Precious stones have always played a role in shaping history and destiny, yet the stories behind some of the most impressive gems have often been a combination of truth and lies.

And Alexandrite, a stone more rare than diamond that magically changes color, was the inspiration behind many of these legends. History and mystery, fiction and reality, the remarkable story of Alexandrite is forever linked to the last of the Russian Tsars.

The Romanov family was the last imperial dynasty to rule Russia. They came to power in 1613 and eighteen Romanovs took the Russian throne over the next three centuries. From a historical perspective and in terms of geology and politics, Peter the Great, Alexander II and Nicholas II are perhaps the most captivating figures.

Peter the Great (1672–1725), may have been the first to understand the strategic importance of the rich Uralian deposits. When traveling in Western Europe, he became acquainted with the fundamentals of mineralogy, mining and metallurgy. He wanted to see Russia as an equal to European powers and was confident in its mineral potential. As a result of his explorations and experiences, he was in a unique position to guide the “westernization” of his empire. Still, many of his ideas only came to fruition after his death.

Peter was the first of the tsars to collect art, precious, engaging, and peculiar things, not only for his amusement but also for the glory of his country. He created the Diamond Chamber, a treasury to be owned by the state, to which he donated coronation regalia, including crowns, scepters and orbs.

More importantly, he encouraged other nobles to give and each subsequent ruler added gems and jewels to the Diamond Chamber. The collections Peter amassed, during his extensive travels, laid the foundation for what would become the well-known Hermitage and the Moscow Kremlin museums.

It was more than 100 years later that emeralds and alexandrites were discovered. Under the reign of Nicholas I (Alexander II’s father), the government encouraged scientific expeditions and explorations of the region and geologists, botanists, astronomers, mapmakers, metallurgic engineers from all over Europe were invited to participate.

Yet it was a local peasant by the name of Maxim Stefanovitch Kozhevnikov that discovered the first emeralds in 1831. Making his way through the forest along the banks of the Tokovaya River, he found some green stones in the roots of a tree felled by a storm. He took them to Ekaterinburg, where the Lapidary Works director identified them as emeralds.

Within a year, the Izumrudnye Kopi (Emerald Pits) on the river Tokovaya were in production. The site, some 90 kilometers southwest of Ekaterinburg, yielded not only emeralds, but also yellow phenakites, light-blue aquamarines, blue-green fluorites, light-green apatites, and red rutiles. Some of the world’s largest mineral specimens were also uncovered.

By 1723, the Urals had become so important to Russia that Ekaterinburg, (named after the Tsar Peter the Great’s wife Catherine), was established as its administrative center. In 1745, a peasant named Erophey Markov was the first to discover gold there. As it turned out, all of the streams and rivers of Ekaterinburg were gold-bearing, and the Urals became a center for mining and exploration. By the end of the century, 140 primary gold deposits had been unearthed, and Ekaterinburg had become the most important city on the road between Russia and Siberia.

It isn’t clear why these early miners never noticed any gemstones in their alluvial searches – there should have been some, but they probably didn’t know much and were only looking for gold.
The Russian aristocracy had become obsessed with their country’s newly found precious stones. Tsar Nicholas I immediately issued a decree ordering that all the best gemstones should be made available to the imperial lapidary in Ekaterinburg and that the finished stones should be sent to his palace in St. Petersburg.

Three years later, on April 17, 1834, the Russian Empire was celebrating the sixteenth birthday of the future Tsar Alexander II, who would become one of the most controversial characters in Russian history. At around the same time, a color-changing gemstone was found in these same Emerald mines.

The name of the first person to find this stone has been lost in the mists of time. However, the first person to bring it to public attention, and ensure that it would be forever associated with the Imperial family was Count Lev Alekseevich Perovskii (1792–1856).

Count Lev Perovskii was a Russian mineralogist and Vice-President (1852–1856) of the Appanage Department. He was close to the royal family and contributed much to the development of lapidary arts and mining. Many new deposits were discovered because of Perovskii’s initiatives. Above all, Perovskii was an enthusiastic collector, and his passion was minerals and precious stones. He often took advantage of his rank to assure that all the best stones went to the Appanage Department, although many later found a home in his private collection. In trying to obtain individual specimens, he was ruthless and would use any means, including bribery or trickery, to get what he wanted.

Yet, it wasn’t Perovskii who realized Alexandrite was a new gemstone. According to a widely popular, but controversial story, Alexandrite was discovered by the Finnish mineralogist Nils Gustaf Nordenskjold, (1792–1866) on the Tsarevich Alexander’s sixteenth birthday on April 17, 1834 and named Alexandrite in honor of the future Tsar of the Russian Empire.

Nordenskjold had already described and discovered several minerals, some new, and some previously unknown in Russia. His reputation was established well beyond Russia and Scandinavia, and no one could compete with his knowledge of mineralogy. It was to Nordenskjold that Perovskii turned when he needed someone with a comprehensive understanding of gemstones.

Although Nordenskjold discovered Alexandrite, it’s hard to believe that he could have seen and named it on Alexander’s birthday. His initial discovery resulted from an examination of a newly found mineral sample he had received from Perovskii. He first identified it as emerald because of the similarity in crystalization. Still, confused with the high hardness, he knew the sample could not be emerald. Later that evening, while studying the specimen under candlelight, he was surprised to see that the stone’s color had changed to raspberry-red instead of green.

Later, he confirmed the discovery of a new variety of chrysoberyl and suggested the name “diaphanite” (from the Greek “di” – two and “aphanes”, – unseen or “phan”, to appear, or show). Perovskii, however, already had plans and used the rare specimen to ingratiate himself with the Imperial family by presenting it to the future Tsar and naming it Alexandrite in his honor on April 17, 1834.

In retrospect, it is perhaps fortuitous that the name Alexandrite instead of Diaphonite was finally chosen. Alexandrite may never have achieved such prominence were it not so inextricably connected to the Tsar Alexander and the end of the Russian monarchy.

Alexandrite by nameake became symbolic of the reign of Alexander II, and later tsarist Russia in general. The fact that its colors of red and green echoed the principal colors of Imperial Russia endeared it to many. Moreover, the magic of the changing colors reflected directly upon the thoughts of a society ruled by Tsars since 1480, where every written and spoken word had a second meaning and allegory was the primary form of expressing any notions different from the official ideology.

The mystical dualism of Alexandrite lies with the reign of Tsar Alexander himself. The early part of his reign was characterized by sweeping reforms and his liberal approach earning him the title of “Tsar Liberator”.

In daylight, the green of Alexandrite was taken to represent the hope and revival brought to Russia by Alexander II’s efforts. “Green morning full of hopes” came into many lives when Alexander II emancipated the serfs and initiated the transformation of the flagging agrarian Russian economy into an industrial state.

Ironically, Alexander II’s liberalization and subsequent reversal fomented and foretold the revolutionary movement that ultimately brought an end to the Imperial family and the fall of the Russian Empire.

The hope had become tainted by blood, and many believed that the red of Alexandrite under candlelight prophesied the forthcoming “bloody evening” for the Third Rome, where Alexander II would be the first royal sacrifice.

It was on March 13, 1881 in St. Petersburg during his visit to the Grand Duchess Catherine, that Alexander II was assassinated. Traveling in a closed ironclad carriage, from the Michaelovsky Palace to the Winter Palace, he was bombed by revolutionaries. And there, Alexander II lay motionless upon the snow, profusely bleeding and dying. Red color, the color of blood and revolution, the color of the evening and the color of Alexandrite in candlelight.

“Alexandrite colors”. Baroness Emma Vladimirovna Frederiks, maid of honor to Empress Alexandra Feodorovna, in century dress for the famous 1903 ball in the Winter Palace. Colorization by Olga Shimina.
He was succeeded by Alexander III, and finally by Nicholas II (Nicholas the Bloody), who believed in autocracy and was widely reviled for his poor military decisions. In 1917 he was deposed and put under house arrest in Ekaterinburg.

On July 17, 1918, Nicholas the Bloody, the last Tsar to reign over Russia, was executed along with his entire family without trial and by firing squad in the basement of the Ipatiev House where they had been held under house arrest.

The detachment of Bolsheviks led by Yakov Yurovsky began preparations early in the day. At about 11 pm on July 16, revolvers were handed out, and an announcement was made that the prisoners were to be executed.

The Royal family was wakened and told they were to be photographed. They were led to a room in the basement and ordered to stand along the wall. Nicholas II was shot first. As the firing continued, bullets began to ricochet, but most of the family wouldn’t die.

When the firing stopped, Nicholas II’s daughters, Olga, Tatiana, Maria, Anastasia and Alexandra, were covered in blood, but still alive. One man resorted to a bayonet, but even that didn’t work. Finally, they were all shot in the head.

When the men came to undress the bodies, they found that Alexandra, Olga, Tatiana, Maria, and Anastasia were wearing bodices made almost entirely of diamonds, gold, emeralds, and alexandrites, and it was this luxurious armor that had been protecting them.

From the Tsar Liberator who brought the green morning full of hopes to the last Tsar, Nicholas the Bloody facing the last days of Tsarist Russia, the story had turned full circle as the last of Romanovs lay in blood and gemstones in the very place where the symbol of their grandfather had been discovered.

Like the supplies of Alexandrite, which had already been depleted, the last of the Russian nobility and monarchists disappeared in exile or labor camps.

Green by day, red at night, “green morning full of hope” and red... the color of blood, and the end of the Russian monarchy.

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EMERALD BY DAY, RUBY BY NIGHT

It is a common misconception that alexandrite changes color from green to red. The best alexandrites are teal, vanadium green, greenish-blue or blue-green under natural daylight or fluorescent light and change to purple-red or red under incandescent light.

BRAZILIAN ALEXANDRITE

BEST OF BLUE

Brazilian alexandrites appear reddish purple-to-purple red under incandescent light while their daylight colors are often more blue than green. Under warm light, the best Brazilian stones possess a strongly purplish hue and appear purplish-red or raspberry red.

INDIAN ALEXANDRITE

BEST OF GREEN

Alexandrites from the Andrapradesh deposit in India are well known for their outstanding daylight bluish-green colors along with their relatively good clarity. Under incandescent light, they often appear plumb reddish-purple. Although Brazilian stones generally show a superior color change, Indian alexandrites exhibit the best blue-green colors in regular daylight.

AFRICAN ALEXANDRITE

MOST ELUSIVE

African alexandrites occur in a broad range of colors and sizes. While many of the stones appear khaki or yellowish-green or brownish in daylight, some magnificent blue-green or green-blue stones with an excellent color change are also found from time to time.
RELICS & RARITIES

Red Spinels with silky inclusions that evoke a dreamy smokey luster occur only in the Mahenge deposits of Tanzania. The colors tend to be exceptionally vibrant, and the luster is reminiscent of a similar effect observable in Kashmir sapphires.

In most gemstones, any reduction in transparency would be considered distracting. Here, the brightness is somehow improved, and it must be the minute inclusions that are indeed reflecting additional light.

Some people believe in gemstones’ power, but even agnostics would agree that stones like this possess a glow that goes beyond the properties we typically associate with color.

PROSPECTOR’S CORNER

Sphene is a beautiful and highly dispersive green or golden yellow gemstone found chiefly in Madagascar. It is virtually unknown to the public and has been pretty much ignored by jewelry designers despite its mesmerizing colors and optics.

This unique specimen found at the well-known deposit in the Daraina, Madagascar, measures 57.2 x 29.5 x 26.6mm and weighs 241.90cts.

The combination of hexagonal black tourmaline (dravite) crystals attached to a well-defined monoclinic sphene crystal is unusual in the world of minerals. The two species appear to have formed independently and later become stuck together like a conglomerate.

The sphene could perhaps be faceted into a 2-carat gemstone, but this specimen is worth more to a collector as is.