

What happened to the Tsar and his family?

■ SOURCE INVESTIGATION

AFTER HIS abdication in March 1917, the Tsar and his family were held under house arrest just outside St Petersburg. For their safety, they were sent to Tobolsk in Siberia. Later they were moved to Ekaterinburg in the Urals, where they were held by the Reds (Bolsheviks) in the house of a family called Ipatiev.

The Tsar presented a continuing problem for the Reds. If he escaped, he might help unite the White forces; if executed, he could become a martyr. But when White forces closed in on Ekaterinburg in the summer of 1918, it seems that the decision was taken to kill him.

According to one account, the family were awoken during the night of 17 July. They were told that there was trouble in the town and that they would be safer downstairs. They dressed quickly and the Tsar carried his sick son down to a basement room where they were told to wait. With the Tsar was his wife, Alexandra, his son and four daughters, the family doctor and three servants (eleven people in all). Yakov Yurovsky led a group of twelve soldiers into the now crowded room. Yurovsky announced that the Tsar was to be executed and, before the Tsar could protest, opened fire. Nicholas and Alexandra died quickly but the girls, who had jewels sewn into their clothing which deflected the bullets, had to be finished off with bayonets.

But is this the true story of what took place? Who exactly was shot and what happened to the bodies? This was the beginning of a history mystery which has gone on for most of the twentieth century. A number of people have turned up claiming to be one of the Tsar's children, most famously a woman who claimed to be his daughter Anastasia.



SOURCE 1 The death of the Tsar, painted by S. Sarmet, based on the investigation carried out by the Whites

Much of the evidence comes from two investigations carried out by the Whites after they had captured Ekaterinburg in late 1918:

- Investigation 1 by Judge Sergejev, who was removed from the investigation in 1919 and died shortly afterwards in mysterious circumstances.
- Investigation 2 by Judge Sokolov. But before the investigation was completed, the Reds recaptured Ekaterinburg.

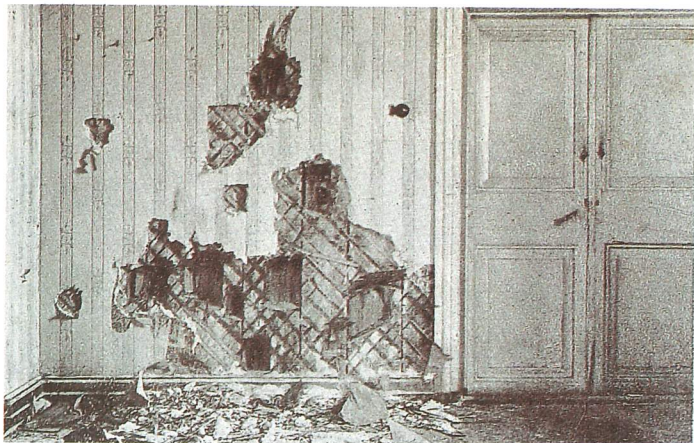
Examine the evidence for yourselves.

SOURCE 2 Interview with Pavel Medvedev, Red Guard commander. This is the only eye-witness account from 1919. It was later claimed that he had been tortured. Also, he gave himself up to the Whites in strange circumstances

“The sovereign walked ahead with the heir [Alexis]. In my presence there were no tears, no sobs, and no questions . . . The Empress sat down by the wall . . . behind her stood her three daughters. The Emperor was in the middle, next to the heir, and behind stood Dr Botkin. (Another daughter stood next to the maid.) . . . Eleven men walked into the room: Yurovsky, his assistant, the two from the Cheka, and seven Latvians.”

Medvedev said that he was sent out of the room to see if the shots could be heard. He heard the shots and returned to see the Tsar's family lying on the floor.

The blood was gushing . . . the heir was still alive – and moaning. Yurovsky walked over to him and shot him two or three times at point blank range . . . The scene made me want to vomit. ”



SOURCE 3 The room in Ipatiev house in which the execution took place

SOURCE 4 Judge Sergeyev, the first investigator, in an interview with the *New York Tribune* just before he was removed from the investigation in January 1919

“I do not believe that all the . . . people, the Tsar, his family, and those with them, were shot there. It is my belief that the Empress, the Tsar’s son and the four other children were not shot in that house. I believe, however, that the Tsar, the family doctor, two servants and the maid were shot in the Ipatiev house.”

SOURCE 5 Sir Charles Eliot was sent by the British government to find out what happened to the Tsar and his family. In October 1918, Eliot talked to Judge Sergeyev who showed him the supposed murder room

“On the wall, the door and on the floor were marks showing [bullet holes] . . . There is no real evidence as to who or how many the victims were . . . No corpses were discovered, nor any trace of their having been disposed of by burning or otherwise . . . The marks in the room prove at most that some persons unknown were shot there . . .”

- Taking each of Sources 1–7 in turn, explain:
 - what type of source it is (eye-witness account, etc.)
 - what it tells/shows us about the murder
 - whether it is good/not good proof that the Tsar and his family were shot. Give reasons. You could set this out in three columns.
- What crucial piece of evidence is missing?
- Does the evidence prove that the Tsar and all his family were murdered?

The Reds and the Whites both had good reasons for telling particular stories:

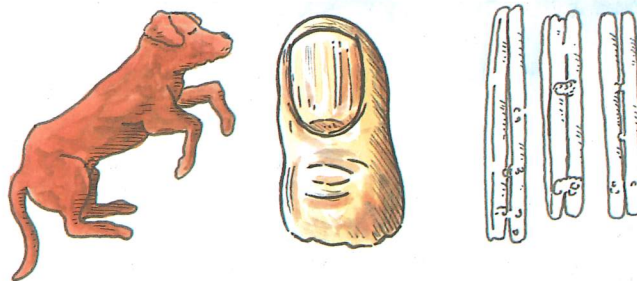
■ **The Reds** were holding vital peace talks with the Germans at Brest-Litovsk. If the Germans thought the Reds had killed the Tsarina and her children (with their connections to the German royal family) the talks might have failed – a disaster for Lenin.

■ **The Whites** could use the cruel murder of the whole family to get support. Many Russians and foreign governments would be horrified if the family were murdered.

SOURCE 6 Judge Sokolov, the second investigator, reported that all the Romanov family had been killed and that the bodies had been taken away for disposal

“The bloody carnage took place in one of the rooms of the lower, basement, floor . . . The murder was perpetrated with revolvers and bayonets. More than thirty shots were fired . . . Several people were murdered . . .”

On 17th July, under cover of darkness, a lorry carried their corpses to the Four Brothers mine . . . At the open shaft, the corpses were stripped. The clothing was crudely removed, torn away . . . The main purpose was to destroy the bodies. For this it was necessary, first of all, to cut them up. The dissected bodies were burned on bonfires with the aid of petrol and destroyed with sulphuric acid . . . the murderers threw [into the mineshaft] objects which had resisted the fire, or which in their haste, they had forgotten to destroy.”



SOURCE 7 Among items found in the mineshaft were Princess Tatiana’s dog, a finger claimed to be the Tsarina’s, and corsets (undamaged by bullets)

A different story

Other evidence collected during or after the White investigations seems to tell a different story. We must remember that:

- this was a very confused time when communications often broke down and thousands of people disappeared
- the Reds and Whites, and the other people involved in the events, had reasons for telling different stories
- witnesses can be mistaken.

SOURCE 8 Announcement by the Bolsheviks (Reds) on 18 July

“In recent days, the danger of approach of the Czechoslovak forces [Whites] posed a serious threat to Ekaterinburg . . . In view of these circumstances, the leaders of the Ural Soviet decided to shoot Nicholas Romanov, and this was carried out on 16 July. The wife and son of Nicholas have been sent to a safe place.”

- Use Sources 8–11 to complete a chart like the one below. Decide whether you think each of the statements is possibly true, likely, highly likely or certainly true.
- Why might the Reds lie in their announcement in Source 8?
- How helpful is Source 9 when supported by the other sources?
- What is the problem with the eye-witness reports in Sources 10 and 11?

ACTIVITY

- Write a different version of the story to that given on pages 58 and 59. Include evidence that supports your new version.
- Explain why the evidence about the death of the Tsar and his family is so confusing.

SOURCE 9 From Sir Charles Eliot’s report

“On 17 July a train with the blinds down left Ekaterinburg for an unknown destination and it is believed that the surviving members of the imperial family were in it.”

SOURCE 10 The eye-witness account of a nurse, Natalya Mutnykh, in March 1919

“I found out by chance that the family of Nicholas II – his wife and four daughters – were transferred from the town of Ekaterinburg to Perm . . . [they] were kept very secretly . . . I was interested . . . and made use of the fact that my brother had to go on duty at the place where the imperial family were being kept, and asked him to take me with him . . . This was in September [1918] . . . We went down to the basement and I saw the room where in the poor candle-light I could make out the former Empress Alexandra and her four daughters, who were in a terrible state but I recognised them only too well.”

Other eye-witnesses also claimed to have seen the Tsarina and her daughters in Perm four months after they were supposed to have been shot.

SOURCE 11 Testimony of Dr Utkin, February 1919. The doctor was called by the Cheka (the Red secret police) to treat a young woman who appeared to have been beaten up and possibly raped

“ . . . a young woman was lying semi-conscious, on a bed. She was plump and her dark brown hair had been cropped close . . . When I asked the sick woman ‘Who are you?’ she raised her head and said in a distressed voice: ‘I am the sovereign’s daughter, Anastasia.’ ”

Another eye-witness mentioned an escape attempt by Anastasia.

| | Possibly true | Likely | Highly likely | Certainly true |
|--|---------------|--------|---------------|----------------|
| The Tsar and the whole family were shot. | | | | |
| The Tsar and one or two others were shot. | | | | |
| The Tsarina and her daughters were not shot. | | | | |
| One or two of the daughters escaped. | | | | |

The final proof?

SOURCE 12 From *The Sunday Times*, 11 December 1994

Tsar's head recreated

Burial pit skull reconstructions show Anastasia was there

These are the faces that reveal the fate of the Russian imperial family, helping to end one of the century's mysteries. Reconstructions from the skulls of Tsar Nicholas II and his entourage show that Anastasia, the grand duchess many believed escaped the Bolsheviks, was indeed murdered in 1918.

Two of the imperial family's five children were missing when archaeologists opened a shallow burial pit in Ekaterinburg, 850 miles east of Moscow, in 1991. One was Alexei, the heir to the throne. The other missing child was a girl, prompting fierce speculation that Anastasia had survived, exactly as a number of pretenders claimed.

To make these faces possible, Russian forensic scientists spent four months piecing together skull fragments. Last week Vladimir Solovyov, the public prosecutor who will report on the fate of the Tsar and his family, said there was no doubt of the results.

'Now there is a clear answer,' he said. 'Anastasia is in the grave. There is no sign of Alexei or Maria.'

Rebuilding the imperial faces, using techniques sometimes employed in

criminal inquiries in Britain, was difficult. Some skulls had been badly damaged by rifle butts during the execution, and by attempts to destroy all trace of the bodies with grenades and sulphuric acid.

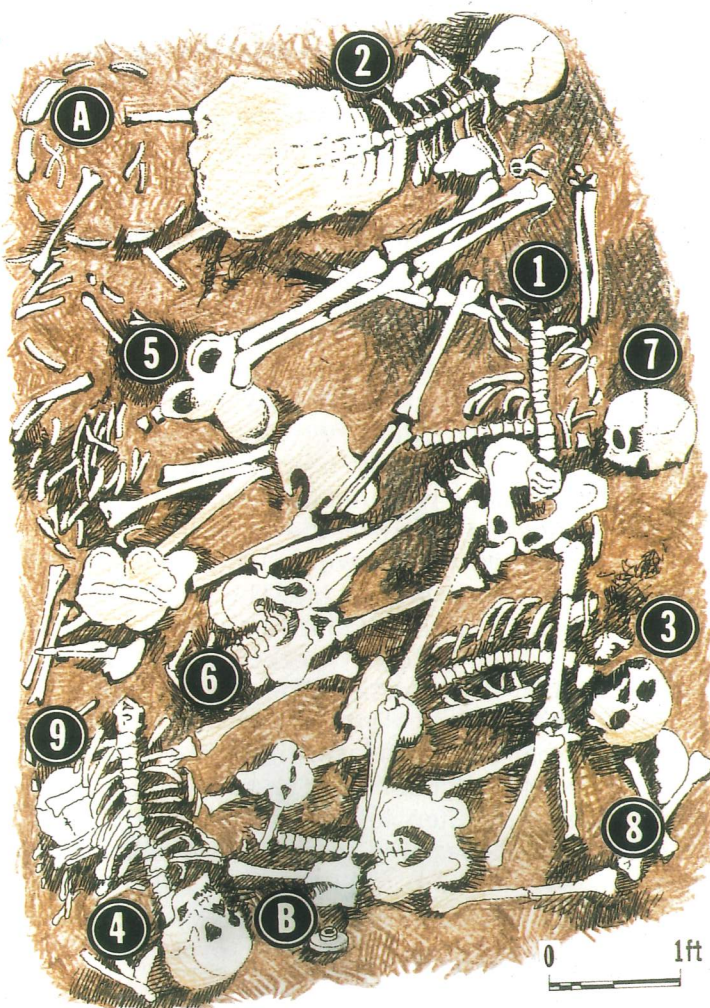
Solovyov said the resulting faces, along with DNA tests and dental records, positively identify Nicholas II, his wife Alexandra and their daughters Olga, Tatiana and Anastasia.

His final report will confirm contemporary accounts of the execution. Marks on the skeletons show that the girls, protected by 'bullet-proof vests' of jewels sewn into their underclothes, had to be finished off by bayonets. The bodies were driven to an abandoned mine 20 miles away. 'They were thrown in, followed by several grenades,' Solovyov said. 'It was assumed that the blast would make the mine collapse but it didn't. The next day the bodies were put back on the lorry.'

Fate intervened again to hinder efforts to hide the evidence: the lorry became bogged down in a swamp. So the remains were buried right there.

Experts are now searching for the charred remains of Alexei and Maria – a find that really would end the story.

SOURCE 13 The contents of the burial pit



- A and B** The remnants of the crushed acid jars
1 The bones of Nicholas II; his skull was detached
2 Dr Botkin; his dentures were found elsewhere
3, 4, 6 Grand duchesses, bayonet marks on bones
5 and 9 Male servants; one still bound with rope
7 Alexandra
8 The worst damaged skeleton, Demidova the maid

Discussion

What does this whole enquiry tell us about:

- the problems of finding out what happened in history when there are gaps in evidence and conflicting evidence?
- how new evidence can help fill out the picture?

Did the Tsar deserve to be shot?

- Look at Sources 12 and 13.
 - Which version of the death of the Tsar and his family do these sources agree with?
 - What evidence do they provide?
 - Can we trust this evidence?
- Could some of the stories about the Tsar's children escaping still be true?
- What are your final conclusions about the death of Nicholas II and his family?