

The Name Rasputin: A Study in Semantic Complexity

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HIDDEN IN THE NAME *RASPUTIN* there seems to be a complicated machinery of wordplay. A play upon the meaning of a word is the basis of the so-called 'Redende Namen' (talking names) in which the meaning of the word comments on the person named. The use of such names is of great antiquity, and the most notable and familiar examples occur in the Bible, where many of the personal names are of this type. In Samuel 25:25, Abigail comments on her husband: "As his name is, so is he; Nabal ("fool") is his name, and folly is with him"; also, Ruth 1:20 "call me not Naomi ("pleasantness"), call me Mara ("bitterness"): for the almighty hath dealt *bitterly* with me."¹ *Rasputin* is an example of the "talking name." The task of this paper is to decode the name *Rasputin* and examine its constituent roots and meanings.

Rasputin's original name was *Vilkin*.² He had it changed, with the permission of the court of Tyumeni, to *Rasputin* when he was about 17 years old (and the change seems to have perhaps been motivated by embarrassment due to scandalous actions by his father).³ However, Rasputin did not actually abandon his former name but merely hid it in his new name.

The name *Rasputin* conceals the name *Vilkin* by an ingenious play on words. *Vilka*, "a fork," gives *Vilkin*, "a maker of forks, a fork-man." *Rasputin* derives principally from *rasputye*, "a crossroads; a fork in the road; a place that leads several ways." *Rasputin*, then, would be "a man of the crossroads; a man of the road-fork," and in this manner the man kept his former name hidden in his new one.

¹ Elsdon C. Smith, *The Story of Our Names* (New York, 1950), p. 25.

² Heinz Liepmann, *Rasputin and the Fall of Imperial Russia* (New York, 1959), p. 22.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

Rasputin's birthplace was Pokrovskaya in the province of Tobolsk, Siberia. Pokrovskaya is located on a crossroads, or road-fork (*rasputye*). He thus took a name which kept him identified with his native village (there seems to be a universal reluctance to abandon one's former identity totally).

The first element of the symbolism of *Rasputin* is that of the road or path (from *put* "road"). The symbol, or image of the road or way, as in the *way of life* is widespread, perhaps universal. Certainly it is a fundamental or primitive image of great antiquity. Indeed, the concept of a "road" or "way" is connected with any activity of man which has as its motivating element the attainment of a goal or the progression from one point to another. Roads, then, which do not really exist to any great extent in Nature, may be seen as extensions, on the physical plane, of the human mental concept of progression to attainment of a desired end.

Siberia, beyond the Urals, in Tsarist days was sparsely populated. Because of its remoteness from the rest of European life, the roads which crossed it must have seemed to the imagination of a boy like Grigori Rasputin (Vilkin) somewhat magical paths which led to far-off places like Petersburg. When he was a young man, Rasputin used these roads as a driver of wagons, and later as routes of wandering in his years as a *strannik* (wandering pilgrim).

Standing at a crossroads symbolizes a time of decision. One must take one road or another. Consciously, or unconsciously – we do not know – Grigori Rasputin must have felt that he was to make a very important choice when he chose his path of life. As it turned out, he chose the life of a wandering *starets*, "elder" (confessor and holy man), and this led him by a strange fate to the royal court at Petersburg.

The crossroads is also a symbol of dualism, since it goes in two different directions (at least). Dualism is apparent in Rasputin's own life. This can be visualized as divergent roads leading from a crossroads (*rasputye*). One example of this dualism is the fact that while he was known as a religious leader and spiritual advisor to the Empress, he was also known for his unconcealed excesses of drinking bouts and sexual liaisons.

There is, moreover, an obvious connection between the crossroads and the cross, further reenforcing the sign of Rasputin's religious vocation. (It is of interest to note that the Russian, or

Greek, cross has two cross pieces more than does the western cross, i.e. ⚈ as compared with †). Rasputin headed his correspondence (notes and letters) with a *cross* and signed them merely Grigori:⁴



My friend – do it for me.

Grigori

But there is further complexity in the name *Rasputin*. As has been indicated, the name derives principally from *rasputye* “a crossroads,” from *ras*, a prefix meaning “separation, parting from, undoing,” and *put* “a road, a way, a path.” There is, however, another root word *put*, meaning “confusion, puzzle.”⁵ From the second *put*, comes *rasputat* “to untangle, loosen, solve” as opposed to *putat* “confuse, tangle, fetter.”

The root *put* “puzzle, tangle” is contained in the form of a riddle (or puzzle) in the name Rasputin. By choosing his new name, he solved (*rasputat*) the problem of embarrassment due to his father’s conduct, while at the same time he kept his former identity hidden in the new name, and of course he reenforced this preservation of identity by association with the *rasputye* which was at Pokrovskaya. *Rasputat* also means “to loosen (from fetters),” and in this sense applies in two ways. First, it loosened the fetters of a name which had come to be a burden. Second, the decision as to which branch of the “crossroad of life” to take was foreshadowed – his adoption of the life of a *strannik*. The idea of loosening from fetters is also applicable here in two ways, since the religious wandering life frees one from the monotonous work of the peasant, and it also frees one from the chains of this world by enabling one to concentrate on heavenly and spiritual matters.

Paradoxically, although Rasputin apparently meant to solve confusion, he sowed it, or it grew up around him against his will. The enormous amount of libelous and sensational material given in accounts of him during and after his lifetime, much of it illogical

⁴ Maria Rasputin, *The Real Rasputin* (London, 1929), p. 54.

⁵ *Handbook of Russian Roots*, by C. Wolkansky and M. Poltoratsky, 1961. (This work has been used as the chief source of Russian lexical items in this article.)

and contradictory, has tended to obscure the real man and present a picture of some grotesque fiend. When one reflects that it is chiefly from accounts given by his enemies that the "dark legend" of Rasputin has sprung, and that his friends did not write extensive accounts, one can obtain some idea of the distortion and confusion.

Furthermore, precise and definitive information about him is not easy to come by, and apparently gaps do exist in his story as it is known. No sooner has one started on the path of inquiry about *Rasputin* than one bogs down in *rasputitsa* ("period of washed out, or bad, or impassable roads"). The "man of the crossroads" seems to have left no really clear trail behind him.

Rasputin apparently belonged to the *khlysty* (the name means "whips"), a sect — persecuted in Tsarist Russia as heretical — practiced in secret.⁶ Among other things, the *khlysty* taught that man should humble himself periodically by committing sins of the flesh so as to be able to beg the divine mercy. It was apparently this doctrine that caused Rasputin not only to "sin," but to do so openly. No doubt his enemies grossly exaggerated his activities in this respect, but it afforded them a convenient target.

Rasputin's enemies used a play on the name to defame him. They got the idea abroad that his name derives from *rasputni* "dissolute, wanton, licentious, depraved," (one encounters Russians today, who, knowing little of Rasputin, still believe this). This word derives from *putni* "sensible, decent" and we can see again the image of the road or path emerge. *Putni* comes from *put* "road" and obviously refers to the idea that what is *putni* "decent" is according to the correct way (note the use of the same image in English).

Consequently, what is *rasputni* "depraved" is away from the (proper) *road* or *way*. This is by no means a metaphorical word peculiar to Russian, since we have the same semantic usage in English, derived from Latin, in the word *deviate*, i.e., what is "off the road (de + via)." The use of *rasputni* in the sense of "depraved, criminal" is paralleled by *deviate* in the sense of "criminal (especially moral or sexual)."

⁶ Rene Fulop-Miller, *Rasputin, the Holy Devil* (New York, 1929). A particularly extensive account of the *Khlysti* is given. See esp. pp. 18 ff., 26, 29, 47, 203, 241, 297, 332, 340.

Strangely, the word *rasputni* also relates to his father's behavior, from which Rasputin seemed anxious to be disassociated. It also foreshadows the charge levelled against him by his enemies.

The word *rasputitsa* "period of bad or washed out roads" was used by his enemies to attack Rasputin (they were forbidden by the Tsar to do so openly). They chose this play on Rasputin's name (it appeared in *Novoe Vremya*) to suggest that he was hampering the war effort.⁷ It was precisely Rasputin's opposition to the war that caused his death (or at least furnished a pretext for his assassins). Rasputin, it is said, had not only advised the Tsar against entering the war but had prophesied that the war would bring Old Russia down.

The curious patterings of correspondence between Rasputin's life and the meanings decodable in his name would seem to imply certain unconscious processes in name selection or adoption. No doubt the compilation, analysis and comparison of cases similar to Rasputin's would be fruitful in shedding light on those processes.

⁷ Fulop-Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 342.

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