

The lessons of the last Romanovs: neither Bolshevism nor tsarism

by Denise Henderson

The Last Tsar: The Life and Death of Nicholas II

by Edward Radzinsky, trans. by Marian Schwartz
Doubleday, New York, 1992
462 pages, hardbound, \$25

The downfall of a regime usually leads to an outpouring of memoirs, analysis, romance, and other sorts of history, and the fall of the 300-year-old Romanov dynasty in 1915, when Nicholas II abdicated for himself and his son, has been no exception. This year, Edward Radzinsky, a Russian playwright and historian, who began his researches on Nicholas II 20 years ago, has added *The Last Tsar: The Life and Death of Nicholas II* to that literature.

Radzinsky's articles on the July 17, 1917 murder of the Romanovs in Yekaterinburg (known until 1991 as Sverdlovsk in honor of Yakov Sverdlov, who helped plan the assassination), first appeared in the Russian publication *Ogonyok* in 1989.

The author elicited an immediate response from all over Russia. He received letters describing furtive conversations held by some of the assassins, who were haunted by their deed (several were not and met regularly in Moscow to argue over whose gun had killed the tsar); one woman wrote about her aunt, who had been a parlormaid to the Romanovs, presumed shot dead with the family, who may have survived. One senior citizen with more perspective wrote: "The brutal execution of the tsar's family seems implausible and terrible now. I am a very old man and I saw that time. . . . Atrocities, brutality, frenzy—they were very common. . . . For the West to understand us and for us to understand ourselves we have to remember that the murder of the tsar's family did not seem strange at the time because it wasn't terrible, it was ordinary."

Radzinsky points out that this fact of life—the cheapness of human life, the ease with which a life could be taken—could be traced to the highest levels of the Bolshevik leadership. Lenin and his comrades liked to compare themselves to the leadership of the French Revolution, particularly Marat and Danton. Lenin called Felix Dzerzhinsky, head of the

Cheka (secret police) of the Urals in 1917 and therefore responsible for the captive Romanovs, a "proletarian Jacobin." Lenin himself proclaimed: "At least a hundred Romanovs must have their heads chopped off in order to unlearn their descendants of crimes." And Trotsky, speaking generally, added, "We must put an end once and for all to the Papish-Quaker babble about the sanctity of human life."

The turning point for the 'ancien régime'

There is no doubt that both the secret way in which the Romanovs were executed, without trial, and the fact that for 70 years the Bolsheviks practiced state terrorism against the Soviet population, thereby making open discussion about the *ancien régime* taboo, have contributed to the fascination Russians and others have with the death of Nicholas II and his family. But more important than Radzinsky's description of the deaths of the Romanovs, and their subsequent coverup, is his attempt to identify the *punctum saliens*, that is, the point of crisis at which Nicholas II either failed to act or acted in such a way as to unleash a chain of events which made his downfall inevitable.

Radzinsky uses Nicholas's diary, contemporaneous accounts, and oral history to unfold his story. He quotes his own 95-year-old landlady, Vera Yureneva, who tells him about a friend of hers who had known the great Russian statesman Count Sergei Witte, who opposed the Russo-Japanese War of 1905 and who had tried to convince Nicholas of the need for constitutional reform.

According to Yureneva, Witte "tried to prove that many of the events that occurred during Nicholas's reign were connected with the present actions of the camarilla. . . . The camarilla in Russia involved distinguished but degenerate families. . . . They were afraid of losing their wealth and power and hated the new times—this incomprehensible capitalism. It was they who formed the inner circle, the court of Nicholas and Alexandra. . . . My friend used to say that the Department of Police slipped the tsar's leash at the end of the century, when the secret police began to place provocateurs in the revolution. . . . This allowed the police to shroud everything in the greatest secrecy. That was when the sinister practice began of provocateurs throwing the bombs of unsuspecting revolutionaries at tsarist officials the camarilla didn't like."

Books Received

The Comeback Kid: The Life and Career of Bill Clinton, by Charles F. Allen and Jonathan Portis, Birch Lane Press, New York, 1992, 294 pages, hardbound, \$18.95.

JFK: The CIA, Vietnam, and the Plot to Assassinate John F. Kennedy, by L. Fletcher Prouty, Carol Publishing, New York, 1992, 366 pages, hardbound, \$22.

Destiny Betrayed: JFK, Cuba, and the Garrison Case, by James DiEugenio, Sheridan Square Press, New York, 1992, 423 pages, hardbound, \$19.95.

Profiles of War, Inside the Secret U.S.-Israeli Arms Network, by Ari Ben Menashe, Sheridan Square Press, New York, 1992, 394 pages, hardbound, \$24.95.

Honored and Betrayed, by Richard Secord, John Wiley & Sons, New York, 1992, 405 pages, hardbound, \$24.95.

Castro's Final Hour: The Secret Story Behind the Coming Downfall of Communist Cuba, by Andres Openheimer, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1992, 461

pages, hardbound, \$25.

Kissinger, A Biography, by Walter Isaacson, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1992, 893 pages, hardbound, \$30.

Lincoln's Loyalists, Union Soldiers and the Confederacy, by Richard Nelson Current, Northeastern University Press, Boston, 1992, 253 pages, hardbound, \$21.95.

We Were Always Free: The Maddens of Culpeper County, Virginia, by T.O. Madden with Ann Miller, W.W. Norton, New York, 1992, 169 pages, hardbound, \$19.95.

The Guns of the South, by Harry Turtledove, Ballantine, New York, 1992, 480 pages, hardbound, \$19.

Margaret Wise Brown: Awakened by the Moon, by Leonard S. Marcus, Beacon Press, Boston, 1992, 377 pages, hardbound, \$25.

Space Policy, An Introduction, by Nathan C. Goldman, Iowa State University Press, Ames, Iowa, 1992, 321 pages, hardbound, \$37.95.

Reflections on Kurt Gödel, by Hao Wang, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1990, 336 pages, paperbound, \$13.95.

And, concluded Yureneva, one of the "dangerous intrigues" of the camarilla "against the tsar and society" was the Russo-Japanese War.

Witte, who died in 1915, in a posthumously delivered letter to Nicholas, pleaded with him to keep the constitution: "This is your undying service to your people and to humanity," he wrote.

Queen Victoria's legacy

Of course, Nicholas II was not the only short-sighted ruler in Europe prior to World War I. Despite the fact that King George V ("Georgie") of England, Kaiser Wilhelm ("Willi") of Germany, and Nicholas ("Nikki") were all cousins through their grandmother, Queen Victoria, even before 1914 the events had been set into motion which doomed two of the three dynasties and created out of the Versailles Treaty a new geopolitical system.

Yet, for Radzinsky, questions of international strategy are overshadowed by his obsession with ferreting out the truth about the Romanov assassinations. Thanks to glasnost and a lot of sleuthing, Radzinsky, a former state archivist, was able to get his hands on previously classified firsthand documents about the murders. The existence of the assassins' written descriptions of the event had been denied.

Like a dedicated "Who shot JFK?" conspirophile, Rad-

zinsky spends a good deal of time detailing the who, what, when, where, and how of the murders. He discusses questions like whose gun it was that killed the tsar.

And, inevitably, the question of possible survivors is discussed. Did anyone survive? If so, who? Anastasia? Tatiana? The heir, Alexei? The parlormaid? How many gravesites were there? Or were the bodies burned?

Russia again at the crossroads

Today, once again, the former Soviet Union—and the entire rest of the world—is at a crossroads. The system created after World Wars I and II no longer functions, but neither would a return to the allegedly "benign" despotism of monarchical rule; and the world should certainly shudder at the idea of a "new 1917" currently being mooted by some in Russia.

Neither Bolshevism nor tsarism should be resurrected from their graves. Instead, it is time for Russians—for all peoples—to heed the voice of Count Witte, who successfully worked for economic and political reform with both Nicholas's father (Alexander III) and Nicholas's grandfather (Alexander II, the Tsar-Liberator). Witte understood that only a commitment by each nation-state to uplifting all of its people could create the basis for lasting international peace.

That was the lesson which Nicholas II, the last tsar, refused to learn.