

From the Knights of Malta to the Knights of the Ice

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The Knights of Malta – between History and Legend

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Although Tsar Alexander I was an integral part in the rise of the Russian Priory, the Russian aristocracy seemed divided over whether to accept the Knights as their equals. Some even opposed them, and the Tsar sought to stay out of the disputes that occurred. The Court was rife with intrigue and, to protect himself after a group of nobles attempted to poison him, the Tsar created a secret branch of the Order. According to some historical accounts these soldiers were known as the Knights of the Ice (due to their strength and impassibility). However, the most accepted and accredited ‘legend’ states that the Tsar entrusted his personal safety to his most trusted admiral, promising him regency over conquered lands in return for his loyalty. According to this historical account, Alexander I named this secret branch the Knights of the Ice and appointed the admiral Fabian Gottlieb von Bellinghausen at its head. He was already a lieutenant of the Knights of Malta, and accepted the Tsar’s invitation; he was named Grand Master of the secret Order and was given men and ships. The Tsar renounced his ownership of the lands the fleet conquered and Gottlieb maintained leadership over the men in this select group of the most trustworthy Knights of Malta, ensuring that they kept their existence a secret in order to be more effective in the fight against the many intrigues of the Russian nobility. The seat of the Order remained in St Petersburg, and the Tsar played an important role in its rise. Alexander II and Alexander III conferred the right to use the insignia of the Order to the knights and their descendants. At the funeral of Alexander II in March 1881 the crown of the Grand Master of the Sovereign Order of St John of Jerusalem was an extreme honour. Tsar Nicholas II, continuing the longstanding family tradition, educated many of his relatives in the dignity of the Balí of Gran Croce and also gave the Page Corps permission to use the octagonal cross of the Order in their insignia.