A Medal for the Czar, 1888

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Throughout his reign (1881–95), Emperor Alexander III, a gentle giant who resembled a bogatyr—a Russian folk hero of gigantic proportions—lived in fear of assassination. This was hardly surprising thanks to the fact that on March 1, 1881, his father, Alexander II, the czar-liberator of the Russian serfs, was mortally wounded by a fanatic terrorist. In 1887 Alexander III himself barely escaped a group of assassins. The closest that he came to death, however, was not the result of a terrorist’s bomb or bullet but of a train accident. On October 17, 1888 (Old Style), Alexander and the imperial family were aboard a train that derailed and then crashed near the station of Barki on the Jursk-Kharkov-Azov line. Among the passengers there were many casualties, but no member of the czar’s family was hurt. The country was jubilant, and Russian poets and composers penned sonnets and cantatas glorifying the czar, his family, and their miraculous rescue.1 Newspapers and magazines were filled with detailed accounts of the event, such as one from the October edition of the Russkii Vestnik: “In spite of the dreadful weather, piercing rain, and mud, His Majesty helped, supervising and commanding the rescue operations; and he would not leave the scene of the accident until all the dead and wounded were removed from the train and sent to a nearby town.”2

Niva, another popular magazine, not only published an article written in enthusiastic and elevated prose about the czar’s heroic conduct but also presented a series of photographs from the scene of the catastrophe (Figure 1).3 It is very likely that the creator of a fine die-struck medal, an example of which was recently acquired by the Metropolitan Museum, found the source of inspiration for the design in the articles and photographs that thus reached the public. The reverse of the medal shows, literally crammed into the exergue, an account of the accident that has an almost eyewitness quality of conviction (Figure 2).4 The upper zone is imbued with a joyous feeling of gratitude for the imperial family’s rescue, reinforced by a quotation in Old Slavonic from Luke 4:10: “He shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee. . . .” The exalted image of a kneeling woman with long braid hair, in the traditional Russian cloak, personifies Mother Russia. Next to her, in calm solemnity, stands an angel with outstretched wings in a gesture of blessing. The Russian imperial regalia is seen at the angel’s right. The overall spirit is perfectly in tune with the Slavophile and nationalistic sentiment that dominated Russian art during the last quarter of the nineteenth century.5

The meticulously rendered scene in the exergue borrows from the photograph reproduced in the form of a wood engraving in Niva magazine, with the addition of the stout, looming figure of the czar just to the right of center in the midst of a group of wounded and killed, his attitude suggesting that he is directing rescue operations (Figure 4). The obverse of the medal (Figure 3) again evokes the new medium of photography. We see the imperial family as it was portrayed in well-known photographs of the day.6 Family members featured on the medal are: Alexander III, his wife, Maria Feodorovna; Grand Duke Nicholas, the future Nicholas II; Grand Duke Gregory; Grand Duchess Xenia; Grand Duke Michael; and Grand Duchess Olga. The inscription in the exergue reads in transla-

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The notes for this article begin on page 217.

Figure 1. Wood engraving after a contemporaneous photograph published in Niva 47 (1888) (photo: courtesy of the Library of Congress)
Figure 2. Avenir Crigorievich Griliches (Russian, 1849–1905). Reverse of a medal commemorating the miraculous rescue of Alexander III and the imperial family, 1888. Bronze, Diam. 89 mm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Friends of European Sculpture and Decorative Arts Gifts, 1995, 1995.424

Figure 3. Obverse of medal
Figure 4. Detail of the reverse of the medal

tion: To the memory of the miraculous survival of the czar's family. October 17, 1888.

The medal is signed on both sides in classic medallic style, on a bar at the exergue; Грилишесъ сынъ (Griliches son).7 Zel'man Avner Girshovich was born in Vilna in April 1882, the son of an engraver.8 By the 1870s he had moved to Saint Petersburg, and in spite of the fact that he was a self-taught artist, he was employed by the imperial mint on February 15, 1871. He was soon entrusted with the execution of the state seals of Alexander III and Nicholas II. In 1886 Alexander III wished to change the design of Russian coinage, and the task was given to Griliches; the format he created lasted until the 1917 Revolution. By the time of his death in 1905 Griliches had achieved the position of senior engraver at the imperial mint and had been awarded the title of court counselor and the order of Saint Stanislas, Second Class.

Our acquisition belongs to a widespread type of commemorative medal in relatively high relief, die-struck and patinated rich red-brown. This style first appeared in Napoleonic France, flourished in Victorian England, and by the late nineteenth century spread to every court of Europe. Griliches demonstrates considerable ability in following these technical conventions while modeling human figures in ingenious and surprising combinations. Although he is perfectly aware of the basics of medallic art, as practiced for example by the Wyons in England, he also shows a charming naïveté and bravado in going so far as to combine the chaotic train crash with the allegorical imagery more common to medallic usage. In language that is simultaneously precise and sublime, his medal has the voice of a popular anthem or ballad.

NOTES

4. V. P. Smirnov, Description of Russian Medals (Saint Petersburg, 1908) pp. 481–482, no. 958.