



THE GRAND DUKES: SOURCE REPORT



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FILE UNDER: **SOURCE REPORTS**

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I WAS CURIOUS ABOUT THIS source because the author's grandfather was Grand Duke George Mikhailovich. The author, David Chavchavadze, is the son of George Mikhailovich's daughter, Princess Nina of Russia. Would David have insider information about the Romanovs I couldn't find anywhere else? Would his book be more or less reliable because of the family connection? There was only one way to find out.

BOOK DATA

THE BASICS

TITLE:	<i>The Grand Dukes</i>
AUTHOR:	David Chavchavadze
PUBLISHER:	Atlantic International Publications
YEAR:	1990
LANGUAGE:	English
EDITOR:	G. Nicholas Tantzios

FINDING IT

WHERE I GOT IT: UC Davis library

WHERE ELSE TO GET IT IN NORCAL: Sac State, Stanford, De Anza College

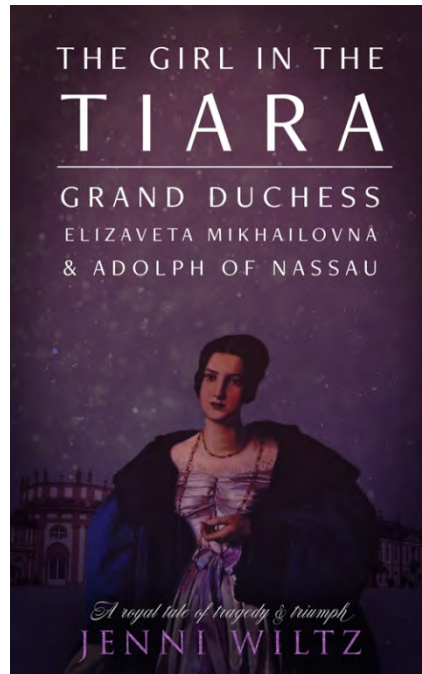
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WHY THIS BOOK?

MY RESEARCH PURPOSE: More information on Grand Duke Mikhail Pavlovich, Nicholas I's youngest brother and Lilli's father. He's not *entirely* obscure, but he's not a well-known grand duke, either. Not sure who the heck I'm talking about? [Check out this page](#), where I blurb the book I'm writing about Lilli, better known as Grand Duchess Elizaveta Mikhailovna.



PEOPLE MENTIONED (NOT EXHAUSTIVE AND IN NO PARTICULAR ORDER)

- Tsar Nicholas I & Tsarina Alexandra Feodorovna
(extensive quotations from her writings)
- Tsar Alexander II
- Tsar Alexander III & Tsarina Maria Feodorovna
- Tsar Nicholas II & Tsarina Alexandra Feodorovna
- Grand Duke Sergei, Grand Duchess Elizaveta Feodorovna (“Ella”), Grand Duke Dmitri Pavlovich, and Grand Duchess Maria Pavlovna (the younger)

- The Vladimirovichi: Grand Duke Vladimir Alexandrovich, Grand Duchess Maria Pavlovna (the elder), and their sons
- The Mikhailovichi: Grand Duke Mikhail Nikolaevich and his sons (there are lots)
- The Constantinovichi: Grand Duke Constantine Nikolaevich and his sons (there are lots)

EVENTS MENTIONED (NOT EXHAUSTIVE AND IN NO PARTICULAR ORDER)

- Decembrist Revolt of 1825
- Crimean War
- Russo-Turkish War
- Russo-Japanese War
- World War I
- Assassination of Rasputin
- Russian Revolution

SUMMARY

THIS BOOK IS AN introduction to the 33 Russian grand dukes, beginning with the sons of Tsar Paul I and covering the years 1796-1917. Each grand duke gets a chapter and an introductory photo.

As explained in the book's introduction, Tsar Alexander III introduced legislation limiting the title of "grand duke" to the sons and grandsons of a tsar. He did this as the grandchildren of Nicholas I were starting to have their own families and the number of grand dukes was likely to explode.



ALEXANDER III BY FELIX NADAR,
PUBLIC DOMAIN VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

Even with that limitation, there are still 33 dudes to cover, which is a lot for a book that's fewer than 300 pages. Less coverage is given to future tsars, and rightfully so since it's easy to find in-depth coverage of them elsewhere. This book is a valuable starting point for basic biographical info & anecdotes about lesser-known grand dukes.

NOTES

EACH CHAPTER SEEMS LIKE it was written without reference to the others, which is both a bonus and a distraction. Why a bonus? Because each chapter can be read on its own – you can drop into any chapter and be told anything you need to know. So why is this also a distraction? Because in at least one case, the information differs slightly depending on whose chapter you read.

In the chapter on Paul Alexandrovich, we're told about the death of his first wife, Princess Alexandra of Greece, after their son Dmitri's birth: "His birth cut short this happy marriage. Grand Duchess Alexandra, only twenty-one years old, died at Moscow, 24 September 1891, five

days after giving birth, much mourned by all who knew her” (127). Then, when we get to Dmitri’s chapter, the story changes a bit: “He was born at Ilinskoye, near Moscow, 18 September 1891...Alexandra went into a coma when she was seven months pregnant, and died three days after Dmitri’s birth” (247).

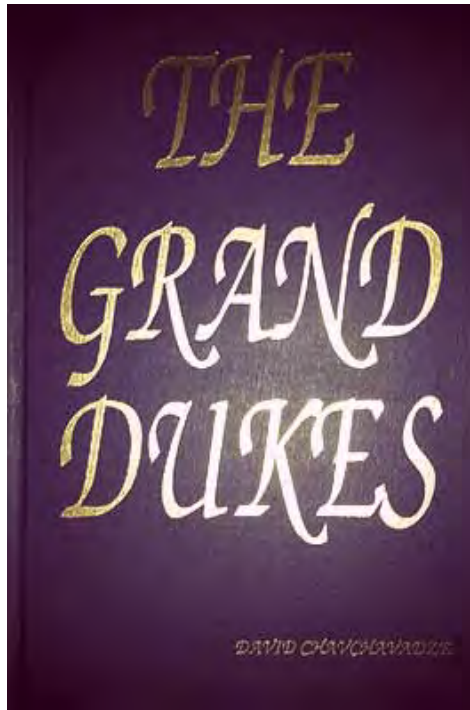


**PAUL AND ALEXANDRA BY AN UNKNOWN PHOTOGRAPHER,
PUBLIC DOMAIN VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.**

Moscow and Ilinskoye are not the same place. Five days and three days are not the same time frame. If you’re a casual reader, this might seem super nitpicky, but if

you're using this as a source to write your own stuff, it'll make you look sloppy. In other words, trust but verify.

Also, the font on the cover hurts my soul. This has absolutely nothing to do with the book's quality. It's just a reminder of how shitty late 80s/early 90s typography was.



RELIABILITY

MODERATE. There are a few typos, mistakes, and other inaccuracies here. To be fair, some of the inaccuracies have only been uncovered by later writers

doing in-depth research using Russian archives, which weren't available when this book was written.

Here's one example of an inaccuracy...or a failure to be specific. Chavchavadze says that Prince Oleg Constantinovich (shown below) was the only royal to die in action on the Allied side in World War I (149). But what about Queen Victoria's grandson, Prince Maurice of Battenberg, killed near Ypres on October 27, 1914? It's possible to quibble over the word "royal," I suppose, since Maurice's dad was the product of a morganatic marriage (i.e., is he really "royal"?). But maybe it's not meant to invoke a linguistic debate. Maybe it's just an oversight. Who knows?



Also, the book's sourcing is weird. Direct quotations are rarely cited. Paraphrased information that's clearly from other sources ("According to so and so...") isn't usually cited. So what *is* cited? If there's a method to the madness, I don't know what it is. Are we to assume uncited quotations are from archival sources we couldn't double-check even if we wanted to? Or from family lore? Maybe. But then again, some interviews *are* cited.

And there's at least one citation that gets the title of the book sort of wrong. For example, one citation was "Russian Court Memories, H. Jenkins." Well, come to find out when I looked for it, the book is actually called *Russian Court Memoirs 1914-16* by A Russian [anonymous], published by Herbert Jenkins Limited. Not a big deal, I know, but still...the book's editors should have double-checked this.

¬_(ツ)_/¬

Another weird glitch is the use of family trees that only appear in the first half of the book. It makes no sense. The book goes in generational order, and for the first few

generations, a family tree prefaces all the chapters that cover that generation (all of Tsar Paul's sons, or Tsar Nicholas I's sons, for example). These mysteriously stop appearing about halfway through the book. That's also the point where the number of grand dukes increases, and I really needed those trees to keep people straight. Also, whoever prepared these trees made a mistake with one of them, attributing the Mikhailovichi to Grand Duke Mikhail Pavlovich instead of Grand Duke Mikhail Nikolaevich. Shit happens. Glass houses. I get it. Just be aware that you have to double-check stuff you find here that you want to use in your own research.

IMPRESSIONS

THIS BOOK CONTAINS SOME hilarious anecdotes – that was the highlight of the book for me. Grand Duke Michael Alexandrovich standing on a balcony above Tsar Alexander III, waiting to douse him with a bucket of water? Grand Duke Constantine Nikolaevich screaming a new servant's name at full volume as a hazing ritual? Comedy gold! The author seems honest in his assessments of personalities – he tells you when cousins held grudges, or when behavior

seems strange or out of character (Ella's coldness toward adopted children Dmitri and Maria, for example). The earlier profiles are more detailed than the later ones. I'm not sure if this is for reasons of space, or because the grand dukes got more numerous and less interesting over time.

Chavchavadze also delivers some unexpectedly amusing judgments on how attractive (or not) some of the grand dukes were. Luckily, there are pictures, so you can make up your own mind. Here's a quick sampling:

- The future tsar Alexander III (1845-1894) was “uncomely and uncouth” (87).
- Alexander's older (doomed) brother Nicholas (1843-1863), however, was “extremely handsome” (79).
- Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovich (1857-1905): “An extremely good looking man...” (119).
- Grand Duke Dmitri Constantinovich (1860-1919): “All in all, he was not unattractive” (153).
- Grand Duke Peter Nikolaevich (1864-1931) “was

quite good-looking in a ‘Douglas Fairbanks’ way” (167).

- Grand Duke Dmitri Pavlovich (1891-1942): “it is arguable that he was the best looking of all the Grand Dukes” (247). YMMV.



DMITRI BY BAIN NEWS SERVICE,
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MOST UNEXPECTED TIDBIT

GRAND DUKE NICHOLAS MIKHAILOVICH

(the historian) wanted to marry Princess Victoria of Baden! But because they were first cousins, “their marriage was not permitted” (171).



NICHOLAS BY BAIN NEWS SERVICE,
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This confused the heck out of me because other cousin marriages in the Romanov family had been allowed. Why not this one? Did it have to do with whether there was a “once removed” in the kinship? Or was it just a matter of whether the tsar liked you enough to allow it?

After all, Grand Duchess Xenia and Grand Duke Alexander Mikhailovich (Sandro) were first cousins once removed. And Grand Duke Paul Alexandrovich and Princess Alexandra of Greece were also first cousins once removed. What gives? Victoria isn't one of my favorite royals, but look how cute she was as a teenager! We don't even know when this happened...all we know is Nicholas Mikhailovich was "a young man." But his youth straddles the end of Alexander II's reign and the beginning of Alexander III's. Which tsar disapproved? How hard did he fight for permission, if at all?



**VICTORIA OF BADEN BY AN UNKNOWN PHOTOGRAPHER,
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SECOND MOST UNEXPECTED TIDBIT

GRAND DUKE ALEXEI ALEXANDROVICH went to America as a young lieutenant in the navy. In 1871, his ship, the *Svetlana*, arrived in New York. He met President Grant, whom he thought was “an ill-mannered lout,” according to Chavchavadze (but that tidbit isn’t directly quoted or cited, so I can’t tell you where it came from) (114).



**ALEXEI BY AN UNKNOWN PHOTOGRAPHER,
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We're told that Alexei couldn't understand why the citizens of a democratic country went nuts for a grand duke, the representative of an autocracy. It made him wonder if Americans were full of crap, talking the talk but not walking the walk.

Alexei met up with Buffalo Bill Cody in St. Louis, then went buffalo hunting with Cody and Custer (four years before the Battle of the Little Bighorn). Here's Alexei and Custer, looking chill AF. Custer, you sexy beast.



IMAGE BY DAVID FRANCIS BARRY,
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Alexei toured the Midwest and got as far as Colorado,

then turned south and made his way back to the *Svetlana* in Pensacola, Florida via Kansas, Tennessee, and Louisiana. I wish the author had looked up some newspaper reports or gotten some quotes about Alexei from Americans. There's only one quote, from the boat pilot who'd guided the *Svetlana* into New York harbor. Alexei had been standing watch, and when the pilot was told the dude standing watch was the grand duke, he didn't believe it. "He ain't no more royal than I am!" the guy said. Hope he wasn't a betting man.

OTHER INTERESTING TIDBITS

- **SUPPOSEDLY, GRAND DUKE** Constantine Pavlovich (Alexander I's brother) had a strange habit: firing a cannon inside his home, the Marble Palace. He would put his wife, Grand Duchess Anna Feodorovna, in a large vase "for safekeeping." WTF, dude. Do not let your homeowner's insurance company get hold of this information. (21)
- **GRAND DUCHESS ALEXANDRA** Iosifovna carted her grand piano with her on vacation to the

Hotel Monnet at Vevey, Switzerland because she refused to play any other piano. We all have our quirks, but most don't involve transporting 1,000-pound objects. (60)

- **AFTER THE RUSSO**-Turkish War of 1877, Tsar Alexander II asked Nicholas Mikhailovich (who'd led the successful attack on Plevna) why he didn't go on to take Constantinople. Nicholas said, "Dude, you totally told me not to." Alexander was like, "I said no such thing." But he *had* said it, via telegram. Nicholas was like, "Whatever, man," because you can't argue with a tsar. (67-9)
- **AS KIDS, GRAND** Duke Nicholas Alexandrovich ("Nixa") and his brother Alexander ("Sasha") did pen-and-ink sketches of a city populated entirely by pug dogs, called Mopsopolis. How totes adorbs is that? (88)
- **GRAND DUKE PAUL** fell in love with a married commoner, Olga Pistol Kors – but her husband wouldn't give her a divorce. So she forced the issue in a spectacular way. At a Winter Palace ball, she wore diamonds that had belonged to Paul's

mother. Obviously, the only way she could have gotten hold of them is if he'd given them to her. Dowager Empress Maria Feodorovna saw the diamonds, recognized them, and told Empress Alexandra Feodorovna to get rid of Olga. A chamberlain duly asked her to leave the ball, but the damage had been done. The city buzzed with scandal, which finally prompted Olga's husband to file for divorce, which was what she'd wanted all along. This is some Gossip-Girl-level manipulation. (128)

- **GRAND DUKE NICHOLAS** Constantinovich was a troubled but fascinating individual. After being accused of stealing jewels from Empress Maria Alexandrovna and his mother, he denied everything. In reality, he'd stolen the items to support his lover, an American adventuress named Fanny Lear. Nicholas's best friend was arrested instead and later confessed to taking the stolen diamonds to Paris at Nicholas's request. Fanny was arrested and thrown out of Russia, but not before the tsar bought all the incriminating letters Nicholas Constantinovich had written to her. Nicholas was

stripped of his military rank and exiled to Orenburg and then to Tashkent. According to his sister, Princess Vera, when their brother went to visit Nicholas, he came away feeling Nicholas was “not entirely sane” (140). His exile lasted an interminable 44 years and he was most likely murdered by the Bolsheviks in 1918. (138-40)

WHAT YOU WON'T FIND

ROCK-SOLID HISTORICAL reporting. The sources Chavchavadze relies on aren't always the best or the most unbiased. He cites Radziwill frequently, which he himself tells you is full of gossip. On the other hand, he also cited from a short autobiography by Tsarina Alexandra Feodorovna, wife of Nicholas I. I hadn't known this existed, and put it on my wish list.

All in all, he relies heavily on the autobiographies of Felix Yusupov, Grand Duke Alexander Mikhailovich, Grand Duchess George, and more. There are also some tidbits missing that you have to find in other sources. For example, about the death of Grand Duchess Alexandra, he says she went into a coma, gave birth, and died. He

didn't mention that she fell while trying to get into a rowboat at Ilinskoye, causing premature labor, then a coma, then death (that's according to Charlotte Zeepvat in *Romanov Autumn*).

Also, if you're playing favorites, don't expect to find chapters of equal length about all the grand dukes. The older ones get way more coverage than the later generations. Nicholas I gets twelve pages. His son, Constantine, gets eight. Constantine's son, Nicholas, gets five. His other son, Dmitri, gets two.



CONSTANTINE'S FAMILY BY AN UNKNOWN PHOTOGRAPHER,
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QUESTIONS RAISED

- **MUCH LIKE EDVARD** Radzinsky's book on Tsar Alexander II, this one makes no mention of the terrible state of affairs between Grand Duke Mikhail Pavlovich and his wife, Grand Duchess Elena Pavlovna. Chavchavadze says Elena was struck with grief after Mikhail's death. Actually, she came alive, her health improved, and she made her most valuable and lasting contributions to Russian society and culture. This is in stark contrast to two other sources: Marina Soroka's bio of Elena, *Becoming a Romanov*, and the profile on Elena in Zeepvat's *Romanov Autumn*, both of which make it clear that family members knew about the shitty state of this marriage. Why is this trainwreck of a marriage not common knowledge?
- **I WANT MORE** detail on the relationship between Grand Duchess Anastasia Nikolaevna (born a princess of Montenegro) and Grand Duke Nicholas Nikolaevich. In Nicholas's chapter, we learn that she was first married to his cousin, George Maximilianovich, Duke of Leuchtenburg. In

the next chapter (on his brother Peter), we find out that Anastasia only got fobbed off on George in the first place because her sister, Militsa, wouldn't marry Grand Duke Peter Nikolaevich without her sister also getting a Russian husband (package deal). Then we find out that George was gay. That being the case, we can guess that Anastasia was longing for a fulfilling physical relationship. But what attracted Nicholas to her? What convinced both of them to break up a marriage? Presumably Anastasia's marriage had been consummated, or it could have been annulled without the need for an embarrassing divorce. I know next to nothing about either of them and this story is out of the scope of my research in general, but I'm curious how it all shook down.

- **I ALSO WANT** to know more about Anastasia's sister, Grand Duchess Militsa. She outlived her husband, Grand Duke Peter Nikolaevich, by quite a few years. They escaped Russia in 1919 aboard a British warship, and settled in Cap d'Antibes. After Peter died in 1931, Militsa moved to Rome to be close to her sister, Elena (Queen of Italy). But

Militsa lived through World War II and saw the fall of the Savoy monarchy, dying in Egypt in 1951.

What a life!

- **IS THERE ANY** source out there that can tell us how Grand Duke Nicholas Constantinovich died? His chapter here says that, while in exile in Tashkent, he was either murdered by the Bolsheviks or starved to death. His death date is given as 1918. Does anyone know more about this?

READ THIS BOOK IF...

YOU WANT A “who’s who” guide for the Romanovs...or at least the male half of them. This is a great starter book, like a survey course in college. It’s also a good reference work to have if you’re like me and can keep mental tabs on, say, 15 grand dukes...and the rest get kind of hard to distinguish. You could either look them up on Wikipedia every time you forget who the heck Sergei Mikhailovich was, or you can just reach for this book and refresh your memory.

P.S. It was so hard not to write “Paul Chavchavadze” throughout this post because I’ve owned one of his

books since I was in high school. I've seen that name sitting on my bookshelf for almost thirty years! Paul was David's father, the guy Princess Nina fell in love with and married. If you've never read his book *The Mountains of Allah*, I recommend it.

The End

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Russia

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