Russia. Tsar Nicholas becomes involved with military operations, and Tsarina Alexandra and the two oldest sisters volunteer as Red Cross nurses. Anastasia's life turns "completely upside down." The war drags on, angering the Russian people, who blame the tsar. To end the war, Nicholas takes over as Commander-in-Chief of the Russian armies, placing his wife in charge of running the country. Alexandra, unwisely, seeks advice from the controversial Father Grigory, also known as Rasputin, whom she trusts completely. Instead of helping the country, Father Grigory's bad advice pushes "Russia to the brink of disaster."

Anastasia learns that, "The country is in chaos. The peasants are starving, and the army is thinking rebellion. There are revolutionaries who want to depose Papa and take over the country." Not long after, Father Grigory is murdered, Tsar Nicholas abdicates, and the royal family is arrested and transported to Siberia. Their lives have changed dramatically: they now live in a cold, unfurnished house with little food and nothing to do. Guards are rude to them and threaten their lives. While Russia falls into the hands of Lenin and the Bolsheviks, the Romanovs wonder what will happen to them. Anastasia is hopeful. As she gives her beloved diary to a trusted friend, Sonia, she says, "When we're free, I'll write to her from England or Japan or wherever we're going, and ask her to send it to me. And so, farewell to you, dear diary. Until we meet again."

### Thinking About the Book

1. What is the cause of "Alexei's problem?" Why is the family so protective of Alexei? Why must no one outside of the family know of his condition?
2. Anastasia writes these words about Father Grigory: "I must be evil to my very bones, because I do not like this man, no matter what anyone says." What are some of the reasons she feels this way about one of her mother's most trusted advisors?
3. Anastasia and her family lived in great luxury. She tells of receiving a diamond and a pearl every year since her birth and of her mother having six wardrobe maids. What other examples of the Romanovs' extreme wealth can you give?
4. Why do the people of Russia begin to believe that Mama is a traitor?
5. Father Grigory makes this prediction to Anastasia's mother: "If I die or you desert me, you will lose your son and your crown within six months." Does this prediction come true?
6. What is the significance of the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary on June 28, 1914? How does this event change the lives of the Romanovs?
7. In her last diary entry, Anastasia writes that she must get rid of her diary. Why is this action necessary?
8. Who is Vladimir Lenin and who are the Bolsheviks?
9. What happens to the Romanovs? Why is this book titled *The Last Grand Duchess*?

### Student Activities

1. What is meant by Old Style and New Style dates? What would today's date be written in the Old Style? Your birthday?
2. Every Easter, Tsar Nicholas gave his wife and his mother each a Fabergé egg. Learn more about Fabergé eggs and [view some of these elegant creations on the PBS website](#).
3. Anastasia's diary is filled with many references to food. Have each member of your discussion

group take one or two of these foods and see if they can find a recipe on how to make it. Bring the foods to class for a Romanov tasting party.

- \*pirozhki
- \*blini
- \*paskha
- \*kulich
- \*kutia
- \*guava

4. In your discussion group consider why you think the author of Anastasia's diary had her underline certain words throughout the book. Did the underlining make any difference to you as you read the diary?
5. Using your copy of Anastasia's diary and reference sources in your library or classroom, find out what each of these words means.
  - \*appalled
  - \*balalaika
  - \*boudoir
  - \*troika
  - \*sophisticated
6. It is mentioned in the epilogue that a woman named Anna Anderson in the 1920s claimed she was the Grand Duchess Anastasia, and that she had escaped the fate of the royal family. Do you believe her story? Why or why not?

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- Subjects:

Cooperation and Teamwork, Family Life, Content Area Reading, Reading Comprehension, Journalism, Literature Appreciation, Vocabulary, Civics and Government, European History, Asia, Monarchy and Royalty, Historic Figures, Social Studies through Literature, Wars and Military

- Skills:

Reading Comprehension, Social Studies, Vocabulary