

ASH LAW

# Iron Tsar

SERIES PITCH OF THE MONTH





# CREDITS



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# Iron Tsar

—ASH LAW

## Nutshell

Engineers battle zombies in the imperial court of an alternate-universe magical Russia.

It is 1920 and the motherland is besieged by the undead armies from the west. You are a ‘машинамастера’—a machine wizard. Your engineering group must come up with archanotech devices to save Russia from the undead hordes, while maneuvering through an increasingly treacherous political landscape, keeping secrets from rival groups, avoiding and engaging in sabotage, and somehow getting the blessing of Rasputin to present your finished magical-machine of war to the imperial court.

## Characters

Have the players decide who their patron is, the nature of their project(s), things that might go wrong, and what obstacles they need to overcome to complete their project. Discuss what terrible things may happen if the project *isn't* a failure.

The characters all share a laboratory or workspace and the same patron. Despite conflicting interests, they are nominally working on the same war project:

- abomination that was not meant to be
- armchair soldier
- conscripted mechanic
- conscripted university professor
- convict test pilot
- cultist of the old dark gods
- discarded (failed?) experiment
- foreign (undead?) infiltrator
- hungry-eyed, low-ranking aristocratic officer
- impoverished noble seeking a way to bring her family back to power

- intelligent (evil?) monkey
- military witch
- necromancer (not a reanimator!)
- psychic noblewoman
- reanimator (not a necromancer!)
- revolutionary sympathizer
- rural mystic seeking political power
- scheming elder scientist clinging to power
- secret anarchist
- self-taught tinkerer
- shell-shocked soldier
- spy for a noble faction
- spy for another university
- veteran of the front lines
- visionary engineer out to change the world
- wide-eyed conscripted physics student
- young scientist with something to prove

## Setting

Snow falls over St. Petersburg or, as it has been known for the last six years, Petrograd. In the distance you can hear the big guns, but the war with the Germans hasn't touched the capital yet. The center of Russian art and culture continues what the French used to call *La Belle Époque* (when there was still a France). For six long years, the Great War has ground onwards, with ever more unconventional weapons being used. In the west, the Germans have stalled in protracted trench warfare against the might of British wizardry and the new tanks, and have turned their undead armies to the east. Though outmatched by the magic of the Imperial Starets led by Rasputin, every soldier that falls adds to their ranks. They now control Ida-Viru County and push towards the city. Desperate, and desperate not to seem so, the Tsar has reached out to any who might be able to save the Motherland.



## Adversaries

- **The Mad Monk:** Grigori Yefimovich Rasputin is not well liked by the nobles. Having cured the Tsar's son of hemophilia and kept the German totersoldaten at bay with dark magics, he is now second in power only to the Tsar. His cadre of mystics and cultists now purge the land of Marxists, finding a surprising number of them among the priesthood. The pyres of burning Marxists cast smoke over the capital, and nobody dares say anything. If a war-machine is to be presented to the court his favor must be gained, but coming to his attention is dangerous.
- **The Tsar:** Nikolas II, Nikolay Alexandrovich Romanov, Emperor and Autocrat of All the Russias. The husband of Alexandra, the Empress Consort, and father of Tsesarevich Alexei, he knows that his nobles and people plot against him and say that he is in Rasputin's power. He has become paranoid and dangerous, seeing traitors and assassins in every shadow. He executes his higher-ranking officers at a worrying rate.
- **The Nobles:** Generals, princes, boyars, and those at the top of the Table of Ranks all vie for power. To leave the city would be seen as a sign of weakness or betrayal by the court, so they must remain in uncertain orbit around the Tsar and Rasputin. None of them can rise too far or they'll gain the unwanted attentions of their twin masters, but if they allow others to rise above them, they'll lose their power. As a result, they are collectively and individually paranoid and fight proxy games of power through their patronage of teams of engineers, scientists, and rogue magicians—all while holding grand balls and going hunting as though nothing is wrong.
- **The Germans:** Nobody in Russia knows who is in charge of the German Empire any more. It was Emperor Wilhelm II, but what little military intelligence is available now says that orders come from Louréne on the former Franco-German border. The Germans

use legions of the dead: reanimated corpses and worse fill out the enemy ranks. Rumors of vampiric spies from the Transylvanian region infiltrating the Russian court are true: shape-shifting lunatics stalk the urban night.

- **The Architects of War:** If one war machine goes into production then others won't. No team wants to face defeat which in this political atmosphere could prove fatal. Patchwork reanimated cavalry horses powered by stolen souls, walking tanks with lightning cannons, tuning forks that vibrate at the frequency of nightmare dimensions, steam-driven infantry armor with prayers to dark gods inscribed on them, lens arrays that focus the light from the blasphemous twin suns and black stars of lost Carcosa—rival teams develop all these and more. Sabotage and murder are becoming a common tactic.
- **The Revolutionaries:** The proletariat was crushed by government forces and Rasputin's magic in 1905. Their problems did not go away, and subsequent purges only brewed greater revolutionary spirit. Many have been sent to die in the West, and the fury of the public grows with their fear of ever-closer undead soldiers. In 1905 it was bullets and bombs, but if they can co-opt a group of war-engineers they may be able to overthrow the Tsarist forces once and for all.
- **Dark Entities:** Unspeakably old things that some worship as gods crowd the edges of reality. These elder gods delight in the slaughter, deriving from the fear and pain of the innocent a form of worship. The elder gods grant powers to those that advance their agenda, striking bargains with those who start with good intentions, but become corrupted in body and spirit. Into the war-dreams of both sides they pour themselves, slipping into our reality like poison seeping into a wound.



## Themes

The world is changing fast and nobody is willing to see it, and it will all end badly. Terrible things are contemplated for good reasons, and evil men serve the greater good. War presses ever inwards, but everyday life goes on, and the closer the war comes, the more fervently burn the fires of decadent intrigue.

- Hubris
- Science vs. Magic
- War
- Inevitability
- Paranoia (both personal and national)
- The True Cost of Serving “the Greater Good”
- Playing at Politics: Fiddling while Rome Burns
- The Death of Innocence and the Passing of an Age
- Man’s Inhumanity to Man, and the Horror of Weapon Design
- The Collective vs. the Individual
- Fear
- The Russian Soul
- Going Too Far
- Trust
- Too Much Truth
- Breaking Free

## Tightening the Screws

A general wants to field-test the team’s project even though it is neither ready nor safe. Can the team get the project ready for a field test? Is it politically wise to do so?

A rival team reports imminent progress on a super-weapon. Can you sabotage their project before they unveil it?

The team’s patron transfers team and project to another noble. Who will get the chop in the transition? Why were they sold? Are they being sold out as part of a political maneuver they cannot yet see?

The team receives a large shipment of uranium, misdelivered and intended for another team. Do they keep quiet and hide it as a passive act of sabotage? Do they deliver it in hopes of learning what it is for? Do they report it to the secret police, in case it is a ploy to make them out to be thieves? Do they

somehow incorporate it into their work? (In 1920, the dangers of the invisible rays given off by uranium are not fully understood; it is used in various products, such as pottery.)

A rival team’s pet abomination is loose in the streets, and if knowledge of this gets out or it starts killing, the revolution could spark again. If knowledge of the runaway steam-beast gets back to the Tsar, heads will literally roll. How did it escape, who is to blame (or can be made to receive the blame), and can it be recaptured before all hell breaks loose?

A team-member is found murdered and one of Rasputin’s secret police comes to investigate. Can the characters hide their secrets? Is this all an excuse to uncover what the team is working on and give an advantage to another team of scientists and engineers. Do the players cooperate or just pretend to? Is there a murderer on the team? Was this done by a rival group, or is it something to do with the mysterious package of artifacts from a recently discovered tomb-island located at 47°9’S 126°43’W in the southern Pacific Ocean?

## Additional Elements

Consult with players to settle on a tone for the series. You might set the dial to ‘corny and light’, with madcap scientists and craaaaaazy cultists and slapstick zombies. Or crank the dial the other way to dark personal horror and paranoia.

Play up or remove entirely different elements of the setting. Fold in Cthulhu mythos elements to make it dark-campy like *Hellboy* or dark-Lovecraftian like *A Colder War*. Pull in traditional horror sources like *Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Make the setting very steampunk or dieselpunk, or downplay those elements to make it more real-world-but-with-slight-magic. The level of magic might range from the subtle but powerful magic of *Bitter Seeds* to the overtly magical world of *Arrowsmith*.

A cross-faction series might cast the leads as members of competing teams of engineers and mystics, or revolutionaries or vampiric spies out to ruin the war effort or kill the Tsar.

## Names

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### Male

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Adskhan Malinin (Малинин)	Illarion Talalikhin (Талалихин)
Aleksei Balakhnov (Балахнов)	Jurek Dorofeyev (Дорофеев)
Andrei Yezhov (Ежов)	Lenka Famusov (Фамусов)
Anton Ubeysobakin (Убейсобакин)	Luka Zavrazhin (Завражин)
Arkadi Abalyshev (Абалышев)	Maksimilian Gagarin (Гагарин)
Arsenij Baltabev (Балтабев)	Milan Lapukhov (Лапухов)
Artemi Avtukhov (Автухов)	Miloslav Lapayev (Лапаев)
Bogdan Pereverzev (Переверзев)	Mstislav Saitov (Саитов)
Dimitryi Mamin (Мамин)	Mykola Lapin (Лапин)
Ernest Galkin (Галкин)	Nikita Lapin (Лапин)
Evgeny Fammus (Фаммус)	Nikolai Lagoshin (Лагошин)
Feodor Say (Сай)	Pavel Sadovsky (Садовский)
Georgi Mantorov (Манторов)	

### Female

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Alenka Zheglava (Жеглов)	Irinushka Agarova (Агапов)
Alexandra Demenoka (Деменок)	Julia Talanova (Таланов)
Alisa / Alina Uglitsky (Углицкий)	Kateryna Kamkina (Камкин)
Alya Kandinsky (Кандинский)	Lara Karandashov (Карандашов)
Amaliji Lagutova (Лагутов)	Larisa Samarina (Самарин)
Anastasia Vasneva (Васнев)	Larissa Kapitsa (Капица)
Angelina Tausheva (Таушев)	Lida Maluygina (Малюгин)
Annessa Saltanova (Салтанов)	Lubochka Talanova (Таланов)
Antonina Gacheva (Гачев)	Lubov Davydova (Давыдов)
Anya Demidova (Демидов)	Lydia Zavrazhnova (Завражнов)
Apollinaria Zavrazhnaya (Завражный)	Margarita Malinina (Малинин)
Arina Zavrazhnova (Завражнов)	Milena / Milenka Lapukhov (Лапухов)
Bronislava Pevtsova (Певцов)	Miloslava Lapayev (Лапаев)
Duscha Kamenskikh (Каменских)	Nadezhda Abalysheva (Абалышев)
Ekaterina Avandeyev (Авандеев)	Nadia Sadykova (Садьков)
Ernestina Telitsyna (Телицын)	Nadiya Pasternaka (Пастернак)
Evgeniya Fammus (Фаммус)	Nadya Rasporova (Распопов)
Fedosya Gacheva (Гачев)	Natalya Obukhova (Обухов)
Gala Paskhin (Пасхин)	Natasha Kapulyushnaya (Капылюшный)
Helena Madulina (Мадулин)	Natashenka Lazareva (Лазарев)
Helina Balsunova (Бальсунов)	Nikita Lapin (Лапин)
Innochka Vasnetsova (Васнецов)	Olenka Nardina (Нардин)
Innusha Pankova (Панков)	Olga Kalashnika (Калашник)
Innya Paramonova (Парамонов)	Olya Panfilova (Панфилов)
Iraida Ntrebova (Нетребов)	Pavlina Sadovsky (Садовский)
Iraina Yevtushenka (Евтушенко)	