

Section 2. History and archaeology

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*Volodko Anna V.,
Ph D. in Law, Senior Research Fellow,
Institute of World History,
Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow, Russia*

BRASOVO ESTATE AND GRAND DUKE MIKHAIL ALEXANDROVICH

Abstract. The article explores another page in the life of Grand Duke Mikhail Alexandrovich relating to the Brasovo estate, which he inherited after the death of his brother, Grand Duke Georgy Alexandrovich. Mikhail Alexandrovich enjoyed spending time at the Brasovo estate and cared for its development and improvement. By the example of the successful management of the Brasovo estate, the myth of the Grand Duke's impractical character trait is debunked. According to Mikhail Alexandrovich, he spent the happiest months of his life in Brasovo with his beloved, later wife, Natalia Sergeevna.

Keywords: Grand Duke Mikhail Alexandrovich, Brasovo estate, life, improvement.

The history of the Brasovo estate, located in a picturesque corner of Orel province, is inextricably linked to the last generation of the Romanov dynasty. Since 1741 it belonged to the well-known noble family Apraksin, who built there a stone manor, church, two almshouses, equestrian yard, distillery, butter-mill, water mills, steam sawmills, etc. In 1882 an active statute of the Romanovs dynasty was established. In 1882, the real State Councilor Viktor Apraksin, being in debt, was forced to sell the estate to the Department of Manor House of the Ministry of the Imperial Court. The vastness and economic potential of the Brasovo estate is evidenced at least by the fact that he received a huge amount for his possessions at that time – 4.2 million rubles [2, 64].

The new owner was the middle son of Emperor Alexander III, Grand Duke Georgi Alexandrovich.

He had never been to his estate himself; as a teenager he developed tuberculosis and, on the advice of doctors, Georgi Alexandrovich lived on the estate of Abastumani in Georgia. On the advice of experienced managers he invested a lot of money in the economic development and improvement of Brasovo. Under the Grand Duke the equestrian yard was transformed into a stud farm, a school was opened, and the systematic construction of a large park, which was to have the shape of a two-headed eagle, began. In 1896 the grand duke succeeded in having the Moscow-Kiev-Voronezh railway run through Brasov lands.

After Georgi Alexandrovich's death in 1899, the estate, along with his status as heir to the throne, was inherited by one of the most unusual members of the last Romanov family, the youngest son of Emperor Alexander III, Grand Duke Mikhail Alexandrovich.

Born in 1878, the Grand Duke was a favourite of his father. Alexander III, normally strict, was affectionate with him and even forgave him some pranks. This undoubtedly left an imprint on his character: for all the natural shyness of the grand duke, he was an open, frank, sincere and benevolent young man. As his aide-de-camp A. A. Mordvinov remarked, “These qualities... would have made Mikhail Alexandrovich in those distant times...” These qualities would have made Mikhail Alexandrovich in those distant... times when the people chose from their midst leaders and princes, the best and most worthy bearer of power. During his ‘reign’ no one would probably have been offended, all would have found access, protection and help from him, and for all he would have been an example of temperance, simplicity, common sense, wit and courage [4, 31]. Although some relatives and contemporaries considered him weak-willed and soft-spoken, in reality Michael was an active man, an excellent sportsman, an active benefactor, and when it was really necessary he could show character and determination. His natural gifts and excellent education helped him to cope successfully with all his official duties, and in military service, which he passed, like all the Romanovs, the grand duke proved an excellent, capable officer.

The problem, from the point of view of the interests of the dynasty, was something else: Mikhail Alexandrovich was utterly devoid of “love of power” and a desire “to prepare hard for it” [4, 31]. Therefore, when Nicholas finally had a son, he was happy, and not only for his crowned brother: according to the observation of the Grand Duke Konstantin Konstantinovich, “the retired heir Misha ... was radiant with happiness that he was no longer the heir” [6, 247]. He was bored with official duties and sought a simple private life, was a stranger to all kinds of excesses (for example, as befits an exemplary athlete, he never drank or smoked) and modest in life.

The Brasovo estate inherited by Grand Duke Mikhail Aleksandrovich was a vast and highly efficient agricultural and industrial enterprise. The “Brief

Sketch of the Brasovo and Deryugin Estates of His Imperial Highness Heir Tsesarevich and Grand Duke Mikhail Alexandrovich”, published in Orel in 1903, notes that at the beginning of the 20th century the Brasovo estate covered over 104000 hectares of land “in economic use” in four counties. Most of this land was covered with forest, and to increase its profitability the estate engaged in intensive logging, had steam sawmills, a sawmill and a cardboard factory. This business was not limited to trade; timber was also used for charitable purposes – distributing ‘free fuel’ to all 18 churches of the estate, priests, widows, orphans and the poor. The land on the Brasov farms was cultivated according to the latest agricultural techniques of the time: there were experimental fields, an agricultural laboratory and its own meteorological station.

Two distilleries with electric lighting, a steam oil mill, a steam flax mill and numerous steam flour mills were built on the estate to process agricultural produce. The estate had a large mechanical workshop with electric lighting and steam heating for the maintenance and repair of equipment, where pupils of the Brasov Orphanage were also trained in crafts.

Other economic activities in Brasovo included horticulture, floriculture, vegetable farming, fish farming (a whole system of artificial fish ponds was created, including valuable species such as sterlet, sturgeon, salmon and trout) and beekeeping.

Of particular importance (given the Grand Duke’s predilection for horses) was the activity of the stud farm, which had up to 70 heads of elite horses.

The efficient organisation of production ensured a high profitability of the estate: for 1902, it amounted to more than 506000 rubles [6, 10].

The manor was equipped with the latest technology of the time: there was a water pumping station, a post office and even a telephone exchange. There was also a six-bed hospital with a doctor, which was used not only by the employees, but also by the local population.

In a word, Mihail Alexandrovich has managed to create a very profitable business. The estate also had

everything one needed for a comfortable life in the lap of nature: an extensive landscaped park, a Russian terem-style homestead, a hunting lodge, bathing huts, a beach and even a heated swimming pool.

Not surprisingly, the Grand Duke fell in love with his “fiefdom”: suffice it to say that when he travelled abroad incognito, he invariably travelled under the name of Brasov. Whenever possible, Mikhail made every effort to visit Brasovo in person, taking care of the development and improvement of the estate. He went there for the first time in April 1901, and, according to *Oryolskie Vedomosti*, he spent most of the time during his visit inspecting the estate and getting acquainted with its “economic peculiarities” [1, 192]. He returned there again in August and stayed on the estate for a few days, visiting the nearby highly regarded Kazan Bogoroditsky Ploshchansky skete. An entry in the journal of the grand duke testifies: “August 19, Sunday. Brasovo. At 9 and a quarter we went to church in the village of Brasovo for supper. Then drove to the greenhouses, visited the almshouse and went to the crèche... On the way back stopped at the Ploshchansky hermitage... visited the monastery” [3]. It should be noted that later Mikhail Alexandrovich repeatedly visited the monastery and provided it with material assistance.

In 1903, a significant event in the history of Brasovo occurred: an agricultural exhibition was organised in Orel, at which a separate pavilion was allocated to demonstrate the achievements of the exemplary “Brasovo farm”. In August 1903, the Grand Duke paid a special visit to Orel to support the organisers and view the Brasovo exposition [1, 192].

The above information allows us to dispel one of the myths about Mikhail Alexandrovich – about his impracticality. Many, even someone as close to the Grand Duke as his adjutant Mordvinov, believed that he did not know real life, “did not attach any importance to money for himself personally, had a very poor understanding of the relative value of various things and remained completely indifferent to all reports that talked about increasing his material resources”

[7, 314]. If you can agree with the first remark, given the modesty of Mikhail Alexandrovich in everyday life (his only expensive hobbies were horses and cars, in which he was just well versed), then the rest of the “Brasov aspect” of his life gives a completely different picture. Of course, the grand duke did not manage the estate “in manual mode”, there were professional managers for that purpose, but he did not let things drift away either, delving into the affairs of the estate and taking care of the dissemination of the best practices of the “Brasov economy”.

One can also disagree with the view that Mikhail Alexandrovich was “detached from everyday life”. For example, the Grand Duke was personally interested in the needs of the peasants of the Brasovo estate. During his visits to the estate he met with them and met their reasonable requests. On one occasion the peasants asked permission to collect deadwood and deadwood for firewood in the woods of the estate. Michael immediately granted their request, assigning a token payment of 10–15 kopeks per cart [3]. His act seems not only generous, but also rational: both to help people and to “clear” the forest of deadwood without employing additional labour.

There is another characteristic example of the social responsibility of the “detached from reality” Grand Duke: Thus, in 1905, during the aggravation of the social situation in the country, the Grand Duke learned of the discontent of the villagers of Brasovo, came to the estate, listened to criticism and improved the living conditions of seasonal workers, increased meals in the canteen and distributed gifts to his workers and foremen. Thanks largely to this, there were no riots in Brasovo in 1905–1907.

Mikhail Alexandrovich was well aware of the importance of improving the educational and cultural level of the people and within the framework of his charitable activities on the estate he paid much attention to this. In the mentioned “Brief sketch of the Brasov and Deryugin estates...” it is noted that on the territory of the Brasov estate there was a “second-class parochial school” and up to 30 zemstvo and

parochial schools that received material assistance from the estate income, and at the head office – a school for employees' children. Illiterate adult workers were taught the Law of God, reading, writing and arithmetic, and educational readings were held on Sundays for local residents.

In Brasovo, the Grand Duke was engaged not only in economic and administrative matters. The well-appointed territory of the provincial estate created all the opportunities both for a simple, secluded life away from the hustle and bustle and conventions of high society, which Mikhail Alexandrovich strove for, and for his favourite outdoor activities – walking, horseback riding, fishing, and the vast forested areas – for another hobby: hunting. Hunting in Brasovo was forbidden, but for the owner, a passionate hunter, and his guests, an exception was naturally made. One such hunt nearly cost the Grand Duke his life: he was attacked by a bear he had wounded, but was saved by the local huntsman Gladilin, who killed the beast with a well-aimed shot. Mikhail Alexandrovich generously rewarded his saviour [3].

A special period in the Grand Duke's life is associated with the estate of Brasovo. While commanding a squadron of Her Majesty's Lifeguard Cuirassier Regiment, he fell in love with the wife of one of his fellow officers, Natalia Sergeevna Wolfert, and they began a stormy affair. By that time he had already had one "scandalous" passion: in 1904 he had fallen in love with the maid of honour AV Kossikovskaya and, contrary to all the rules of the dynasty, married her. This "unequal marriage" was not without difficulty upset by his mother and Nicholas II himself.

This time, however, although his mother and brother-emperor categorically rejected the choice of Mikhail Alexandrovich (in addition to the fact that Natalya Sergeyevna was "unequal by descent", she had already been divorced once), the Grand Duke was adamant. A scandal broke out, and to hush up the story that threatened the reputation of the royal family, Nicholas II exiled his rebellious brother to Oryol to command the 17th Chernigov Hussar

Regiment. The fact that Brasovo was only 120 versts from the provincial town where the regiment was stationed played a role in his choice of duty.

The Grand Duke served diligently in Orel, but was forbidden to live with Natalia Sergeyevna. Mikhail Alexandrovich saw her during holidays and absences from the regiment. Only after the birth of his son George and divorce from Natalia Sergeevna Wolfert Nicholas II exchanged wrath for mercy, giving the child hereditary nobility (incidentally, under the surname Brasov) and allowing Natalia Sergeevna to come to the Brasov estate. At the same time the Emperor made his brother promise never to marry "this person". Mikhail Alexandrovich and his common-law wife spent three happy months in Brasov in the summer of 1911.

Natalia Sergeevna loved Brasovo. There she could retreat with the Grand Duke away from the ill-will of the St Petersburg world. Besides, she finally had a home where she felt like a rightful mistress. Natalia Sergeevna, who had exquisite taste, appreciated the natural beauty of the estate and the work of the architects and gardeners: the wooden "palace" was spacious and elegant, with windows overlooking a large fountain and a cascade of ponds. The interior furnishings of the manor can be seen in the paintings of her good acquaintance, the famous Brussels-based artist S. Yu. Zhukovsky, who lived in Brasovo at Natalya Sergeyevna's invitation in 1916, painted the interiors of the "palace".

Life on the estate went on as usual: walks in the surrounding groves, playing with the children (Natalia Sergeevna had a daughter from her first marriage in addition to George), bathing, fishing. Loneliness was brightened up by visits of friends. For example, in the summer of 1911, the great composer Sergei Rachmaninoff and his wife visited them.

However, the idyll did not last long. A new royal "favour" soon followed: Mikhail Alexandrovich was appointed commander of what was probably the most famous and brilliant of the cavalry regiments of the Guards – the Cavalry Guards. He did not want to leave Oryol, foreseeing that in St Petersburg he and

Natalia Sergeevna would once again have to face the ill-will of the court and high society, but an order is an order. His fears were justified, and Mikhail Alexandrovich took a radical, even adventurous decision to put an end to this ambiguous situation. Breaking his word to the Emperor, he secretly married Natalia in Vienna in 1912. Repression followed immediately: an enraged Nicholas II fired his brother from all military and government posts, imposed a sequestration on his property, and forbade him to return to Russia. For two years the couple were forbidden access to Brasovo.

Everything changed with the outbreak of the First World War. Mikhail Alexandrovich, as a true patriot, could not stay away and asked permission to return home and go to the front. Nicholas II granted his request and put him in charge of a unique military formation – the Caucasian Native (“Wild”) Cavalry Division. In this position he proved himself a brilliant, desperately brave commander, earning the respect and love of the Highlanders volunteers [8]. Later the Emperor recognised his marriage and even granted Natalia Sergeevna the title of Countess Brasova.

The Grand Duke spent most of his time at the front, and in Brasov he ordered a 100-bed infirmary for wounded soldiers to be set up in the main office. Natalia Sergeevna was engaged in arrangement of Brasov house. Thus, in 1916 she “reported” in a let-

ter to Mikhail Alexandrovich: “The house is coming out remarkably well and beautifully... I don’t know which room is better, all of them are wonderful, one is better than the other, it’s just a museum” [3].

The front life affected the Grand Duke’s health; in the autumn of 1916, when he had already become commander of the cavalry corps, his chronic peptic ulcer became acute, and Mikhail Alexandrovich was granted leave to improve his health, which he spent on his estate. “In Brasov I have completely recovered,” he wrote to his brother [5, 121]. Nevertheless, additional treatment was required in the Crimea, from where he came again to Brasovo, where he stayed from December 20 to 28, 1916. Together with a few friends he and Natalya Sergeyevna spent Christmas in the peace and quiet of the provincial estate, enjoying the “simple” life to which the grand duke had always aspired [4, 265–267]. However, “simple life” for the Grand Duke Mikhail Alexandrovich, as for the other Romanovs, was coming to an end. Ahead were formidable revolutionary events, which he was not destined to survive. Leaving for St. Petersburg, the Grand Duke did not know that he would never see his beloved estate again.

In 1917, Grand Duke Mikhail Alexandrovich gave his last order concerning the Brasovo estate, transferring it with all its property to the local peasants.

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