The Swiss and the Romanovs

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For centuries, the Swiss people and government have supported the cultural, intellectual, and economic objectives of the Russian people and the Russian government. Especially during the Imperial Era of Russian history (1682-1917), the assistance provided to the ruling house of Russia by Swiss nationals was indispensable and of vital importance in helping the Russian royal house to achieve its cultural, political, pedagogical, and ecclesiastical goals.¹

The Petrine Period (1682-1725)

Contacts of some consequence between the Swiss and the House of Romanov started as early as the seventeenth century, when a twenty-year-old Swiss soldier François Lefort came to Moscow in 1675 to serve the Romanov Dynasty, and soon reached a position of prominence. Although Czar

¹ The Romanov Dynasty began to rule Russia in 1613 when, shortly after the Time of Troubles, Michael Romanov was accepted as the new Tsar by the boyars in Kostroma, at the Ipatieff Monastery.

Peter the Great (1682-1725)
Peter I was crowned while still a child (1682), it was Peter’s sister Sophia, and later his mother Nataliya Naryshkina, and their boyar relatives, who were running the country for over a decade after Peter’s coronation, leaving young Peter with plenty of time to dream of how to change his country when he would have real power. Lefort happened to be one of the people who greatly influenced the young Czar’s world view, and, once Peter became fully in charge of his country, the Swiss soldier became one of his top advisers and became highly influential during the first several years of Peter’s campaign to modernize and to Europeanize Russia.

Even though Lefort died fairly early in Peter’s reign (1699), quite a few other Swiss soldiers, adventurers, educators, and scholars made a contribution to the history of the Russian Empire during this period. The Swiss-Italian architect Domenico Trezzini, for example, was the general manager of the construction of Saint Petersburg until 1712. He is credited with the creation of the Petrine Baroque, charac-
teristic of that city’s early architecture. The mathematician Leonhard Euler and five members of the Bernoulli family became members of the Saint Petersburg Academy of Science.

Eighteenth Century (1725-1796)

It was, however, in the eighteenth century, during the Enlightenment, that Swiss influence became predominant in Russia. Empress Elizaveta Petrovna, reigning between 1741 and 1761, was an ardent Francophile and was determined to realize the dream of her father, Peter the Great, to Europeanize Russia. Raised herself by a French governess, she started a vogue for everything French and Swiss which would continue unabated until the advent of the Russian Revolution in 1917.

The presence of French and Swiss influence in Russia became much more pronounced during the reign of Elizabeth’s succes-

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2 Mario Franciolli and Manuela Kahn-Rossi, eds., Domenico Trezzini e la costruzione di San Pietroburgo (Firenze: Franco Cantini, 1994). This is an extravagant and elegant 316-page volume of essays to honor one of several Ticino artisans, who was instrumental from 1703 until his death in Saint Petersburg in 1743 in the building of the new city of Saint Petersburg. The book was part of an exhibit mounted by the Republic and Canton of Ticino, between November 27, 1994, and February 26, 1995, in honor of Domenico Trezzini.

3 Ulrike Lentz, “The Representation of Western European Governesses and Tutors on the Russian Country Estate in Historical Documents and Literary Texts” (Ph.D. diss., University of Surrey, 2008, 57-58.)
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Catherine the Great (1762-1796)

sor, Catherine the Great. Catherine made French the official language of the Russian Court, and at this time foreign tutors and governesses from France and Switzerland made their way into the households of the Russian nobility. Indeed, by the end of the reign of Catherine, the instruction of Russian children by French and Swiss tutors and governesses became the norm in the households of the Russian nobility. The need for such French and Swiss tutors was supplied principally by the school of pedagogy at the University of Neuchâtel. The graduates of this school, with letters of reference from the school’s administration, were sent in large numbers from Neuchâtel to the various noble households of the Russian Empire, where they easily found employment.

By the nineteenth century, French and Swiss tutors were playing a central role in the education of the Russian intelligentsia. For example, in their works Pushkin, Lermontov, Griboedov, Gogol, Tur-

\[\text{\textsuperscript{4}}\text{Ibid., 58.}\]
genev and Tolstoi, all attribute much influence by Swiss and French tutors in the education and lives of their characters.⁵

**Frédéric-César de La Harpe**

Two Swiss tutors in Russia, in particular, achieved a high level of international fame. The first was Frédéric-César de La Harpe. La Harpe was born in 1754 in Rolle, Switzerland, in the canton of Vaud. At the time Switzerland was a confederacy of mainly self-governing cantons held together by a loose military alliance, with little in terms of actual union and no central government. Some of the cantons were what was referred to as subject lands since they were governed by other cantons; Vaud, for example, had been under the control of Bern since the sixteenth century. La Harpe studied at the University of Tübingen in 1774, graduating with a doctorate of Laws degree. Leaving Switzerland, La Harpe travelled to Russia, where he became a tutor for the children of the Russian Emperor Paul I, including the future Alexander I, with whom La Harpe remained in contact well into his reign. La Harpe was a republican idealist, seeing the rule of the Bernese administration as oligarchical and as an infringement on the natural rights of the people of Vaud and the other subject states, such as Fribourg. La Harpe viewed the rule of the culturally dissimilar Bernese government and aristocracy as uncaring for the popular will, and contrary to the historical sovereignty of Vaud, in the tradition of the Swiss people.

When La Harpe became the personal teacher of Alexander I of Russia, he naturally sought to educate his sovereign in the ideals of the Enlightenment. At the collapse of Napoleon’s regime in 1815, La Harpe and his friend Henri Monod, in fact, lobbied Emperor Alexander, who in turn persuaded the other Allied powers at the Congress of Vienna to recognize Vaudois and Argovian independence, in spite of Bern’s attempts to reclaim them as subject states.

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The second Swiss tutor in Russia who achieved international celebrity was Pierre Gilliard. Between 1905 and 1918, he served as the private tutor of the five children of Czar Nicholas II. He left a detailed account of his life as the royal tutor for the Czar’s children, in his book, *Thirteen Years at the Russian Court*.

Pierre Gilliard was born on May 16, 1879, in Fiez, Switzerland. In his memoirs, Gilliard wrote that...
he initially came to Russia in 1904 as a French tutor to the family of Duke George of Leuchtenberg, a cousin of the Romanov family. He was recommended as a French tutor to the Tsar’s children and began teaching the elder children, Grand Duchesses Olga and Tatiana Nikolaevna of Russia, in 1905.

He grew fond of the family and followed them into internal exile at Tobolsk, Siberia, in the autumn of 1917, following the Russian Revolution of 1917. While at Tobolsk, he was a source of much comfort to the imprisoned imperial family. The Bolsheviks prevented Gilliard from joining his pupils when they were moved to the infamous Ipatiev House in Ekaterinburg in May 1918. While he and other courtiers accompanied the Romanovs to Ekaterinburg, upon arrival in the city they were detained at the Ekaterinburg rail station. He described his final view of the royal children in his memoirs:

The sailor Nagorny, who attended to the Tsarevich Alexei Nikolaevitch, passed my window carrying the sick boy in his arms, behind him came the Grand Duchesses loaded with valises and small personal belongings. I tried to get out, but was roughly pushed back into the carriage by the sentry. I came back to the window. Tatiana Nikolaevna came last carrying her little dog and struggling to drag a heavy brown valise. It was raining, and I saw her feet sink into the mud at every step. Nagorny tried to come to her assistance; he was roughly pushed back by one of the commissars.6

Once the royal children and Nagorny had disappeared, the Bolshevik guards divided up the rest of the party. General Tatishchev, Countess Hendrikov, and Mademoiselle Schneider were sent to prison to join Prince Dolgoruky, who had been there since arriving with the Tsar. Kharitonov the cook, Trup the footman, and Leonid Sednev the fourteen-year-old kitchen boy were sent to join the Imperial family and Dr. Botkin in the Ipatiev house. When these latter people had gone, Rodionov entered the coach and announced, to their amazement,

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that everyone else—Dr. Der-evenko, Baroness Buxhoeve-den, Sidney Gibbs, and Pierre Gilliard himself—were free to go. For ten days, they remained in Ekaterinburg, living in the fourth-class railway carriage, until ordered by the Bolsheviks to leave the city. On July 20, 1918, in Tyumen, Gilliard and the other servants of the royal party were rescued by the advancing White Army.

Gilliard remained in Siberia after the murders of the family, for a time assisting White Movement investigator Nicholas Sokolov. He married Alexandra “Shura” Tegleva, who had been a nurse to Grande Duchess Anastasia Nikolaevna of Russia, in 1919. In Siberia, he was instrumental in unmasking an impostor who claimed to be the Tsarevich Alexei.

For over a year, Gilliard was in the service of General Maurice Janin, the commander of the French military mission during the Russian Civil War, until early November 1919 when along with thousands of others, including ministers and government officials of the old re-


https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/sahs_review/vol57/iss2/3
gime, he fled Moscow and headed east on the Trans-Siberian railway. They were chased by the Bolshevik cavalry. After an epic journey lasting six months, he arrived in Vladivostok in early April 1920. He then took an American ship to San Francisco, and from there travelled by ship along the Pacific coast, through the Panama Canal, across the Atlantic Ocean and Mediterranean Sea to Trieste. He travelled through Italy to Switzerland, and in August 1920 he reached his parents’ home in Fiez, which he had left 16 years before.

Monsieur Gilliard subsequently became a Professor of French at the University of Lausanne and was awarded the French Legion of Honor. In 1921, he published a book entitled *Le Tragique Destin de Nicholas II et de sa famille*, which described the last days of the Tsar and his family, and the subsequent investigation into their deaths. In 1958, Gilliard was severely injured in a car accident in Lausanne. He never fully recovered and died four years later on May 30, 1962.
The Anna Anderson Affair

In 1925, seven years after the murders at Ekaterinburg, the Tsar’s sister, Grand Duchess Olga Alexandrovna of Russia, asked the Swiss Gilliard and his wife Shura to investigate the disturbing case of Anna Anderson who claimed to be Grand Duchess Anastasia. Anna Anderson had been mistaken for the Grand Duchess Anastasia by a fellow inmate at an asylum in Berlin after her attempted suicide in a Berlin canal. The inmate had seen a photograph of the Russian royal family in a magazine, and there was a definite physical resemblance between Grand Duchess Anastasia and Anna Anderson. Her fellow inmate in Berlin jumped to the conclusion that this mentally ill invalid was a Princess of the Russian Royal House. Therefore, many came to believe that the imposter Anna Anderson was in fact the resurrected Grand Duchess of Russia. Knowledge of the case quickly circled the globe, and both Grand Duchess Anastasia and Anna Anderson became celebrities.

The Tsar’s sister especially insisted on the investigation by Gilliard and his wife because, of all the eye witnesses, they had been the most closely associated with the children of the deceased Tsar. On July 27, 1925, the Gilliards saw Anderson for the first time at St. Mary’s Hospital in Berlin, where Anderson was being treated for a tubercular infection of her arm. Anderson at the time was severely ill, and only semi-conscious. During this initial interview Madame Gilliard asked to examine Anderson’s feet, and noted that Anderson’s feet were shaped similarly to Anastasia’s: both had bunions. Gilliard
thereupon insisted that Anderson be moved to a better hospital, to ensure her survival while her identity was investigated.

After an operation on Anderson’s arm, she recuperated at the Mommsen Nursing Home in Berlin. There, in October 1925, the Gilliards saw Anderson again. Anderson did not recognize Gilliard, which she later claimed was because he had shaved off his goatee beard. When he asked her to “tell me everything about your past,” she refused. According to Gilliard, Anderson mistook Shura for Grand Duchess Olga on the second day of this visit. At a subsequent meeting, Anderson mimicked the actions of the real Anastasia when she asked Shura to moisten her forehead with eau de Cologne, which left Shura shaken, because at the Court of Tsar Nicholas II during the Imperial Period, Grand Duchess Anastasia had actually often asked her, as a member of the royal household, to perform this small task. The Gilliards were therefore understandably confused about the true identity of this person.

Anderson’s supporters claimed that the Gilliards recognized Anderson as Anastasia, while the Swiss Gilliards denied it, and said her supporters mistook their compassion for lawful recognition. Anderson’s friend and lifelong supporter, Harriet von Rathlef, wrote that she spotted Gilliard in the hallway after the visit, looking agitated, and muttering in French, “My God, how awful! What has become of Grand Duchess Anastasia? She’s a wreck, a complete wreck! I want to do everything I can to help the Grand Duchess!” Shura actually cried when she left Anderson that day, wondering why she loved this strange woman as much as she loved her former protégée, the true Grand Duchess.

On departure from the hospital, Gilliard told the Danish Ambassador in Berlin, Herluf Zahle, “We are going away without being able to say that she is NOT Grand Duchess Anastasia.” Gilliard later recanted, writing to von Rathlef making further enquiries about Anderson’s health, but he referred to her as “the invalid”, without a royal pedigree, rather than as “Anastasia.” Thus, by the beginning of 1926, Gilliard was clearly of the opinion that Anderson was an imposter.
While supporters of Anderson insisted that the Gilliards recognized her as Anastasia and then for some odd reason changed their minds, possibly the Swiss couple were hesitant at first because her emaciated condition made her look so different from the plump teenage royal Anastasia whom they had last seen at the Court of her father Nicholas II. While this was enough to suspend their initial doubts, they eventually decided, once Anderson was better and they could question her more closely and more soberly, that she was in fact an imposter. Anderson’s supporters accused Gilliard of turning his back on her because he was paid off by the Tsarina Alexandra’s brother, Ernest Louis, Grand Duke of Hesse.

About this time, Grand Duke Cyril Romanov of Russia, the official head of the House of Romanov after the demise of Nicholas II, gave a news conference, with other members of the Royal House of Russia, officially denouncing Anna Anderson as an imposter, who was playing this game in order to acquire wealth. Clearly this news conference greatly undermined the authenticity of Anna Anderson’s claims. With all the doubts being disseminated by the Swiss Gilliards, the last eye witnesses to have been closely associated with the Grand Duchess Anastasia before her death in 1918, and now with this official denunciation of Anna Anderson by the Royal House of Romanov, fewer and fewer people believed her claims to be the authentic heir of Tsar Nicholas II. Thereafter, in the opinion of most people, Anna Anderson had no royal blood and no right to claim the Throne of Russia. In the eyes of most, she was merely a commoner, who had no legal right to command allegiance from the Russian People.

Like Ernest Louis and the majority of the true Romanov royal family, Gilliard became a vociferous opponent of Anderson and her circle of social climbers. Gilliard wrote articles and even a book entitled *The False Anastasia*, which claimed that she was a “vulgar adventuress” and a “first-rate actress,” but certainly no Princess. He said that he had known at once that she was not really Anastasia: there was no congenital facial resemblance, her entire knowledge of Russian
imperial life was gleaned from magazines, books, and her friends, and she could not speak Russian English or French, as all the Tsar’s true children could. He consequently testified against her in Hamburg in 1958. The lawsuits, designed to determine whether she was truly the Grand Duchess, eventually ended inconclusively in 1970, after Gilliard’s death.

DNA Evidence

In 1991, the true bodies of Tsar Nicholas II, Tsarina Alexandra, and three of their daughters were in fact exhumed from a mass grave near Yekaterinburg. They were identified on the basis of both skeletal analysis and DNA testing. For example, mitochondrial DNA was used to match maternal relations, and mitochondrial DNA from the female bones matched that of Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, whose maternal grandmother Princess Victoria of Hesse and by Rhine was a sister of Alexandra. The bodies of Tsarevich Alexei and the remaining daughter were discovered in 2007. Repeated and independent DNA tests confirmed that the remains were the seven members of the Romanov family, and proved that none of the Tsar’s four daughters survived the shooting of the Romanov family. Thus, the contention of Tsar Nicholas’ Swiss tutor, Pierre Gilliard, that Anna Anderson was not the Tsar’s daughter but rather an imposter, was finally proven to be accurate and true. However, nearly a century had elapsed before the Anna Anderson affair could finally be put to rest.

A sample of Anderson’s tissue, part of her intestine removed during her operation in 1979, had been stored at Martha Jefferson Hospital, Charlottesville, Virginia. Anderson’s mitochondrial DNA was extracted from the sample and compared with that of the Romanovs and their relatives. It did not match that of the Duke of Edinburgh or that of the bones, confirming that Anderson was not related to the Romanovs. However, the sample matched DNA provided by Karl Maucher, a grandson of Franziska Schanzkowska’s sister, Gertrude
(Schanzkowska) Ellerik, indicating that Karl Maucher and Anna Anderson were maternally related and that Anderson was Schanzkowska. Five years after the original testing was done, Dr. Terry Melton of the Department of Anthropology, Pennsylvania State University, stated that the DNA sequence tying Anderson to the Schanzkowski family was “still unique”, though the database of DNA patterns at the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory had grown much larger, leading to “increased confidence that Anderson was indeed Franziska Schanzkowska”.

Similarly, several strands of Anderson’s hair, found inside an envelope in a book that had belonged to Anderson’s husband, Jack Manahan, were also tested. Mitochondrial DNA from the hair matched Anderson’s hospital sample and that of Schanzkowska’s relative Karl Maucher, but not the Romanov remains or living relatives of the Romanovs.

While the employment of Pierre Gilliard by the Russian Royal Family represents the most intimate association between the Romanovs and the Swiss, connections between the Swiss Confederation and the Romanov family persist until the present day.

Post Romanov Era

The most dramatic example of this association is the diplomatic alliance between the Swiss government and the Romanov Family Association, one of whose presidents, Nicholas Romanov, Prince of Russia, for many years resided in Rougemont, Switzerland.

Prince Nicholas’s father Roman Petrovich came up with the idea of a family association of the Romanovs in the mid-1970s. After looking through the papers of his father, who died in 1978, Nicholas found that everything was in place for the creation of such an organization. He then wrote to all the members of the Romanov family who had been in communication with his father, and it was agreed that a family association should be created. A year later, in 1979, the
Romanov Family Association was officially formed with Prince Dmitri Alexandrovich as president and Nicholas as vice-president. When Vasili Alexandrovich became president in 1980, Nicholas remained vice-president.

In 1989, after the death of Vasili Alexandrovich, Prince Nicholas was elected the new president of the Romanov Family Association. Given that the Romanov family had been officially exiled from Russia and given that Prince Nicholas was a resident of Rougement, Switzerland, at this point, in 1989, Rougemont became the Romanovs’ cultural center. During these years there were many exchanges between the Romanovs and the Swiss city of Rougement. The Association currently has as members the majority of the male-line descendants of Emperor Nicholas I of Russia, although Grand Duchess Maria Vladimirovna has never joined, nor did her late father Grand Duke Vladimir Kirillovich.

The official position of the Romanov Family Association is that the rights of the family to the Russian Throne were suspended when Emperor Nicholas II abdicated for himself and for his son Tsarevich Alexi in favour of his brother Grand Duke Michael Alexandrovich, who then deferred ascending the Throne until a Constituent Assembly ratified his rule. Emperor Michael II, as he was legally pronounced by Nicholas II, did not abdicate but empowered the Provisional Government to rule. Michael’s “reign” was ended with his execution by the Bolsheviks in 1918.

Nicholas, Prince of Russia, who for so many years resided in Rougemont, considered that following the death of Grand Duke Vladimir Cyrillovich in 1992, that he himself was head of the House of Romanov and his rightful successor. With the exception of Grand Duchess Maria Vladimirovna, Prince Nicholas was recognized by the rest of the family as head of the Imperial House.

During his years of residence in Rougemont, Prince Nicholas participated in two events which were to prove to be significant in the History of the Romanovs. First, Prince Nicholas led the Romanov fam-
ily at the funeral in St. Petersburg of the last Russian Emperor Nicholas II and his family, in July 1998. As head of the family he was also present at the reburial of the remains of the Dowager Empress Maria Feodorovna in Russia, in September 2006. Prince Nicholas and his brother Prince Dmitri had been responsible for lobbying the Danish royal family and the Russian President Vladimir Putin, to allow the transfer of the Dowager Empress’s remains to Russia, so that they could be buried alongside her beloved husband Emperor Alexander III.

Secondly, as the head of the family that ruled Russia for centuries, Nicholas Romanov acted as one of the honoured guests in 2003 at the special celebration marking the three-hundredth anniversary of Saint Petersburg. Since his ancestor, Peter the Great, founded and built the city, it was only fitting that Nicholas would receive this honor.

Shortly before he departed on this particular trip to Russia, Nicholas Romanov granted an interview to swissinfo at his home in the Swiss alpine resort of Rougemont. On this occasion, he discussed
with the Swiss press the importance of the anniversary and his life as a Russian prince in exile. The interviewers noted that his chalet was decorated with paintings and pictures of his royal ancestors. Hanging in his bedroom were portraits of his great-grandfather and the wife of Nicholas I as well as a painting of Saint Petersburg by an English artist. Military books from imperial Russia filled the bookshelves. The first words that Romanov learned to write as a child were “Russia” and “God” in Cyrillic. The piece of paper with these two words hangs today on his bedroom door. He spent his days in Rougemont writing biographies of the Romanovs, but he told the reporters, he had no intention of ever moving to Russia. As he stated at this 2003 interview, “Were I 30 years younger, I would have certainly tried to settle in Russia and do something there. However, at my age, it’s too late. I’m too used to western European ways and too old to learn something new.”

During the interview, the regal octogenarian sat back on a sofa in the drawing room of this chalet and spoke to the Swiss reporters of Saint Petersburg as if he had spent his whole life in the city. “Petersburg along with London and Stockholm is the only capital city of Europe which has never seen a foreign soldier within its walls,” he says. “And that is an exclusive privilege we are very proud of—we’ll always be proud of the heroic defenders of Leningrad who, as I often say, saved our Petersburg.”

The conversation then continued thus. “The celebration of Saint Petersburg’s three hundred years is very important. First of all it’s a sign of unity for our country,” he explained. “Moscow is the seat of government and Petersburg is no longer what Peter the Great thought it was, a window on Europe. Now it’s exactly the opposite. It’s the window on Russia for foreigners. You are much better off if you get your first contact with Russia through Petersburg because Petersburg is today what it has always been—a great city of northern Europe.”

Today, in the third decade of the twenty-first century, the Swiss Confederation maintains its cordial relationship with the people
of Russia and the Royal House of Romanov. Russia has an embassy in Bern and a consulate-general in Geneva, while Switzerland has an embassy in Moscow and a consulate-general in Saint Petersburg. Finally, the Swiss government continues to treat with sincere respect and interest the two current leaders of the House of Romanov, the President of the Romanov Family Association, Princess Olga Andreevna Romanoff, who lives at Provender House near Faversham in Kent, and Grand Duchess Maria Vladimirovna of Russia, who was officially recognized in March 2013 by the Patriarch of Moscow and the Russian Orthodox Church as the true contemporary representative and heir of the Russian Royal House of Romanov.

~ Bryan College