CONTENTS

Preface 7

Teuvo Laitila 9  Divine wonders and worldly saintliness

Matti Haltia 27  Saint Herman of Alaska

Elna Kahla 45  The new female saints of Russia

Aune Jäskinen 67  From viking princess to a Princess of All Russia

Maritta Pitkänen 81  Olof Aschberg and his icon collection in Stockholm

Merja Merkas 105  Icon painting in Finland today

Katariina Hussu 117  Icon collections in Finnish museums

Pirkko Vekeli 133  The matriarch of the Committee for Byzantine Studies

Appendix 1 165  Selected bibliography of books and papers by Prof. Aune Jäskinen

Appendix 2 175  Finnish National Committee for Byzantine Studies:
diary of events, 2006–13

Acknowledgements 189
As we have witnessed, Russia as a state and its understanding of its own role have undergone a vast transformation within the last quarter of a century. Efforts have been made to restore many of the features and national symbols of pre-Soviet Russia. The most obvious among the symbols is the come-back of the two-headed eagle. It symbolizes Russia’s claim as the inheritor of Byzantium, and also hints to the close cooperation and harmony that existed between the religious and secular authorities in the Byzantine empire as well as in the autocratic pre-revolutionary Russia. Later on, in the post-Soviet period (starting from 1992), the ideological principles based on internationalism, communism and atheism having been discredited, they gradually became replaced by the Orthodox church and religious practice (Russ. carkerlen), authoritarian government and patriotism. Thus, at least externally, the spiritual and secular leaderships have once more begun to draw closer to each other, evidently in the hope that joint public manifestations of unanimity will help to unify the people and re-strengthen the national identity.

I will deal in this paper with the role of Orthodox culture in present-day Russia and one central issue related to the revival of that culture, namely the significance of the newly canonised saints (NCS), those canonized by the Russian Orthodox Church in recent times as epitomes of Christian life and virtue. I will
focus on the role of the new female saints as identity builders and as behavioural models for various social groups.

I wish to dedicate my essay to Professor Aune Jääskinen, herself an important female role model in my professional career. Aune Jääskinen was instrumental in guiding my first steps towards the secret treasures of Orthodox culture and iconography. Aune encouraged me to write my first paper on those zealots who continued to practise their religion during Soviet times – figures who had previously been utterly unknown to me. She pressed a copy of Gennadi Durason’s book on Mother Makaria into my hands and urged me to write a review of it, since ‘nobody else will take it on’, as she put it. Now, fifteen years later, this interest in the cultural deep structures of modern Russia has emerged from its marginal position to become a major topic of multidisciplinary research.

**The continuum of Orthodox culture and the role of the new saints in its revival**

The first questions that come to mind for a contemporary secular reader are on what grounds, by what means and for whom the new saints were created as role models. How did this cult arise, and how are these modern saints related (or being made to relate) to those of olden times? How are these modern-day saints represented in icons, given that in many cases we have access to photographs of them? What special meanings lie behind the cult of the last Imperial Family? And last but not least, what kind of virtues and failings does the last Empress of Russia epitomize?

I will not attempt here to provide any conclusive answers to these far-reaching questions, but will be content with discussing them. The approach will be to place the general theme at the intersection between cultural history and religious tradition. One major consideration in the Russian Church’s canonization of new saints was to emphasize the continuity of the faith, which is witnessed in a remarkable way by/in the communion of the saints. In other words, counterparts to the new figures and events are to be sought in the history of canonization so that the separate historical periods can be considered as representing one process, merged together in a seamless manner. When applied to iconography, this ideal representation of continuity implies that the new saints should be depicted in a stylized form, with no attempt to reproduce iconologically irrelevant time-bound material details such as the use of spectacles, for instance. One of the principles of Orthodox iconography is that it seeks to minimize the importance of time and place, and personal features of the figure, as well as of the landscape, architecture etc. should be emphasized only to the extent necessary for recognition.

It has been customary to emphasize the Christian nature of the Russian state ever since its emergence. The idealistic histories of medieval princes and princesses always depicted them as ruling over and protecting a Christian nation – even to the extent that some of them were themselves canonized. The custom of sanctified rulers came to a definite end with the Reformation in the west but was not entirely abandoned in the Orthodox east. Prince Vladimir of Kiev was baptized in the river Dniepr together with his people in 988 and he was subsequently canonized. Similarly his grandmother, St. Olga, is revered for having forsaken paganism and converted to Christianity together with her subjects. Some time later, in 1015, the princely brothers Boris and Gleb were slaughtered by their half-brother on account of a feud between them and were subsequently canonized. The murder of the meek brothers Boris and Gleb led to the creation in the Russian tradition of the saintly category of “passion-bearer” (strastoterpets). This definition, implying that they meekly submitted to a martyr’s death at the hand of a relative who was of the same religious persuasion, was alluded to once more, along with the example of the saints Boris and Gleb, when the Patriarchate of Moscow decided in the year 2000 to canonize the last tsar of Russia, Nicholas II, and his family as “passion-bearers”, on the grounds of the faith and devotion that they had demonstrated in support of unity among their people. It should be noted, however, that the Patriarchate indicated at the same time that no political connotations or monasticist interpretations should be placed upon its decision, which the Canonization Committee justified on the grounds of the example of humility and suffering that they had set. The Canonization Committee observed that their martyrdom bore witness to the splendour of the Christian faith that enables it to overcome evil and united the imperial family with the millions of believers and fellow citizens who had lost
their lives in the religious persecutions of the 20th century.

The cult of the last tsar and his family has been symbolic in very many ways, both within the church and in political circles. The monarchy still has its supporters, even among the younger age groups. Some of active parishioners (votserkovdenye) attach importance to the fact that the Patriarchate finally associated itself with the movement for the veneration of the Imperial Family. The veneration started immediately after their execution and had been kept alive for decades by the emigrant churches. Legend has it that the underground catacomb church was already venerating the royal family by 1928, chiefly on the evidence of eye witnesses from the time when they were imprisoned in Siberia in 1918. Jailers there had borne witness to the fact that they were well aware of that stage that they would be executed. They spent their time in ardent prayer and in preparing for death. They even read their own prayers for the commemoration of the dead, anticipating the fact that no Christian ceremony would take place. Three days after the execution, on 21 July 1918, Patriarch Tikhon of Moscow preached a sermon in which he called the attention of the faithful to the implications of this event:

A terrible thing has taken place in the last few days: our former ruler Nicholas Alexandrovich has been assassinated... The word of God obliges us to condemn this deed, for otherwise the blood of the victim will be upon our heads as well as upon those who perpetrated it. We know very well that in abdicating from the throne he was acting in the best interests of Russia and out of love for his country. He could have lived in safety and relative peace abroad once he had abdicated, but he chose not to do so, preferring to suffer alongside the people of Russia. He did not attempt to improve his lot, but submitted to his fate without complaining.1

A variety of attitudes have been adopted towards the present discussions of the martyrdom of the Imperial Family. It is a major concern nowadays, of course, for people who are considering whether to leave their homes in Russia or remain there, or to develop strategies for combining these alternatives. Dual nationality is becoming an increasingly lucrative alternative for those who wish to keep the doors to their homeland open even though they do not live there any longer. Meanwhile, for the current political leadership in Russia the mass emigration of people of active working age, with all its negative consequences, is a challenge that must be responded to by all available means. One purpose of saintly epitomes is therefore to influence people's moral attitudes and behaviour. Such examples may be looked on as part of the politics of memory by which those in authority can seek to restrain emigration and at the same time keep those who have already moved abroad in spiritual contact with the mother church, that is, the Moscow Patriarchate. Veneration of the same saints can be a form of communion between churches and the faithful. It serves as a means of creating a sense of unity across mental national borders.

Just as important as the politics of memory is the direction in which society is developing. Discussions regarding modernization in Russia in recent decades have mostly been enthusiastic repetitions of the eternal theme of the direction which reforms in Russia should take. There is an on-going old debate between the westernizers (zapadniki) and their adversaries (in numberless separate groupings) who call for revitalisation and preservation of the special character of Russia's specific civilization, the Slavophiles.2 Among western social scientists it is a generally held opinion that the modernization of Russian society has been delayed. One may ask whether Russia is to adopt western behavioural standards, i.e. those prevailing in Western Europe and the United States, as the yardstick, and if so, is Russia today moving in the direction of those allegedly universal values or rather away from them.

In the opinion of the sociologist Alex Inkeles, the main criteria for modernity are the division of labour, a distinction between the private and public sectors, the development of markets, finance and the labour market, the sharing of power, the participation of troops in the exercise of power, secularization and development of the mass media.3 All these criteria can be assessed in Russia as well, although there has been some dispute over their conceptual content and intercomparability. For example, although western modernization theory accepts secularization as a criterion for a modern society, religious belief, and in particular adherence to
the church (voterskhodeniye) among the majority population, has flourished in Russia over the last 25 years rather than diminishing. In most questionnaires about 70–80% of ethnic Russians describe themselves as Orthodox. Altogether, the figures point to recognition of the church’s role as a defender of traditional values. The church’s role is to emphasize a sense of community and a distinctive ethnic background that is independent of personal choice or religious preferences. The role of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) denotes an anti-modernist trend, as it is focused on the community rather than on the individual.

A further characteristic of recent developments is the lack of any determined path. The inclusion of the Basis of Orthodox Culture, or alternatively, the basics of Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, secular ethics or world religions for fourth-graders within the school curriculum, for instance, has raised ambivalent reactions.6 One might refer to the general trend as “desecularization”, but its content arouses numerous questions. The ROC has met criticism since its actions often tend to be dictated from above and are consistent with the wishes of the secular power. At this moment of time the ROC has declined in popular support, and the authority of its leadership has been undermined by a variety of rivaling groups, referred to generally in popular parlance using a revival of the term “catacomb church”. In part, the church is affected by the same problems that face Russian society as a whole. The main conclusion drawn by the Russian people themselves regarding the reforms is that they have been unsuccessful, precisely because of their authoritarian nature. If reforms are conducted in an authoritarian manner, from above, they will fail, because they will lack popular support and it will prove impossible to carry them through. The result is a cyclic process in which similar reforms are attempted time and again.

In spite of this, steps in a modern direction have taken place in Russia, even in the leadership of the church. One step towards the country’s recognition as a modern civil society is the church’s participation in public discussion which involves opinions that are critical of it, sometimes severely so. The Pussy Riot scandal that broke out in February 2012 may be regarded as a trial by ordeal for the public image of the ROC. Although the agitators who attempted to conduct “punk prayers” to draw attention to women’s rights within the church and society at large did not receive the same amount of publicity in Russia as they did in the west, they did cause the church to react almost hysterically in its own defence. The nationalist-conservative demonstrators dismissed the incident as a “western plot” and an attempt to discredit Russia, while the ROC itself looked on at the atrocity as an insult to Christian values and appealed for state protection. From the viewpoint of western social theories the ideas at stake represent a pre-modern concept of social equality which cannot be regarded as sustainable in the long run.7 It should also be noted that little in the way of western critical feminism is to be found in Russia, either within the church or in society in general. Thus, even in the Pussy Riot controversy the outstanding element was not feminism but ultra-nationalistic and conservative views disguised by the use of religious language and symbolism.

Extremists of all walks of life tend to appeal to role models taken from history to suit their own purposes. In Russia, nationalists frequently refer to tyrants such as Ivan the Terrible or Josef Stalin and raise them up in a pseudo-iconographic manner.8 The recent support for the re-naming of Volgograd as Stalingrad would have made use of one of the decisive battles of the Second World War to perpetuate the memory of the former head of state. On the other hand, the idea of a return to the city’s original name “Tsaritsyn, “the Emperor’s City”, also gained support in a street interview survey in February 2012. These examples clarify the use of the politics of memory.

Repercussions that could reflect extremist views have also been linked with the official canonization of the Imperial Family by the Patriarchate of Moscow. There were some people, for instance, who also advocated canonization of the Tsar’s sinister adviser Grigori Rasputin.9 In addition, anti-Semitic and xenophobic overtones commonly occur in (pseudo-)religious connections, e.g. in the designing of memorials and in the editing of the biographies of the new saints and the determination of their iconography. Likewise, although the leadership of the church aims at putting forward moderate views, its conservative opinions on sexual ethics and some other matters have frequently been seen by believers, especially women, as being badly out of tune with the realities of modern life.
The painfulness of many of the pluralist issues that are inevitably connected with modernization is clearly manifested in the canonization controversies. First of all, there has been some confusion as to which saints have been canonized and which cases are still pending, for example Mother Maria of Paris, or the last hegumen of the Pechenga monastery, Father Paisii. They are still at the stage of being unofficially venerated in the ROC. Neither is the symbolism to be included on their icons properly established, so that a host of non-canonical images exist alongside the canons of the Moscow art historian Irina Yazykova has reported.

One of the official icons of new saints has at its centre the last Tsar and his immediate family: Nicholas II himself with his wife Alexandra and their five children Olga, Tatiana, Maria, Anastasia and the Crown Prince Alexei. They are dressed in somewhat stylized clothes as appropriate to their status, and each is holding a martyr's cross. Nicholas, Alexandra and Alexei are wearing a crown, a reminder that God has anointed them as sovereigns. Irina Yazykova reports that alongside the official icon of these new saints there have been a host of 'unconventional' designs in circulation in which the iconographic characters of the family members, their clothing and the symbols used, deviate from the accepted ones. Some of these, in fact, may be regarded as totally unsuitable, including ones in which the Emperor Nicholas II is portrayed either in military uniform or else wearing the cap of the ancient ruler Monomach or a cowl in the manner of a patriarch, or even represented by his head on a platter like that of John the Baptist or clad in white robes in accordance with the vision in the Book of the Revelation. There are likewise instances in which the Empress Alexandra is shown holding an icon of the Mother of God of the Sign, dressed as a nurse or even wearing a low-cut gown, i.e. in guises that carry no iconological significance whatsoever. Yazykova attributes these errors of judgement to the fact that the painters were entirely lacking in the knowledge, vision and techniques necessary for conveying a clear spiritual message. A still more serious reason, however, says Yazykova, may be found in the church itself. She writes:

In spite of the fact that more than ten years have passed since their canonization, the situation has still not become any clearer: the iconography of these latter-day passion-bearers has not yet taken on any established form or achieved any canonical features. It would seem that the church has not fully appreciated the purpose of the image or the spiritual message that it is intended to convey.

In summary, it may be said that veneration of the new saints is a dynamic and highly popular feature of contemporary religious life in Russia, but that it tends to reflect the changes taking place in society at large and the conflicts inherent in its development.
On the one hand, the church has not entirely accepted the existence of pluralism in the modern global society, while on the other, excessive emphasis seems to be placed on pressures exerted by loud but still marginal groups.

How does the cult of a saint originate?
Work has been going on for some decades now to develop written "lives" of the new saints. One of the first people to take an interest in these matters was Hegumen Damaskin Orlovsky, the secretary and primus motor of the Canonization Committee of the ROC, who began his work in the last years of the Soviet regime. The general idea was to delve into the history of the religious persecutions that took place in Soviet times by examining the official archives and transcripts of interviews with believers and by working up the resulting material into a form in which it could be placed before the Canonization Committee. At the same time, biographical texts would be drawn up on traditional hagiographic lines and icons would be designed. In many cases, however, material of this kind proves to be inconsistent and deficient in some way. Information gathered from religious communities is characteristically marred by the sporadic nature of details recalled from memory, a proliferation of routine quotations in Church Slavonic, the linking of supernatural perceptions with major historical events and an abundance of personal details of setbacks, injuries, illnesses and deprivations. Often only oral evidence can be found with regard to those new saints who hailed from the lower social classes or suffered from handicaps or illnesses that rendered them illiterate. As a result, the lives of these people will inevitably have to be recorded by others, usually professional writers.

In spite of the many defects in them, the models provided by the lives of the saints Xenia of St. Petersburg and Matrona of Moscow, the "fools for Christ" of Diveyevo and innumerable Macari and Nilas, have made a deep impression on practising Christians. In all their simplicity and straightforwardness they testify to the fact that those in dire distress have no one to turn to except God, and that one cannot encounter the divine grace other than by constant self-abasement. One has to accept that this teaching is conveyed in very peculiar ways in some of the accounts, and even in ways that might seem offensive to "erudite readers." Ordinary human wisdom is not sufficient; a truly humble ascetic, a fool for Christ's sake - yurodnyi - will condescend to put plants in the ground upside down or transfer water from one container to another. In many cases these stark tales can be interpreted as representing acceptance of the inevitable and its transformation into a virtue. If one's life is filled with asceticism and deprivation through no choice of one's own every aspect of that ascetic life will be an acceptance of the inevitable. It is therefore tempting to surmise that this emphasis on the value of asceticism and the wave of emigration from Russia in search of higher living standards are phenomena that go hand in hand.

The written accounts of the paths pursued by these ascetics almost always adhere to the same pattern and incorporate the following elements: omens connected with the person's birth, a missionary calling, practical difficulties, manifestation of a personal Christian attitude and mode of action, sufferings and death, events after death, such as the transfer of the individual's remains from one place to another, miracles, and veneration by a group of followers. These elements can be traced to the Gospel accounts of Christ's earthly life, and it is clear that they confer on these persons a certain identity that creates the image of a consistent band of saints, a Church triumphant. The purpose of this familiar pattern and set of metaphorical elements is to support the emergence of a continuous, consistent, typical and sufficiently abstract horizon of expectation. The reader is supposed to accept that this is a stylized, non-realistic account and that the ideal target depicted in it (always in imitatione Christi) is ... in effect unattainable. It is an ideal to which one may aspire, but which one cannot live up to, or even understand rationally, in this life. One cannot construct a paradise on earth.

Readers of these lives of saints and those who endeavour to identify themselves with the models are required to be aware of the conventions and receptive to them. Tradition has it that "lives should only be written of notable persons", a good example of which is the life written by Epiphanius the Wise of St. Sergius of Radonezh (d. 1394), a national saint of Russia who effectively strengthened the central power and status of Muscovite Rus. Especially meritorious in such accounts were the repetition of bib-
tical precedents, a sharp dichotomy and bitter struggle between
good and evil and the use of universally acceptable, elevated lan-
guage. The ideal "life" should not make compromises: a humble
monk in a torn habit and a top politician should be described
as two quite distinct characters.11 The ideal was that only an
exalted style of language was appropriate for praising God and
making supplications to him. On the other hand, it is expected
that points remaining incomplete or unexplained will be filled
in through the receptiveness of those who read the life and are
moved to prayer by it.

Although the veneration of saints as role models is connected
with the "unbroken string of pearls" of tradition, it is equally
important to be able to encounter these people in the here and
now. The saints of the Church triumphant inhabit another king-
dom, but they are still alive amongst us. As Hegumen Damaskin
Orlovski points out, if we cannot recognise the ascetics of our
own times, how can we recognise those who lived long ago and in
quite different circumstances? How can anyone identify with the
life and model of St. Mary of Egypt, who laboured in the wilder-
ness for forty years in the 6th century, unless they can see parallel
examples of ruined bodies around themselves here and today?

To return to the question of the delayed development of Rus-
sian society on account of authoritarianism and a tendency for
cyclic movements, it may be seen that in such a context the new
becomes bound up with the old, and myths and heroic ideals
live on from one age to the next, so that, though the names may
change, the characteristics remain recognisable. A corresponding
phenomenon to that found here in the Russian canonical lives
of saints has been observed by the folklorist Lauri Harvilahit in
folk poetry: Russian tradition must be preserved, the "legacy of
our fathers" must be reiterated, it must be taken as sacrosanct and
not wantonly revised. Thus the new historical material has been
blended in with the traditional myths and local details have had
the universal pattern applied to them. In this way the accounts
have remained relevant from one generation to the next.12

Female saints from three social backgrounds:

aristocrats, intellectuals and fools for Christ

Thus invocation of the "legacy of our fathers" may be regarded
as a typical feature of Orthodox culture. The majority of the es-
tablished lives of saints are indeed the work of monks living in
monasteries, and it was common for a spiritual disciple to write
the biography of his mentor. This means, too, that since substi-
tually less women have been canonized than men, only 2–3% of
the total, only a tiny fraction of the lives of saints are the work
of women writers. On the other hand, these figures naturally do
not tell us anything of the relative significance of the role models
provided by saints either for the spiritual lives of individuals or
for the common knowledge preserved by the church, especially
since its members venerate in an unofficial manner and in their
private prayers innumerable non-canonized female saints in ad-
dition to the official saints listed in the church's calendar. These
unofficial female saints include numerous "fools for Christ"
(yurodnie, blazhennye), many of whom lived under miserable
conditions or were alienated from society, while a separate group
consists of intellectuals, learned women who occupied promi-
inent positions in society. Finally, there is a third category, which
is the one that we will concentrate on here, namely members of the
ruling classes whose significance as role models can be examined
in terms of their contribution to the strengthening of the bond
between church and state.

Female rulers as political guarantors

The list of women who have been the wives of rulers in Russia
or have been crowned as rulers in their own right is a long one.
Of the "independent" female rulers, mention should be made
of Yelena Glinskaya (ruled 1533–38), the regent Sophia Alexeyev-
na (1681–89) and the empresses Catherine I (1725–1727), Anna
(1730–40), Elizabeth I (1741–62) and, the last and most influen-
tial of all, Catherine II, "the Great" (1762–96). The model of love
and protection for their people, of mother figures defending the
nation from danger, occupies a substantial chapter in the history
and tradition of Russian Orthodox feminine ideals. The historian
Gary Marker has thrown some light on the cults of these crowned
female autocrats (somoderzhity) in his highly original research
into the cult of St. Catherine of Alexandria, which he claims
provided a religious basis for the reign of the Empress Catherine
I.13 In his opinion the essential element in the legitimation of the
power of a female ruler in Russia – as in western countries at the
time of the Renaissance – lay in being able to create an illusion of
continuity by pointing to a precedent, quoting biblical sources where necessary, and performing carefully planned rites and ceremonies. Since the 18th century was a period of predominantly female rule in Russia, to the extent that there was a male ruler for only five years between 1725 and 1796, it is interesting to observe trends in the rhetoric connected with the cult of the ruler. Marker points out that the use of metaphors alluding to femininity such as “the bride of Christ” was virtually absent. The cult of the Empress Catherine I was built up almost entirely on the strength of that of St. Catherine of Alexandria, with emphasis on noble accomplishments in battle and other masculine qualities (muchove). The key to the issue lies in this observation, that the cult of a woman ruling on her own (or a corresponding person sworn to celibacy) can be legitimated only on the grounds of mindness, with a conscious effort to play down all womanly aspects. The corollary is that the cult of a crowned female head of state and the virtues associated with it are more straightforward that in the case of an empress ruling alongside her husband. The latter is expected to show both manly and maternal characteristics – and to remain in the background. Let us now turn to the role of consorts and the expectations surrounding their activities.

400th anniversary of the Romanov dynasty

The year 2013 was a significant one for the Romanov dynasty in many respects. It was exactly 400 years previously, on 21st February 1613, that the diet took its historic decision to invite the 16-year-old Mikhail Fedorovich Romanov to assume the throne. His election brought to an end a period of oppression caused by the absence of an obvious heir to the throne that is still remembered in the history books as a miserable and terrifying interlude, or smuta. In fact, the principle put forward later by Peter the Great that each ruler should name his or her successor lives on in Russian politics even today.

Also recalled to memory this year, however, are the grandiose celebrations held in 1913 to commemorate the 300th anniversary of the Romanov dynasty, which included the building of a number of churches, most notably the recently restored Feodorov Cathedrals in Tsarskoe Selo and in St. Petersburg, both dedicated to the Feodorovskaya icon of the Mother of God. This icon was particularly regarded as protecting the House of Romanovs. Thus the commemorations have brought all manner of symbols and parallels to mind. The Russian economy was flourishing in 1913, and the monumental building projects that took place bear witness to the wealth and vitality of the country as a whole and of its ruling dynasty. On the other hand, 1913 has gone down in history as the last year of peace before the outbreak of the First World War, which brought dynasties all over Europe to the brink of disaster. In Russia it led to a bloody revolution and the execution of the Imperial Family. Thus the by-products of this anniversary year, such as exhibitions and picture books, have concentrated in part on the important role played by the women members of the Romanov dynasty as political intermediaries, background figures in the exercise of power and the mothers of heirs to the throne.

As mentioned above, the Russians are quick to mention the roots and model of a tradition whenever at all possible, and where marriages contracted by the ruling dynasty are concerned the oldest model of historical significance is that of Prince Vladimir of Kiev to Anna, sister of the Byzantine Emperor Basil II. Faced with a revolt, Basil appealed to Kiev for military assistance, the conditions for which were that Vladimir should convert to Christianity and marry Anna.

Almost five hundred years later, in 1472, the Russian prince Ivan III married the last Byzantine princess, Sophia Palaeologus. It was a politically motivated marriage that finally sealed the Russian claim to have inherited the hegemony of the Christian state of Eastern Rome following the overthrow and occupation of Constantinople by the Ottomans in 1453. Further politically inspired intermarriages between dynasties followed in later centuries. In accordance with the Byzantine tradition, Ivan the Terrible made a survey of potential brides, the aim being that the ruler should marry the most beautiful maiden in his realm. He did this on three occasions, in fact, and it is said that there were as many as a couple of thousand applicants at best. His first marriage, to the 14-year-old Anastasia, is regarded as having been a happy one for both parties and for the nation as a whole. Anastasia was able to suppress the Tsar's outbursts of temper, earned the respect of her subjects with her wisdom and devoutness, founded monasteries, convents and churches and supported artisan occupations and handicrafts, e.g. by setting up a gold brocade workshop in the
Kremlin. Their marriage lasted 13 years and they had six children. When Anastasia died, the distraught Ivan accused the Boyars of bringing about her death and subjected them to severe persecution throughout the realm. His subsequent marriages were unfortunate and his reputation in later years severely tarnished. His machinations for retaining power and his acts of bigamy were highly problematic for the Orthodox Church, which gave its blessing only to his first three unions. Ivan, in turn, could not tolerate the criticism levelled at him and ordered the assassination of his former educator and mentor in his youthful years, Metropolitan Philip. Four hundred years later, Josef Stalin categorically declared his admiration for Ivan's progressive attitudes, his "modernism," and as a by-product of this imitated the oppressive style of government by which he subjugated the nation and strengthened its boundaries. No woman could interfere with state affairs in later careers either of Ivan IV or Josef Stalin.

The last empresses

Female monarchs have tended to be greeted with great expectations, and have also been subjected to enormous pressures. Failure to give birth to a male heir, for instance, has generally led to banishment. For several centuries the Russian royal family tended to contract marriages with princesses of German birth, primarily for political reasons, and adaptation to the exigencies of their new role was a challenging task. Not one of these princesses was Orthodox by birth, so that each in turn was obliged to change her religion and name and adopt a new patronym. Thus the last Empress of Russia (1877–1918), Princess Alix of Hesse, who was Lutheran, received the name Alexandra Feodorovna upon being anointed into the Orthodox Church, the patronym being derived from the Feodorovskaya icon, the protector of the Romanov dynasty. In metaphorical terms, she received a new father and was obliged to forsake her natural father.

One recent popular book on the consorts of the Russian tsars mentions as one of their virtues their ability to support their husbands without giving the external impression of meddling in politics. The penultimate empress, Maria Feodorovna (1847–1938), Princess Dagmar of Denmark by birth, is described as having been influential in this respect thanks to her common sense and political instincts. "It was above all a question of fulfilling the role of empress in the context of Alexander III's anti-German policies. Although of German extraction, she was an ardent Danish patriot and abhorred the Germans ..." In her somewhat schematic treatment of the theme, the author, T. Lobanova, leaves the reader to decide what to think about Maria Feodorovna's influence, and then goes on:

The slender, outwardly delicate Maria Feodorovna had a strong, active spirit and exercised an immense influence on her husband, but she did not dabble in power politics, contenting herself merely with dictating court policies and guaranteeing the Tsar perfect peace at home. She was able to transform herself into a genuine Russian empress who, as described by her lady-in-waiting, Countess Lilia Vasil'chikova, was loved by everyone from the highest society circles to the lowest ranks of the Cuirassier Guards Regiment, of which she was Commander-in-Chief.

It is widely held that Maria Feodorovna treated her daughter-in-law, Alexandra Feodorovna, as a rival. The mother-in-law put consciously difficulties in Alix's way so that she never became a favourite with the general public. Nicholas II himself is usually regarded as a weak-willed, somewhat retiring character. He could easily be manipulated by both his mother and his wife. Alix, in turn, never succeeded in expressing herself naturally in Russian, so that she seemed somewhat distant in her public appearances. When Tsar Alexander III died unexpectedly at the age of only 47 the heir to the throne, Nicholas, had to marry Alix fairly promptly, "so that the wedding bells almost coincided with the funeral bells". Lobanova writes of her:

Having not had a proper opportunity to adapt to the character of the Russian people, she interpreted this as best she could. The Empress was pretty, with an excellent education (having studied at Oxford and mastering several languages), she was interested in art and she had impeccable tastes. She loved her husband dearly, was a devoted mother and a model housekeeper. In other words, she was the epitome of domestic virtue. But she was also pathologically ambitious,
and having become the "first lady" of the Russian Empire she did not adopt the traditional air of sympathy and good-will towards her subjects but was distant and haughty. The gulf between the Empress and her people in fact widened as time went by, this being especially noticeable at times of crisis such as the Russo-Japanese War or the revolution of 1905, when instead of common sense and optimism, all she could communicate to the people was a rather sick religious mysticism. She surrounded herself with charlatans, the most notorious of whom was the spiritual adviser, or "elder" (starets), Grigori Rasputin, whose active interference in affairs of state could not go unobserved. On the outbreak of the First World War (1914–1918) Alexandra Feodorovna and her daughters took part in the training of nurses, acted as patrons of the Medical Corps, founded military hospitals and assisted at surgical operations, but in spite of all this, persistent rumours of espionage circulated within the army, claiming that she had passed on confidential information to the Germans.  

Outside immediate family members and ladies-in-waiting, Alix fatally lacked support in Russian society. Her alienation ended up as a catastrophe.

**Fatal errors**

Alexandra Feodorovna was faced with enormous public expectations. Not only was she unable to fulfil them, but the most severe stain on her reputation arose from her relations with religious imposters. Thus, although there was some sympathy for her motherly worries over the health of the haemophiliac Crown Prince — which emerges as the principal theme of the remarkable Silver Age poet Marina Tsvetayeva's important, albeit unfinished, poem about the Imperial Family, Tsarskaya semya (1929–1936) — it was difficult to approve of her actions as a whole. The Empress's insistent support of Grigori Rasputin as an adviser to the court eventually gave rise to a serious atmosphere of rebellion. Although Rasputin was eventually assassinated as the result of an officers' conspiracy in 1916, the mood of rebellion persisted.

The Empress's relations with her elder sister, Elizabeth Feodorovna (1864–1918), who was also canonized as a great martyr, were broken off entirely on account of Rasputin. There is documentary evidence of the chiding and severe warnings that Elizabeth delivered to her sister, and this was reflected — in a negative light — in the canonization process for Alexandra. The published correspondence leaves no room for doubt that the Empress was entirely under the thrall of Rasputin, whom she referred to in her letters as her "friend". It was no surprise, therefore, that when the bodies of Alexandra and her five children were recovered they had small images of Rasputin around their necks, as Lobanov reports.  

The cult of Alexandra is still somewhat controversial even now. She is included in icons of the whole family, but as an individual she is still subject to snide accusations or else her role is simply ignored. Those who actively support her cult are in part the same people who continue to speak up for Rasputin. In popular devotional literature the errors committed by the last Empress of Russia are treated as tantamount to the destruction of the whole country, whereas the activities of her predecessor, Maria Feodorovna, are not seriously criticized. The fact that the latter refused to accept that her son and his family had been executed, for instance, and prevented prayers for the dead being read for them did not suffice as evidence of a lack of sound judgement. What happened abroad after the Russian Revolution was only of limited significance for events within the country.

Alexandra Feodorovna's "fatal error", about which she could naturally do nothing, was connected with her failure as a guarantor of the continuity of the dynasty in power. First of all her position at court was made difficult by the lack of a male heir, and then, when Alexei Nikolayevich was finally born in 1904, his inherited disease was interpreted as a mystical cure that would lead to the collapse of the whole of Russia, the dispersal of the church and the shedding of innocent blood. Secondly, the Empress failed to provide the people with an epitome of motherhood, largely on account of her nervous disorder (possibly sciatica), her poor command of Russian and her failure to empathize with the people. When the outbreak of the First World War
enflamed anti-German sentiments in Russia and even the use of Christmas trees was prohibited, Alexandra Feodorovna’s list of sins was extended beyond the following of a false prophet to include espionage on behalf of a foreign power. "Down with the German woman!" was the cry in the Palace Square ...

On the significance of patron saints and other saints
One’s patron saint is an essential part of the daily life of prayer for Orthodox Christians. We pray for blessing from the heavenly intercessor whose name we have been given at baptism or anointing, or who is especially important to us for some other reason. There are also other ways, however, in which we may acquire a special bond of prayer and spiritual protection as well as through the patron saint referred to by our personal forename. Since dichotomies are very common in the Russian cultural code, it is frequently said that “Official is the same thing as dead," an adage that I construe as implying that making something official puts an end to all deliberations on the subject, puts a rubber stamp on it, renders all controversies irrelevant and makes it “negatively sacred,” a taboo that one is no longer allowed to concern oneself with.44 In view of this dichotomy surrounding officialdom, we can complete this discussion by asking who is officially a saint and who unofficially, and what this might imply for us.

Several thousand new saints approved by the Holy Synod’s Canonization Committee have been added to the church’s calendar since the collapse of the Soviet Union; as many as 1554 were canonized in the year 2000 alone. This large number has been inspired by the idea that the assassination of the Tsar and the fall of the monarchy led to a perception of the faithful and to a national tragedy that can only be remedied by the Orthodox people of this country repenting and returning to the observation of God’s commandments. The large-scale canonization, individually or collectively, of Orthodox bishops, priests, monks, nuns and laymen who lost their lives in the Soviet persecutions is directly connected with this notion, for the canonization process is at the same time a means of rendering official the restoration of these people’s reputations and a demonstration of gratitude for their faithfulness by bestowing the church’s blessing upon them. Such a process will inevitably be selective, however, and there are many respected ascetics who would meet the criteria for martyrs, such as Mother Maria of Paris (1892–1945), mentioned earlier, who have not yet gained the approval of the Patriarchate of Moscow. Even so, the church does not forbid the veneration of these people. Indeed, given that official canonization requires that the person be the subject of active veneration, the remembering of “unofficial saints” and the study of their lives are to be encouraged.

NOTES
1 Quoted (in translation from the Finnish version) from Yuryeva, Irina. *Распространение идей о святых в России: Труды по истории духовной жизни страны (в печати).*
5 Bremer, 2013, pp. 6–8.
6 A Google search for “Stalin icon” will provide some illustrative examples of this.
7 See, for example, Pomin, 2006.
8 See Kahl, 2011.
9 Yuryeva, Irina. *Распространение идей о святых в России: Труды по истории духовной жизни страны (в печати). Translated from the Finnish version by the translator of this paper.*
10 See, for example, the lives of those who suffered and died in the religious persecutions of 1918, including the "Gods for Christ" of Divnovo (or Puno):
From Viking Princess to a Princess of All Russia
Irene of Byzantium, Olga of Kiev, Irina of Novgorod, Birgitta of Sweden — women in power in medieval Europe

How could a woman achieve the position of a ruler in medieval Europe? By that stage in history Christianity had become the state religion and dominant set of values for all the nations of Europe. Thus the Pope in Rome and the Patriarch in Constantinople presided over and supervised the spread of this new doctrine on a transnational scale, each with his own territory, bounded by doctrinal interpretations and challenged by the political aspirations of the secular powers. The actual earthly rulers, however, the kings and emperors, also had a place in the church hierarchy. In both Byzantium and Russia the emperor was regarded as “God’s anointed”, in loco Christi, while the Pope in Rome was a representative not only of Christ but also of the Apostle Peter, the “rock” on which Jesus had promised to build his church. The offices of priest and bishop naturally belonged to men, although the names and biographies of suitably qualified women were also accepted for inclusion in the church’s calendars and hagiographies.

In addition, the history of medieval Europe testifies to the rise of certain women to ruling positions, or at least to the role of a close advisor to those in power. The essential criteria for achieving this peak in the social hierarchy were a spotless family background and an influential, charismatic personality, credentials which, combined with marriage to the ruler of a nation or his heir, would open the door to the inner circle of the inherit-