

# TEACHING NOTES

# *The* RASPUTIN DAGGER

BY

CARNEGIE MEDAL WINNING AUTHOR

THERESA BRESLIN

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# INTRODUCTION

These notes give suggestions as to how students can explore the Russian Revolution using Theresa Breslin's novel, *THE RASPUTIN DAGGER*.

Written in consultation with a qualified and experienced teacher of history, these notes contain advice on activities and how they tie in to the National Curriculum for Key Stages 3 and 4.

Activities include:

- WRITING
- RESEARCH & DISCUSSION
- ART
- DRAMA

Chapter references are given, but it is recommended that students read the novel in its entirety.

Published in 2017 (during the centenary of the Russian Revolution) *THE RASPUTIN DAGGER* is an historical novel, which has, within the story, issues relevant to modern times and universal themes.

**NOTE:**

1. *Until February 1918 Russia used the old-style Julian calendar which was 13 days behind our modern calendar. To keep the story in tune with the lives of the characters and their times old-style calendar dates are used in THE RASPUTIN DAGGER and in these Notes.*

2. *At the time of the book St Petersburg was the capital city of Russia but, because it was thought this sounded too German, its name was changed to 'Petrograd' during World War One.*



# CURRICULUM LINKS

The suggested activities explore the following curriculum areas:

- History: Russian history: World War One: Women's Rights:
- Citizenship / Modern Studies: Forms of Government – Absolute Rulers, old and new - The Romanovs, Tsar Nicholas II & Imperial Family: Grigory Rasputin:
- English: Creative writing: Report Writing: Setting and Characterisation within the novel. The literature of Folk Tales & Mythology:
- Science: Medical advances
- Geography
- Fake News / Propaganda: Citizenship: PSD

The author hopes that the book will be read for enjoyment, but welcomes teachers exploring the text with students as she feels that she benefited enormously from insightful teaching during her own school days.



# ABOUT THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

There were in fact TWO revolutions in Russia in 1917. The first, (the February Revolution) at the beginning of the year, was sparked off largely due to the protest organized by the women of Petrograd / St Petersburg. This forced the abdication of the Tsar and the formation of a 'Provisional' Government of the people. The second (the October Revolution) took place at the latter end of the year when Lenin led the armed branch of the Bolshevik Political Party to overthrow the new Provisional Government. After this - asserting that they were acting in the name of the Soviets (the various council groups of factory workers, peasants, soldiers etc) - the Bolsheviks seized complete control.

At the time of the Revolution, the Romanov family had ruled Russia for centuries with sole authority. The Tsar appointed Government Ministers who ran the country. These were noblemen who had little contact with ordinary citizens. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, due to increasing unrest, the Tsar allowed the formation of a people's assembly called the Duma. However voting rights for the Duma altered over time which made it less representative of the Russian people. Also, it had no real power. The Tsar could, and did, suspend it any time he chose. When World War One broke out Russia fought on the side of the Allies. Their army was poorly equipped and suffered colossal loss of life. Homeless refugees flooded into the cities, food was scarce, and many people died of starvation or the intense cold.

The ordinary Russian was denied a voice as political meetings and protests were banned. Those who broke these rules were, variously, imprisoned, tortured, or killed. The Tsar appeared unable to listen to legitimate grievances. He'd taken over as Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces and was overwhelmed and indecisive. There was also terrible tension within his own household because the Imperial Crown had to be inherited by a male heir and their only son (now aged twelve) had the debilitating condition of haemophilia.



The arrival of a supposed faith-healer, a monk called Grigory Rasputin, seemed at first to help the situation. The Tsarina and the whole family came to rely heavily upon him for emotional support. But Rasputin increasingly interfered in their lives; and the Tsarina, left in charge while the Tsar was at the battlefield, often listened to his foolish political advice. Other members of the Imperial Family, Ministers of State and many of the general public grew to hate Rasputin.

The winter of 1916 was exceptionally harsh resulting in an escalating death toll at home and on the battlefields. In December of that year Rasputin was brutally killed in strange and suspicious circumstances. Despite restrictions, more meetings and protests took place and popular political parties grew in strength. Among these was the Bolshevik Party. Although their leader, Lenin, was in exile in Switzerland they began to arm themselves as a home militia.

At the beginning of 1917, on International Women's Day (23<sup>rd</sup> Feb), the women in Petrograd took to the streets to protest about the lack of bread. Over the next few days they were joined by factory, office and transport workers which brought the city to a standstill. Large sections of the armed forces refused to fire upon the crowds who would not disperse. Faced with increased mutinies Tsar Nicholas II abdicated at the beginning of March, and a Provisional Government was formed.

In April 1917 the German Government allowed Lenin free passage through their country to return to Russia. (When he eventually became Russia's new leader Lenin signed an armistice with Germany and took Russia out of World War One) Between February and October 1917 the new Provisional Government struggled to provide the populace with enough food, manage the armed forces, and find a safe refuge for the Tsar and his family.

In October 1917 the Bolsheviks, acting decisively and with force, overthrew the Provisional Government. Thereafter they suppressed opposition and defeated the forces trying to reinstate the rule of the Tsar. In 1918 the Imperial Family, the Tsar, his wife and five children were murdered.



# ABOUT THE BOOK

From multi-award winning author, Theresa Breslin, comes a story of two young people trying to escape their past, and find a future. The book is set in Russia, with the action moving between Petrograd (St Petersburg) and Yekaterinburg in Siberia. The story starts in 1916 - the year before the Revolutions - and follows Nina and Stefan until 1918 - the year of the murder of the Imperial family. Their backgrounds are vastly different yet chance throws them together, but, as the Russian winter closes in, the Revolution threatens not only their love but their very lives.

*Russia 1916: A country on the brink of Revolution.*

*Nina Ivanovna's uneventful life in a village in Siberia is suddenly shattered. She flees to Petrograd / St Petersburg, taking with her a carved oblong box which contains a strangely powerful dagger. Unknown to her she is being pursued.*

*Stefan Kolodin - young and idealistic - is a medical student at the University of St Petersburg. Driven by his own demons, he wants change for Russia and its people.*

*Amidst the chaos of a city in revolt, their lives collide. And a stormy relationship develops . . . full of passion and dangerous politics.*

*While Stefan risks his life and career to support rebellion and struggles to help the wounded soldiers returning from the battlefields, Nina is drawn into the lavish lives of the Royal Family and begins to fall under the spell of their mysterious monk, Grigory Rasputin.*

*The ruby studded dagger Rasputin owns is, chillingly, a mirror image of the one left to Nina by her father.*

*And it carries a deadly curse.*



# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Theresa Breslin is a popular, multi-award winning author, critically acclaimed for over 40 books, with work dramatised on stage, TV and radio.

She has been described as an outstanding writer who combines a powerful sense of drama with memorable characters and superb storytelling. She writes for all age groups and her historical novels have a huge following, including *REMEMBRANCE*, a tale of youth in WWI; *PRISONER OF THE INQUISITION* shortlisted for the Carnegie Medal and voted favourite book by the school pupil shadowing groups; and *THE MEDICI SEAL*, her story featuring Leonardo da Vinci.

She won the Carnegie Medal, the most prestigious award in children's literature, for *Whispers in the Graveyard*, her compelling story of a dyslexic boy.

While renowned for the depth of her research, Theresa Breslin's historical novels are always character-driven and *THE RASPUTIN DAGGER* is an immensely readable story with resonance and relevance for today.

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# CONTENTS OF ACTIVITIES

The suggested activities are as follows:

## **WRITING**

1. Write a letter
2. Write a scene
3. Write a newspaper article
4. Write a for/against report
5. Write a folk tale

## **RESEARCH & DISCUSSION**

6. The Universal vote
7. Women's rights
8. Character hot seat
9. Political ideologies
10. Create a map

## **ART**

11. Explore propaganda artwork
12. Create an image gallery

## **DRAMA**

13. Role play & improvisation



# ACTIVITIES - WRITING

## 1. WRITE A LETTER

*Reference: Chapters 4 - 7 & 10 & 12.*

Write a letter from Nina to her father's steward, Dmitri, telling of her life in the city. Keep in mind that Nina grew up in the countryside, isolated but happy, but has now fled to a huge city, where ordinary life is becoming more dangerous and difficult.

Imagine how overwhelming this would be for Nina. Think about the adjectives she might use when writing to Dmitri. How does the city look, sound and smell? What is the atmosphere on the streets? How would YOU feel about being in this city at this time?

*Curriculum note: This activity allows students to empathise with Nina and immerse themselves in the time period helping to build historical understanding. They can explore the similarities and differences between rural and urban life and the reach of the pre-Revolution unrest.*



# ACTIVITIES - WRITING

## 2. WRITE A SCENE

*Reference: Prologue & Chapters 1 - 13*

**Dual narrative** – *THE RASPUTIN DAGGER* is written in dual narrative: i.e. from the alternative points of view of Nina and Stefan, each moving the story on and letting the reader know what is happening from their perspective.

Write up any scene from the book using two different perspectives. How can using two different points of view help move the story along? How does it affect the reader seeing things from two angles?

*Curriculum note: This activity allows students to show empathetic understanding by considering Nina's and Stefan's views and how their pasts have influenced their viewpoints. The backgrounds of these characters give scope for consideration of cause and consequence: e.g. why would Stefan be more likely to be radical?*

*More able students can explore the motives of others like him and help to build a case for why there was unrest and a desire for change in Russia at the time.*



# ACTIVITIES - WRITING

## 3. WRITE A NEWSPAPER ARTICLE

*Reference: Chapters 26 - 32*

Rasputin wanted Russia to withdraw from World War One. He said that, being a peasant himself, he had huge sympathy for the devastating hardships the peasants were suffering because of the war – the horrendous loss of life and ruination of their livelihoods. Some Russians suspected that he was being paid by the German government and that he and the Tsarina were plotting to bring Russia under German control.

Write an article giving the news about Rasputin's death. Try laying it out like a newspaper article, in columns and use images.

Reflect on the circumstances of the case – where and how the crime took place. Note that if the Russians stopped fighting, then the whole German army would amass on the Western Front and the Allied Armies could be overrun. Recent investigations into Rasputin's death open up the possibility that his assassins were helped by British or American Secret Service Agents. Do you think this is at all credible? Or was Rasputin's death just a bizarre and badly-planned murder?

*Curriculum note: This activity allows for historical enquiry and interpretation. The article could take into account a specific viewpoint (pro- or anti- Rasputin) or be unbiased and try to show the events more factually. Students might include 'quotes' from different perspectives; the Tsarina for example, but also from someone, e.g. Prince Yusupov, who considered Rasputin to have too much sway.*

*This can be developed by more able students to show an understanding of how Rasputin's humble roots may have influenced aristocrats' ideas of him.*



# ACTIVITIES - WRITING

## 4. WRITE A FOR/AGAINST REPORT

*Reference: multiple references within the text*

Some of the characters in the book are controversial figures in history: e.g. Tsar Nicholas II / the Tsarina/ Rasputin. For over one hundred years their actions have been debated. Was the Tsar directly to blame for the colossal loss of life, or was there no way of saving those who died? Was the Tsarina guilty of treason, or was she merely physically ill and overstressed with worry about her son? Was Rasputin a self-deluded peasant who offered what emotional support he could to the royal family, or a man driven by greed and arrogance?

Chose a character to research and write a document or make a list of bullet points outlining opposite points of view on their actions. Which one do you agree with?

*Curriculum note: This activity allows students to provide evidence from their research into the lives of their chosen character to interpret history. Their own historical enquiry and the resulting report would encourage students to evaluate and explain their points, clearly showing different viewpoints.*

*This can be developed to provide an opportunity for comparison with modern views of past events e.g. levels of bias / opinion expressed as fact / 'fake' news.*



# ACTIVITIES - WRITING

## 5. COMPOSE A FOLK TALE

*Reference: Chapters 14, 17 & 55*

In the book *THE RASPUTIN DAGGER* the author draws for inspiration on 'Masha' and 'The Bear' – two well-known characters from Russian folk-lore. (New and modern animated stories are now on YouTube; the bear has become very benign and these are watched by young children).

Compose your own folk tale based on Masha and the Bear.

The Tsar's son, Alexei, loves being told stories and is old enough, eventually, to see the hidden layers these contain. Do you think folk tales have another purpose other than entertainment?

*Curriculum note: This activity allows students to write freely or do this as a comic strip.*

*More able students: On page 377 Alexei asks if the Bear represents Russia. Students could be asked to explain how. This task would allow for high level reasoning and practice the same skills required for interpretation of evidence (used at GCSE with political cartoons of Germany etc).*



# ACTIVITIES –

## RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION

### 6. THE UNIVERSAL VOTE

*Reference: Chapters 13 & 44 - 46*

**THE UNIVERSAL VOTE** - Who was allowed to vote in Russia BEFORE and AFTER the Russian Revolution? Were all parties always represented in the candidate list? Which European country was first and which was last to allow all adults voting right? When was this? Does having a vote actually matter?

Hold a debate - divide students into two groups: one side to represent the Royal Tsars who believe God selected them to rule supreme, and the other side to represent the people/democracy. Bearing in mind the vastness and the variety of Russia, debate the justice and logic of these systems of government. Should all adults have a vote, and, if so, why?'

*Curriculum note: This activity allows for the study of first order historical concepts such as democracy, revolution, communism and socialism. Students can analyse and explain reasons for change here (Cause and Consequence).*

*This could link to the study of Women's suffrage in the UK which is often carried out in KS3 History and features in the new GCSE syllabuses concerning Power and Democracy.*

*It could also link to Citizenship with debates around suffrage and the voting age for the recent Brexit and Scottish Independence referendums.*



# ACTIVITIES – RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION

## 7. WOMEN'S RIGHTS

*Reference: Chapters 4, 11, 29, 35, 40, 50.*

The shawl that Nina wears to cover her shoulders (and often her hair too!) is mentioned a number of times in the book. If you research the colours you will see that they are those used by the women suffragettes. Why do you think the author chose to describe the shawl in these particular colours? Can you find images or examples of other uses of the same colours on items/posters/objects in history?

Note: a statue of the suffragist Millicent Fawcett is to be erected in Parliament Square in London, the first statue of a woman to appear there.

*Curriculum note: This activity links to the study of Women's suffrage in the UK which is often carried out in KS3 History and features in the new GCSE syllabuses concerning Power and Democracy.*

*A focus on Emily Davison may be interesting here, as someone who was willing to take a stand and put herself in danger for the cause – like Nina, Galena and the women of the bread queues and Stefan's mum. This allows for the consideration of strong women, stepping outside of their sphere.*



# ACTIVITIES –

## RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION

### **8. CHARACTER HOT SEAT**

Compare the routes taken by Stefan and his three friends, Tomas, Eugene, and Fyodor, during and after their last year at medical school. What key decisions did they make? What were their motives? How did these choices affect their future lives? Why did Stefan initially argue with Fyodor? Did Stefan sometimes see Fyodor's point of view? What happened eventually in their relationship?

You could compare the characters' views and journeys by creating a comic strip, or use a spider diagram to show each of their beliefs.

*Curriculum note: This activity allows the students to explore how the friends all thought they were playing a part in building a better Russia.*

*This can be developed to show how idealism can sometimes become something more insidious.*



# ACTIVITIES –

## RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION

### 9. POLITICAL IDEOLOGIES

*Reference: Prologue and Chapters 7, 9, 16, 24, 35 - 44, 48, 51*

Research what is meant by the 'Divine Right'. Why did many people, like Galena, find this so difficult to challenge? Discuss Galena's personal life history. [See above for chapter references] She and many other people believed the Tsar was God's representative on Earth. Yet she saw what happened to Stefan and his mother in the 1905 protest; she waited in the queue for bread, and, despite the danger, took part in the February Revolution protest. She wants a better life for ordinary people, but, as shown in the debates around the family dinner table, she is still a firm royalist. Make a list of Galena's reasons why she wants to keep the Tsar as ruler of Russia.

*Curriculum note: This activity allows for discussion on the concept of imperialism, political ideologies, communism, revolution and counter-revolution, and the welfare state.*

*This can be developed into the exploration of viewpoints where it is shown that people have the capacity to empathise with strongly-held beliefs which are in opposition to their own.*



# ACTIVITIES –

## RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION

### 10. CREATE A MAP

*Reference: Chapters 3, 4, 21 & 52*

**GEOGRAPHY** – At the outbreak of World War One the Russian Empire was vast. How did the Romanovs acquire so much land and rule over so many diverse peoples? Compare and Contrast other Empires of the time e.g. British, German, and Austro-Hungarian etc.

Why is Tsar Nicholas so angry with Lenin and the Bolsheviks for the conditions of the peace they made with Germany?

Draw, colour and annotate a map of the world showing the different empires at that time and add in a few bullet points of information about each.

*Curriculum note: Map work would show the extent of the Empire and allow for debates on imperialism and colonialism, both first order concepts.*

*Work on the causes of World War I highlights the link between the Romanovs, Kaiser Wilhelm II and King George V which would be a useful comparison activity here and allow for debates on Significance.*



# ACTIVITIES - ART

## 11. EXPLORE PROPAGANDA ARTWORK

*Reference: Prologue and Chapters 12, 36, 37, 38, 40,*

Various protest marches and political meetings take place in the book - from peaceful demonstrations to those which are more rowdy and violent. Banners, posters and pamphlets reflect and express the attitudes, feelings, thoughts and aims of those taking part.

During the February Revolution the women carried their own hand-made signs.

These were different from those used during the October Revolution - when the Provisional Government was overthrown.

What flags or banners were carried on these occasions?

Compare the above with modern political propaganda and how it is displayed now e.g. Campaign Buses. Are such materials always truthful?

What makes an effective leaflet / poster / banner?

Make your own banner / poster / political leaflet for the February Revolution or the October Revolution.

*Curriculum note: Exploring and creating propaganda allows for historical enquiry and interpretation. Propaganda poster interpretation is examined in Modern World GCSE specifications.*

*This activity would also allow for consideration of motivations - did the women want political change? Did they just want to feed their families? How far did the popularity of the February Revolution show support for, and therefore encourage, the October Revolution? E.g. the actions of the soldiers etc.*



# ACTIVITIES - ART

## 12. CREATE AN IMAGE GALLERY

Russian Imperial Style was grand and ornate. e.g. lavishly decorated rooms, expensive fashionable clothes, ornate dishes, Fabergé Eggs etc.

Compare and contrast Russian Imperial style with a) the rest of Europe and b) with the style that followed the fall of the Romanovs. .

Create a physical or electronic image gallery showing styles and fashions of the day before and after the Russian Revolution.

*Curriculum note: This activity allows students to contrast pre- and post- Revolution Russia and creates an opportunity for them to consider Change and Continuity, and Similarity and Difference. Both concepts need students to be able to identify and explain differences and understand how beliefs and attitudes are represented by differences.*



# ACTIVITIES - DRAMA

## 13. ROLE PLAY & IMPROVISATION

The events leading up to the Russian Revolution are constantly mined for the purposes of dramatic expression, e.g. films such as Rasputin, Dark Servant of Destiny; Nicholas and Alexandra; Anastasia (animated film); The Battleship Potemkin; Ten Days that Shook the World.

THE RASPUTIN DAGGER contains many dramatic incidents which may be extended / improvised. Below are some suggested characters with chapter references. Students can communicate their character's point of view using persuasive dialogue and expressive tone and gesture. (First line is supplied only as a helpful prompt and may be discarded)

*Curriculum note: This activity allows students to develop empathetic understanding of the time period. They can show an awareness of the predicaments and points of view of the characters and be encouraged to avoid anachronisms, lose the cultural norms of their own time and immerse themselves in the period.*

NINA: [Chapter 1] 'No! It can't be true! My father did not murder anyone!'

STEFAN: [Chapter 12] 'We are in danger here and must leave this place at once!'

RASPUTIN: [Chapter 23] 'It was the time of the Wolf Moon when the dagger was made.'

DOCTOR K [Chapter 26] 'It breaks my heart that so many wounded men are dying when they could be saved.'

MOTHER OF STARVING BABY: [Chapter 36] "My baby is dying for want of bread!"



COSSACK SOLDIER: [Chapter 37] 'I will draw my sabre, and hope that will be enough to frighten them and they will run away...'

FYODOR: [Chapter 38] "Change will only come through armed uprising!"

TSAR NICHOLAS II: [Chapter 52] 'Lenin has betrayed Russia and her people!'



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THERESA BRESLIN

*The*  
**RASPUTIN**  
**DAGGER**



**AVAILABLE NOW**

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