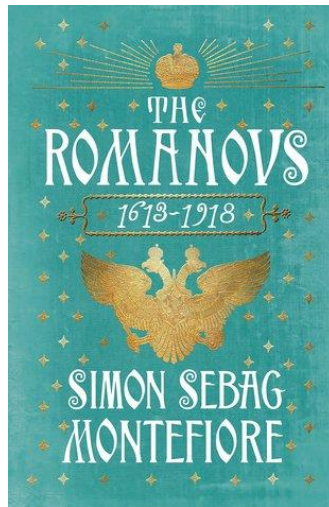


The In & Out Club Library

23 July 2020 ·

New books for a new world.



Not only does the Library now possess copies of the two semi-autobiographical World War II novels described through William Boyd's radio discussion of them on 15 June 2020 (Fred Majdalany's *Patrol*, first published in 1953, and Peter Elstob's *Warriors for the Working Day*, first published in 1960), but we now also have Simon Sebag Montefiore's great history of the House of Romanov, which will help to expand the minuscule Russian history section beyond the Crimean War.

The Romanovs: 1613-1918 is arranged in three acts, 'The rise', 'The apogee', and 'The decline', and is played out by 'twenty tsars and tsarinas, some touched by genius, some by madness, but all inspired by holy autocracy and imperial ambition'. The bare minimum of the statistics involved in this great sweep of monarchy around the circumference of the Wheel of Fortune is sufficiently breath-taking to draw the reader in: this dynasty reigned for 304 years, during which 'the Russian empire... grew by 55 square miles (142 square kilometres) per day', so that by the late 19th century 'they ruled one sixth of the earth's surface...' The domestic families of the Romanovs are intimately entwined with an autocracy powered by Divine Right, which subverts normal relationships – 'the allure and corruption of power so often trump the loyalty and affection of blood' – and practises obscene violence on its members and subjects.



Brilliantly, the Prologue of the book alternates paragraphs on two Romanov sons, one, aged 16, from the very beginning of the dynasty's rise in 1613, and the other, aged 13, from its extreme end in July 1918. One had just been chosen to accept the poisoned chalice of the crown, but it took six hours of argument by a delegation of aristocrats and bishops to bludgeon him into agreement; the other had been condemned to death, with all his family. Michael, the first Romanov, was descended from the family of the wife of Ivan the Terrible, whom he had chosen as his bride in 1547 from a talent show of 500 virgins. The intervening period (between Ivan and Michael) was packed with feeble heirs, assassination, enforced dispatch to monasteries, accusations of witchcraft, disembowelled bodies, war with Sweden and Poland: a sort of abstract of what would follow in the next three hundred years. 'Sorcery was often a symptom of political conspiracy'.



Peter the Great starts off (aged 10) as one of two tsars on a double throne, with his half-brother Ivan, five years older but mentally handicapped, sharing it, and his half-sister Sophia executing the opposition in the background. The catalyst for his career is the gift of a sextant (which no-one in Russia can use) and introduction to the Dutch, German, British and Swiss mercenaries and experts

who lived on the fringes of the country; but besides his tireless campaigning and innovating come his 'profane parodies': 'He might seem like a terrifying circus master presiding over a 17th century version of a decadent rock band on tour, yet there was no division between business and bacchanalia'. His second wife was Catherine I, who started off as the daughter of a Lithuanian peasant; she was to bear Peter twelve children, although only two survived; and Peter tortured his heir by his first wife to death. His daughter Elizaveta would eventually become empress; and her nephew Peter III would marry the woman who would have him killed and become Catherine the Great.



This is a book which needs a strong stomach to read it; the struggles amongst individual rulers, wives, heirs apparent, followers, supporters, enemies and advisers generates such a plethora of breakings on the wheel, ripped-out tongues (for daring to wear the same colour as Elizaveta), knouting, beheadings, and other even more hideous deaths that the effect is rather like watching a particularly violent gangster film on a continuous loop. Its cinematic quality is evidently the fruit of a huge amount of research: the bibliography covers 14 pages of very small print, and takes in nine separate archives. It's an extraordinary achievement; a mad and tense parade of grotesque, fearfully-realized characters, illustrating 'the empire built by flinty conquistadors and brilliant statesmen that conquered Siberia and Ukraine, took Berlin and Paris, and produced Pushkin, Tolstoy, Tchaikovsky and Dostoevsky: a civilization of towering culture and exquisite beauty.'