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Bad Blood: Hemophilia and Its Detriment to the Russian Imperial Family

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Stories about royalty have captivated the public for centuries. There has always been some sort of drama with the royal families and their overlapping ties. Whether it be the bloody revenge of Charles II, the many wives of Henry VIII, or the relationships of the current British royal family, their stories have a strong grip on the public's attention. Perhaps one of the most famous stories is the spread of hemophilia in royal families across Europe. Due to a mutation in Queen Victoria's genes, royals across Europe found themselves with children plagued with hemophilia because of their incessant need to preserve royal blood and intermarry with other monarchs. In Russia, specifically, this mutation caused irreparable damage to Russia's previously strong aristocracy. While the Russian revolution and collapse of the Imperial Family was inevitably due to constant wars and lack of resources, it was Tsarevich Alexe's hemophilia that was the catalyst for the end of the Romanov dynasty.¹ His condition, and the family's subsequent isolation from the public weakened the already unstable control the Romanov family had over their country, leading to their downfall.

Hemophilia is a genetic disorder that prevents a person's blood from clotting regularly. People with the disease are more likely to bleed longer, as well as have more internal bleeding that seeps into joints and bones.² This mutation is passed solely on the X chromosome, and thus affects members of the male sex more frequently. When passing on genes, a child receives either two X chromosomes if they are female, and one X and Y chromosome if they are male. Hemophilia is a recessive trait, so the alleles on the chromosome must all be hemophilic. With females, this requires there to be two hemophilia genes, but with males, it only requires one. Boys receive this one chromosome from their mother, meaning they are much more susceptible to the disorder when their mother carries traces of the recessive gene in her DNA. In order for

¹ Tsarevich is the title reserved for the Tsar's sons. Nicholas II only had one.

² This is due the lack of a factor VIII or a factor IX encoded on a gene of the X chromosome.

this trait to be passed on, the mother must either be a carrier of the disease, or have the disease and live long enough to produce offspring.³ In the present day, having hemophilia is not a death sentence. Nowadays, doctors can easily identify symptoms when a baby is born and help administer treatment. However, back when the disorder was first discovered during the 19th century, there was no readily available treatment for the disease.⁴ Those who developed the disease had no hope of living very long, often dying young, due to internal bleeding. This was the fate of Queen Victoria's grandson and many of her other relatives.⁵ Queen Victoria of England had some sort of mutation in her genetic code, causing her to pass on the mutation to her son Leopold, who was hemophilic.⁶ From there, the family continued to grow, with Victoria having forty-two grandchildren spread amongst the many royal families across Europe.⁷ While it is unknown if Victoria knew the disease was hemophilia, it is known that the disease was regarded as a challenge for the family.⁸ Upon finding out about Alexei's bleeding problem, the Tsarina is recorded as saying "if only you knew how fervently I have prayed for God to protect my son from our inherited curse."⁹ From then on, Tsarevich Alexei's condition became a source of stress for the family, especially Alexandra.

In addition to the personal problems plaguing the Imperial family, Nicholas II was dealing with multiple external pressures. From the beginning of his rule, the Russian public was not content with his decisions, claiming that he was "well-intentioned but weak, immature, and

³ See Appendix Figure A

⁴ John Conrad Otto is credited with discovering hemophilia in 1803.

⁵ Tsarina Alexandra had a brother, Frederick William, that died when he was a baby when he fell out of a 20 foot high window and died from the internal bleeding that it caused (McKusick, 91). The Tsarina was also a carrier of hemophilia and passed the mutation on to her son.

⁶ See Appendix Figure B

⁷ See Appendix Figure C

⁸ Queen Victoria was credited with writing in her journal: "Our poor family seems persecuted by this awful disease, the worst I know" (McKusick, 88).

⁹ Brown, Amy, "The Royal Disease and The Royal Collapse: Political Effects of Hemophilia in the Royal Houses of Europe" (Honor Scholar Senior Project, DePauw University, 2017), 36

politically inexperienced” and that he was underprepared to lead a country after the death of his father.¹⁰ It did not help that his bride was from a German family.¹¹ From there, he continued to disappoint the public, often refusing to listen to anyone’s advice because he “ha[d] a firm, an absolute, conviction that the destiny of Russia—that [of his] own fate and that of [his] family—is in the hands of God, who” appointed him to the position.¹² He led the country through multiple wars, losing millions of subjects in the process.¹³ With so many men dead from war, the workforce collapsed, along with the transportation and food distribution systems.¹⁴ He was paranoid about losing power over the country, refusing to cooperate with the Duma or listen to the people when they shared their discontent with his rule.¹⁵ However, this became a self-fulfilling prophecy, with Nicholas II losing his power due to the Duma, along with the support of the army that turned against the Tsar, forcing him to abdicate the throne. Multiple reasons contributed to the Tsar’s forced abdication and eventual murder, but perhaps the catalyst for many of his poor decisions and subsequent failure to protect his reputation was his son’s hemophilia.

With Alexei vulnerable to accident, the Romanov family decided to withdraw from public life to keep the illness a secret, causing an even larger dip in their public approval. The family was already quite private, Alexandra insisting that they cut down on the number of guards at the palace before Alexei was even born.¹⁶ With the development of Alexei’s hemophilia, they

¹⁰ Ibid, 38.

¹¹ Due to Russia and their hostility for their German neighbors, the fact that their new Tsarina was German was not met with positive reactions from the public. These feelings soured even more with the start of WWI and the countries being enemies.

¹² Massie, Robert K., “The Wrong Man for the Time,” *Newsweek* 132, no. 3 (July 1998): 34, ProQuest One Literature 214308774.

¹³ From World War I alone, Russia saw “over 1.8 million military, and about 1.5 million civilian deaths” (Blakemore)

¹⁴ Massie, “Wrong Man,” 34.

¹⁵ “The first representative body of legislative power was created in the Russian Empire in 1905 as result of the revolution” (the State Duma). This legislative body had some power, but was still under the power of the Tsar.

¹⁶ Bokhanov, Alexander et al, *The Romanovs: Love, Power & Tragedy*, trans. Lyudmila Xenofontova. (London: Leppi, 1993), 117.

decided to only tell immediate family members about the disease to protect themselves from social backlash.¹⁷ As a country, Russia had very close ties to Christianity. The deeply religious Russian orthodoxy believed the Tsar and Tsarina to be akin to Gods. They were considered “exalted persons” with their love seen as one of the purest forms of Earthly devotion.¹⁸ In Russia, only God held a higher position than the Tsar. Nicholas II was considered both the Tsar and the head of the Russian Church. To the people, they were God’s chosen rulers and, by extension, modeled after God, therefore, perfect. Any malady or defect would be a clear manifestation of God’s disappointment of that person’s morality. If word spread that the crown prince was dealing with an incurable disease, there would be intense judgment from the public, who would then consider the family unholy and call for their removal. Grand Duke Alexander Mikahailovich supports this, writing “Although it was no one’s fault, the Russian people regarded any defect as divine judgment for some sin. So the affliction of the future Tsar and supreme priest was concealed from all except the immediate family.”¹⁹ The knowledge of the Tsarevich’s condition would ruin the family’s reputation even further, so the family, especially the Tsarina, decided to keep all matters of Alexei’s health a secret. Scholar Robert K Massie argues that this “made the family vulnerable to every vicious rumor. It undermined the nation’s respect for the Empress and, through her, for the Tsar and the throne. Because the condition of the Tsarevich was never revealed, Russians never understood the power which Rasputin held over the Empress.”²⁰ While it was already unbecoming to discuss the health of the Imperial family, when Alexei’s condition was discovered, the precedent was expanded.²¹ The family locked down the information only trusting the immediate family and a select few friends with the information. The family chose to

¹⁷ Bokhanov, *The Romanovs*, 212.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 106.

¹⁹ Brown, Amy, “Royal Disease and Royal Collapse,” 37.

²⁰ Massie, Robert K, *Nicholas and Alexandra* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1967), 163.

²¹ *Ibid*.

lie to everyone else, even those who worked closely with the family, like Alexei's French tutor, Pierre Gilliard.²² Gilliard was later told of Alexei's disease after seven years of employment with the family, however, he noticed a certain anxiety in the Tsarina's gaze when looking at her child even before he understood "the meaning of it."²³ Rumors of illness still surrounded the Tsarevich despite the family's attempts to hide the disease from the public. Multiple excuses were given whenever Alexei missed the few public events the family still attended, although no one really believed them. Despite the Tsar and Tsarina's best efforts, those at court were suspicious of the Tsarevich's condition.²⁴ With the rumors, the Romanovs became desperate to keep their son's illness a secret; they hid him from public life, keeping their distance from the court. Their already private lifestyle became even more isolated, especially Alexandra's. Due to her own health complications with giving birth to Alexei, she became even more removed from society, choosing to focus more on her children in private.²⁵ This decision strained the already fraught relationship the Tsarina had with the public. Their disdain for her, stemming from their hatred of her German ancestry, grew even stronger when she disappeared from court life with no explanation. Those at court assumed that her isolation was due to "distaste for Russia and its people."²⁶ The royal couple distancing themselves from people caused the public to become convinced that their royalty hated them and their country. Rumors would spread that the Tsarina was a German spy who would support Germany once one of Alix's relatives declared war on the country. After the 1905 protest, called "Bloody Sunday," around one hundred protestors were murdered by the Tsar's police. Multiple protests occurred before that with people carrying signs

²² Bokhanov, *The Romanovs*, 212.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Massie, *Nicholas and Alexandra*, 163.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

saying “Down with the war” and “Down with the German Woman [the Tsarina].”²⁷ The lack of tact with which the Imperial family dealt with the economic crisis and food shortage only strengthened the hatred of the monarchy. With the Tsar and Tsarina’s reputations being impacted by their inability to rule the country during a time of crisis, their withdrawal from public life did little to protect them from social scandal. If anything, their withdrawal caused a longer, more drawn-out death of their reputations, rather than the swift death that could have occurred if Alexei’s condition was made public. Left with little to no respect from their public, the Romanovs’ decision to distance themselves from court fostered an environment for revolution. Their son was the most important part of their lives, causing them to seek out solutions to his disease that caused more issues during their reign.

Seemingly unconcerned with their reputations when the fate of their son and only heir was at stake, the Romanovs turned to the notorious mystic, Grigoriy Rasputin. Rasputin and the rumors that he brought with him, only served to sour the Romanovs’ reputation even further. His past was suspicious to those at court, as well as the public. He was an illiterate Siberian peasant with a wife and three kids before he left Siberia and became a monk. Previously, he drank excessively, was known for fighting, and was caught stealing. After a visit to a monastery, he changed his ways, choosing instead to devote his life to the religious path. His methods included rigorous prayer and fasting, as well as going on many pilgrimages, and developed a small cult due to his mystic reputation.²⁸ It was this association with the occult that led to Grand Duke Peter and his wife introducing him to the Romanovs.²⁹ Desperate to find some sort of solution to heal their son, they developed a close relationship with the Siberian monk, who appeared to heal the

²⁷ Jebson, Hugh, “Russia, 1914-17: Part 1 the Road to Revolution,” *Hindsight* 19, no. 1 (September 2008): 22, <https://go-gale-com.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/ps/i.do?p=GPS&u=s1185784&id=GALE|A185428543&v=2.1&it=r>.

²⁸ Bokhanov, *The Romanovs*, 230-233.

²⁹ Brown, Amy, “Royal Disease and Royal Collapse,” 36.

Tsarevich with his prayers.³⁰ “The doctors tried every known remedy, but the hemorrhage grew steadily worse and death was expected at any moment. The distracted Tsarina had Rasputin recalled to his bedside. Over the blood-soaked bandages Rasputin made the sign of the cross, mumbled some incantations, laid his hand upon the still, white face, and the bleeding stopped.”³¹ The entire family seemed charmed by him, with Nicholas II claiming that even just talking with Grigoriy “restored [the] balance” of his soul.³² However, it was the Tsarina that had the closest relationship with Rasputin. His presence was calming for her as she wholeheartedly believed that as long as Rasputin was around, her son would live. “Gradually, Alexandra became convinced that the *starets*³³ was a personal emissary from God.”³⁴ He offered tremendous comfort for the family, but those present at court were skeptical. The Tsarina’s deep admiration for Rasputin was seen as inappropriate. There were rumors about a supposed love affair and whispers of accounts of Rasputin engaging in other such relations with other high women at the court. A majority of Rasputin’s followers were women who had been rejected by society, which lent more evidence to the court’s accusations that he was a sexual predator.³⁵ In addition to the scandalous rumors that shrouded him, his uncleanliness and off-putting appearance did little to convince the nobility that he was trustworthy.³⁶ In his account of Rasputin entering his restaurant, Joseph Vecci asserts,³⁷

³⁰ “It is strongly suspected that a decrease in emotional stress has a beneficial effect on bleeding. As calm and a sense of well-being return to a patient, his capillary blood flow will decline and the strength of his vascular will increase” (Massie, 202). Rasputin’s presence is assumed to calm Alexei and slow the bleeding due to a lower blood pressure.

³¹ Walsh, Edmund, “The Fall of the Russian Empire: The Part Played by a Woman,” *The Atlantic*, January 1928, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1928/01/the-fall-of-the-russian-empire-the-part-played-by-a-woman/303871/>.

³² Bokhanov, *The Romanovs*, 239.

³³ A starets is “a spiritual adviser who is not necessarily a priest, who is recognized for his piety, and who is turned to by monks or laymen for spiritual guidance” (Merriam Webster).

³⁴ Massie, *Nicholas and Alexandra*, 200.

³⁵ Bokhanov, *The Romanovs*, 230-239.

³⁶ See Appendix Figure D

³⁷ Joseph Vecci was the owner of the restaurant *Astoria Hotel* in St. Petersburg. “He left a fascinating chronicle of his experiences in Petersburg and his encounters with the Royalty, Aristocrats and the fall of the Dynasty in his book *The Tavern is my Drum*, published in England in 1948” (Atchison).

“About his [Rasputin’s] whole person there was something repellent, and this was not due solely to the general uncleanliness of his body and attire, but rather as if he exuded an aura of something evil and sordid.”³⁸ He was a deeply strange man, and people were concerned about his relationship with the royal family. It was said that this relationship ruined the “halo of ‘divine infallibility’” that surrounded the Romanovs.³⁹ Multiple attempts were made to convince the Tsar to denounce Rasputin and “‘open His Majesty’s eyes’” to the type of man that Rasputin was.⁴⁰ The monk’s critics gathered every single piece of information they heard about Rasputin, whether it was true or not. When they presented it to the Tsar, he did not believe them, and refused to denounce the monk, effectively sinking his popularity even more. Even his extended family doubted Rasputin’s authenticity, with his own mother convinced that “Rasputin [was] a fraud.”⁴¹ Many government officials and aristocrats were also concerned by the suspicious amount of influence that Rasputin had in the government. While it is uncertain whether or not he had any real political power, there is evidence that Rasputin had some political power when Nicholas II entrusted Alexandra with political affairs in 1915.⁴² With the Tsar away from the capital while the country was at war, Rasputin is thought to have used his influence over the Tsarina to remove ministers that were distrustful of him.⁴³ For example, minister Nicholay Borisovich Shcherbatov was removed from his position because of a disagreement with Rasputin. This possible rumor, coupled with people’s suspicion of his morality and distaste for his presence around the royal family, was the final nail in the coffin for people’s respect for their Tsar. After his constant dismissal of the people’s demands for stability, in addition to multiple

³⁸ Moshein, Rob “Eyewitness Accounts - Eyewitness Report of Party for Rasputin by Vecchi,” *Alexander Palace Time Machine*, accessed December 15, 2021.

<https://www.alexanderpalace.org/palace/rasputin-restaurant-joseph-vecchi.php>.

³⁹ Bokhanov, *The Romanovs*, 239.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Massie, *Nicholas and Alexandra*, 186.

⁴² Massie, “Wrong Man,” 34.

⁴³ Jebson, Hugh, “Russia, 1914-17: Part 1 the Road to Revolution,”

military failures, his relationship with Rasputin only strengthened the growing feelings of revolution. While the Tsar was away at war, there were multiple insurrections and protests throughout Petrograd during 1915 and 1916: “In 1915, there were 146 political strikes with 132,384 strikers, and 157 economic strikes with 78,563 strikers in the city. In 1916, 330 political and 354 economic strikes, with 377,431 and 243,500 strikers, respectively, were recorded.”⁴⁴ The political implications of Rasputin having too much influence encouraged those at court to take control of the situation. On December 30, 1916, Rasputin was murdered by Felix Felixovitch Yusupov, in a plot hatched by Grand Duke Dmitriy Pavlovitch and Vladimir Mitrofanovitch Purishkevich.⁴⁵ Rasputin’s murder was the beginning of the end for the Tsar and his control over his country. After all, if he did not have the support of the nobility or the common people, how would he be able to enact policies?

Seventy-four days after Rasputin’s murder, Nicholas II was forced to abdicate the throne. After years of discontent with his actions, the leaders of the Duma decided that it was finally time for the Tsar to face consequences for his actions. After a strike at the largest steel factory in Russia in February and a violent riot at Petrograd in March, it was clear that the Tsar had little to no support from the people. The country was falling apart, especially after resources were stretched thin following years of conflict. The council ordered him to vacate the throne and have Tsarevich Alexei take over, “with Grand Duke Mikhail Alexandrovitch acting as Regent.”⁴⁶ Multiple nobles supported this abdication and Nicholas II accepted this as unavoidable. When working on abdication documents, the Tsar was informed of how Alexei would be forced to be

⁴⁴ Albert, Gleb J, “Labour Movements, Trade Unions and Strikes (Russian Empire),” in *International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, ed. Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, Berlin: Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin, 2014. doi: 10.15463/ie1418.10458.

⁴⁵ Bokhanov, *The Romanovs*, 240.

⁴⁶ Bokhanov, *The Romanovs*, 283.

separated from his parents if Nicholas II gave him the throne. Worried about his son and any accident that could cause his death, Nicholas gives the throne to his brother:

“I have decided to renounce my throne. Until three o’clock today, I thought I would abdicate the throne in favor of my son, Alexis. But now I have changed my decision in favor of my brother Michael. I trust you will understand the feelings of a father.”⁴⁷

With the abdication documents signed, the former Tsar and his family handed over control of the country to Mikhail Alexandrovitch. However, there were concerns about Mikhail assuming the throne. Mikhail Vladimirovich Rodzianko declared that Alexandrovitch’s rule would be “absolutely inadmissible.”⁴⁸ The next day, Mikhail Alexandrovitch renounced the throne, effectively ending the monarchy in Russia and the end of the Romanov dynasty.⁴⁹ While not a part of the official abdication proceedings, Tsarevich Alexei and his hemophilia facilitated the end to Russia’s monarchy and the Romanov dynasty. If it were not for the boy’s condition, Alexei would have assumed the throne and could have kept the dynasty going. However, his health continued to be a factor for his parents’ political and personal decisions, which led to their exile and eventual murder by the Bolsheviks.

Even with Nicholas II’s detailed journals and other accurate historical accounts of the era, much of the information surrounding the Romanovs and their relationships are shrouded in mystery. Specifically, information about Rasputin and his friendship with the Romanovs is hard to verify. Rasputin was a mystic, inspiring volumes of “cheap fiction and pulp writ[ing].”⁵⁰ It is hard for historians to verify how much influence Rasputin had over the royal family. Everyone who knew the monk or the Tsar had their own version of the story: Rasputin was either part of a

⁴⁷ Massie, *Nicholas and Alexandra*, 414.

⁴⁸ Bokhanov, *The Romanovs*, 285.

⁴⁹ Ibid

⁵⁰ Ibid, 230.

plot to overthrow Russia, a trusted miracle worker and mentor, or a “‘sexual maniac’ who had seduced his malignant will the dissatisfied metropolitan matrons.”⁵¹ Rasputin and his actual influence on Russia’s history has become melded together with the rumors that surrounded him. However, based on accounts from the Romanov family and others who witnessed Rasputin interact with Alexei, it is clear that at the very least, “a remarkably eerie coincidence had occurred” and that “enormous consequences would follow.”⁵² Some argue that Rasputin’s influence on Russia and its government were slim to none. Sarah Newman cites World War I, inflation, revolution, and nationwide hunger as the direct causes of Nicholas’ abdication. She argues that Alexandra and Rasputin could be subtracted from “the Russian scene [and], the downfall of the Romanov dynasty was still on the cards.”⁵³ While Russia’s revolution might have unfolded naturally, it is impossible to deny the effects of Alexei’s hemophilia, and subsequently Rasputin, on the Tsar and Tsarina’s reputation.

When researching this topic, it is important to recognize the lack of translations regarding primary sources. Many sources were written in entirely Russian, only occasionally translated into other languages. Tsar Nicholas’s journal is only partially translated, and a difficult source to rely upon. There are many accounts of the Imperial family, but many of them were inaccessible due to a language barrier. Fortunately, hemophilia was not only a challenge for Russia, but monarchs from several European countries, like England, Spain and Prussia, also dealt with the threat of unclotted bleeding being passed on through their genes. As a consequence, there is a wide array of available information on Queen Victoria and the English branch of the family, where many significant points of information in this paper were drawn from. Of the information available, the

⁵¹ Ibid, 230.

⁵² Massie, *Nicholas and Alexandra*, 188-189.

⁵³ Newman, Sarah, “Alexandra and Rasputin,” *Historian* 108, (Winter 2010): 11-13, ProQuest Arts Premium Collection 857450073. 13

Russian royals arguably experienced the most aggressive political effects out of all of the aforementioned countries, and so became the focus of this research.

Tsarevich Alexei, despite his short life, irreparably altered the course of Russia's government. Because of his illness, his health was a major factor in the family's decisions about their life. The threat of hemophilia prompted his parents to withdraw themselves from society and associate with an outcast, giving the public more fodder against them, as well as choosing to abdicate the throne because of Alexei's shortened life expectancy. While Tsarist rule had been critiqued before Nicholas II assumed the throne, it was his policies and behavior that caused the people of Russia to overthrow him. His reign caused the other classes to question how much power one person should have over the country, especially if he is destroying his country with war and an unstable government. However, Alexei's medical history catalyzed these serious societal consequences for the Romanovs, which worsened the already rebellious environment brewing in the nation, ultimately bringing the autocracy to an end, ushering in the Russian Soviet State.

Appendix

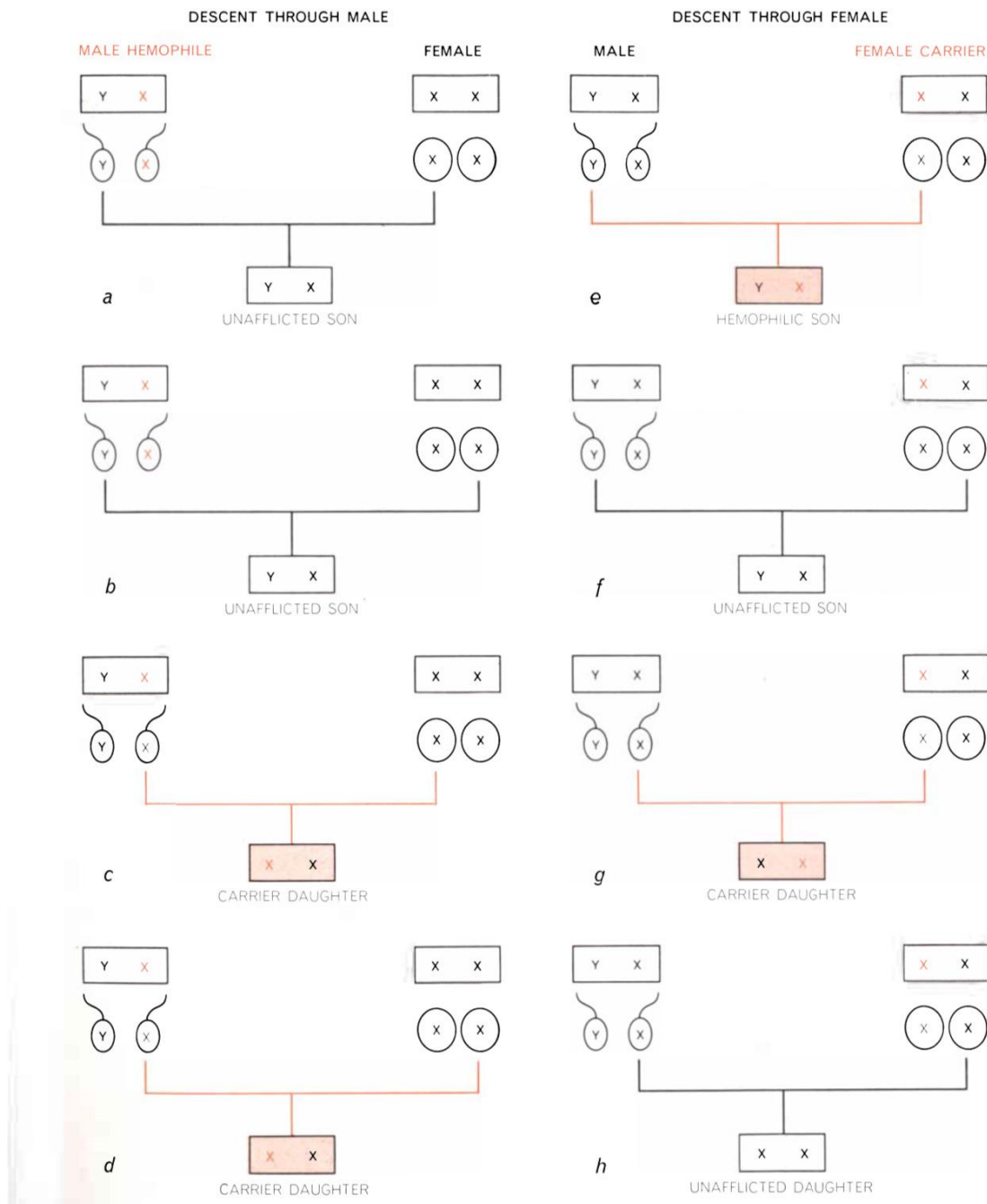


Figure A. Examples of hemophilia inheritance patterns. (Chart featured in McKusick, Victor A.

“The Royal Hemophilia.” *Scientific American* 213, no. 2 (August 1965): 88-95.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/24931974>.)

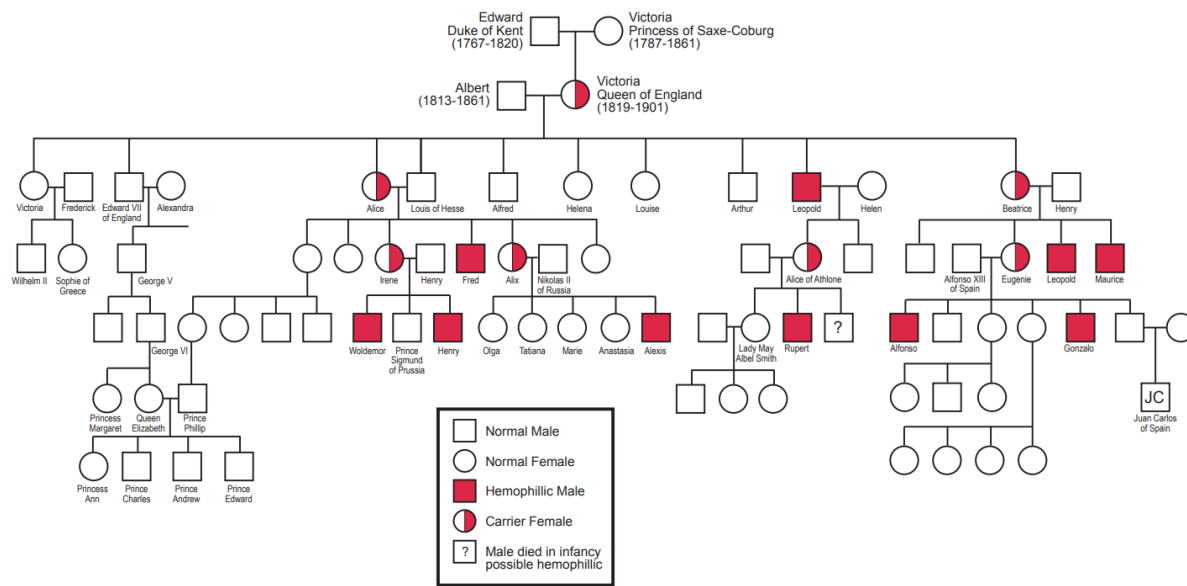


Figure B. Pedigree of Queen Victoria and her family tracking hemophilia. (Chart featured on *Chegg.com*. “Hemophilia Is An X-Linked Recessive Disorder Characterized By The Inability To Properly Form Blood Clots.” *Chegg.com*. Accessed December 15, 2021. <https://www.chegg.com/homework-help/questions-and-answers/hemophilia-x-linked-recessive-disorder-characterized-inability-properly-form-blood-clots-h-q46909257>.)



Figure C. A photograph of Queen Victoria and some of her descendants, including her children and grandchildren. (Featured in McKusick, Victor A. "The Royal Hemophilia." *Scientific American* 213, no. 2 (August 1965): 88-95. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24931974>.)



Figure D. Photograph of Russian *starets* Grigoriy Yefimovich Rasputin in 1905. (Featured in Barshad, Amos. “My Grandma, Rasputin.” *New York Times*. April 27, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/27/opinion/sunday/my-grandma-rasputin.html>.)

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