

INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT K. MASSIE, PRINCETON, NJ

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Beverly Blois, interviewer

Q: Your interest in history, I believe, predated your interest in Russian history per se.

A: I was interested in history when I was a small boy in Nashville. The Second World War was going on and I was aware of the significance of it, even when I was 10 years old. I knew that if the Germans won, my life would be different. The war was sort of like a huge, never-ending Super Bowl. For a while it looked as though we might lose, so it was very exciting for me. I followed it through Time magazine. And then I've always, since I can remember, been interested in history as it is and as it was. By "as it is," I mean what's going on today is tomorrow's history. My friend David McCollough said something very well once when he said, "People who lived in the past didn't think of themselves as living in the past." We don't think of ourselves, today, that we are living in tomorrow's past. You and I will die and our children will remember us and tell stories for a few years and then we will fade away. A few of our contemporaries will survive in one form or another in books, I guess, and on film, but I am interested in this process. My work is trying to go back into the past and take these people who are no longer living and try, in a sense, to bring them back to life on a printed page.

Q: There's a question sometimes asked in research about Stalin: "Was he really necessary?" Was Peter the Great necessary, as a figure in history? Was Nicholas II? Or were they impelled and bobbed about by events the way Tolstoy writes?

A: I think in the sense that Russia, in the late 17th century or early 18th century, was behind the rest of Europe (assuming that you're saying that Russia was part of Europe), it was necessary that it catch up. Militarily, it had to catch up or somebody else would move in. Countries which are that far behind become prey to more modern countries and eventually they have to catch up or they are destroyed. China didn't catch up until the beginning of the 20th century, and now that China has become a modern state, it is a very powerful one because of its people. Peter started this process for Russia by bringing it into the West and the West into Russia. This was the first Russian revolution. This historical change would have happened through the agency of somebody, some one human being or group of human beings (and, since Russia was an autocracy, it would have been one human being). Under Peter's father there had already begun to be a Western influence in Russia, and it had grown even more under the regency of his sister, Sophia. Yet, there is still a sharp change when Peter the Great came out to the West on the Great Embassy and brought back to Russia all those foreign experts.

Q: Kliuchevsky says he sent Russia to school. Do you think that a useful analogy?

A: Yes, he sent them at the point of a stick.

Q: Do you think Peter's role in the torture and death of his son may be exaggerated?

A: I'm very pleased with the four chapters in my book that deal with his son, Alexis, because I have strong feelings about fathers and sons. One of the themes of Nicholas and Alexandra is how Nicholas invested so much in worrying about the little tsarevich. This was responsible for the Rasputin phenomenon. Then you turn around and here's Peter who decides that everything that he has done is at risk from his son, the focal point of opposition to his reforms. What's he going to do? My feeling as I read Peter's letters to his son was that there was a real element of sadness, even desperation. There was the note of command, but there was also pleading--"I order you to take your proper position at my side...please." You see what I mean?. The son, Alexis, because he was his mother's child and was afraid of his father and so forth, couldn't do this, and ran

away. Then there was the whole business of luring him back and promising him amnesty and then overturning the promise because of suspicions. It doesn't excuse Peter's behavior. When I was working on the book, people would say, "Wasn't he the man who killed his son?" He did, but not with his own hand, and he had the problem that his son was, by the terms of the day, a traitor. Peter turned to the leaders of the state and the church saying, "What should I do?"

Q: You have written that Nicholas was a better father than tsar. I assume in Peter's case it would be the opposite.

A: Well, yeah, my little saying, I suppose it's a cliché, but I made it up myself, was that Peter sacrificed his son to save his empire, and, that Nicholas sacrificed his empire to save his son. Very simplistic, but it's a starting point for discussion.

Q: Do you think Peter truly was, as a primary motivation, concerned with the "general good" (*obshchee blago*), with that sort of Enlightenment notion?

A: For his concept of the general good, or the state actually, he was trying to make the seat of power the state, not the tsar, and to take out the divinity or semi-divinity from the ruler's person, and make the tsar the first servant of the state, who would interpret what the state required. As you know, many slavophiles hate Peter still for several things: for bringing in the oberfiskals, the forerunners of the Okhrana and the KGB, for opening Russia to the West and allowing in these foreign pollutions and corruptions, the latest of which, they would say, was Marxism. I respect what Peter tried to do. He was not ambitious. Why should he be? He couldn't go any higher. He sacrificed himself. He didn't lie around in luxury. He worked his tail off, and he never rested. He was restless. The areas in which he has been charged with ruthlessness--digging canals, building Petersburg, and so forth--were not sadistic cruelty. He wanted these things done. He drafted labor from the provinces near and far. He set them to work and they died of malaria, but they weren't kept in stockades. They were drafted for the summer and they went home in the winter. He tried to dig a canal all with hand tools. Well, now the canal system in Russia is one of the most important parts of its communication system. Peter's idea was a good one, but it had to be done with human labor. This was for the good of the state.

Q: There's a lot of writing on modernization as the explanation for what Peter did, and the way you were just making comparisons between the West and Peter's Russia makes me ask if you feel this was a motive of his?

A: Absolutely. The basic story of Peter the Great is how he happened to find himself in the German suburb where foreigners lived and he saw that they were living a more advanced life. Not only socially, women were present in the company of men, but technologically--telescopes, sextants, etc. And, of course, the greatest example was the boat, the keeled boat that sailed against the wind. That sort of thing led to his desire to go and see. In talking to these people about their cultures, their homelands, he wanted to go and see them. It was a great curiosity, I mean you or I would probably do the same thing given the opportunity. If you walked out of the town you live in and there was a suburb with people who had their own private rocket ships--just making this up--and they were Martians, and you could take a trip to Mars, wouldn't you go?

Q: Are there elements of continuity in Peter's and Gorbachev's Russia?

A: You know, the interesting thing is that Russians today, ethnic Russians within the Soviet Union, are very pleased that they have a Russian at the top. The first Russian, they say, in the Soviet Era. Some even go

back and say the first Russian since Peter the Great, because the tsars were increasingly German. As each tsar married a German wife, or maybe a Danish wife, or whatever, but a Western wife, the blood, the Russian blood, got thinner and thinner. I think I calculated that Nicholas II was 1/128 Russian. Then you had a series of non-Russian rulers of the Soviet Union. Gorbachev is Russian, of course, and the people are very pleased. Gorbachev, like other Soviet leaders, wants to bring in Western technology without Western ideology, which is part of what Peter wanted. Certainly this is what Peter's father had wanted. The church functioned then in an ideological role, the way the party does now. The church didn't want anything to do with the West, but technologically and militarily Russia needed Westernization.