



The Romanovs: 1613-1918

Simon Sebag Montefiore

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The Romanovs were the most successful dynasty of modern times, ruling a sixth of the world's surface. How did one family turn a war-ruined principality into the world's greatest empire? And how did they lose it all?

This is the intimate story of twenty tsars and tsarinas, some touched by genius, some by madness, but all inspired by holy autocracy and imperial ambition. Montefiore's gripping chronicle reveals their secret world of unlimited power and ruthless empire-building, overshadowed by palace conspiracy, family rivalries, sexual decadence and wild extravagance, and peopled by a cast of adventurers, courtesans, revolutionaries and poets, from Ivan the Terrible to Tolstoy, from Queen Victoria to Lenin.

To rule Russia was both imperial-sacred mission and poisoned chalice: six tsars were murdered and all the Romanovs lived under constant threat to their lives. Peter the Great tortured his own son to death while making Russia an empire, and dominated his court with a dining club notable for compulsory drunkenness, naked dwarfs and fancy dress. Catherine the Great overthrew her own husband - who was murdered soon afterwards - loved her young male favourites, conquered Ukraine and fascinated Europe. Paul was strangled by courtiers backed by his own son, Alexander I, who faced Napoleon's invasion and the burning of Moscow, then went on to take Paris. Alexander II liberated the serfs, survived five assassination attempts, and wrote perhaps the most explicit love letters ever written by a ruler. **THE ROMANOVs** climaxes with a fresh, unforgettable portrayal of Nicholas and Alexandra, the rise and murder of Rasputin, war and revolution - and the harrowing massacre of the entire family.

Written with dazzling literary flair, drawing on new archival research, **THE ROMANOVs** is at once an enthralling story of triumph and tragedy, love and death, a universal study of power, and an essential portrait of the empire that still defines Russia today.

The Romanovs: 1613-1918 Details

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From Reader Review The Romanovs: 1613-1918 for online ebook

Bibliophile says

The Romanovs make the Lannisters look like the Bennett sisters. Simon Sebag Montefiore does his best to avoid speculation and sensationalism, but not even his sober outlook and academic restraint can quench the glorious madness that was the Romanov rule. *THE MAYHEM*. People are not only shot or beheaded, as one would expect, but imaginatively tortured, broken on the wheel, impaled in the bottom, cut into sections, stomped to pulp, doused in vodka and set on fire. *Cut into sections*. That requires dedication. On a good day you only get your tongue ripped out. Then there are the courtly intrigues and sexual shenanigans. The corridors of the Winter Palace are teeming with mistresses, assassins and false Dimitris. Nitroglycerin is stored under pillows. Heirs have fits and conveniently fall on their daggers. Brides-to-be are poisoned so often you'd think that they'd wise up and look for husbands elsewhere.

Of course, there is more to this work than colourful anecdotes, but where's the fun in war and politics? Only half kidding. 300 years are crammed into 650 pages, which eventually made me lose track of the bit players and their political motivations and animosities. Which was ok, because I was able to lean back and enjoy the tsar mania, but if you would like a deeper understanding of Russian history, you need further reading. This book tells the history of the Romanovs, and does it wonderfully.

Alexandra says

This book was provided to me by the publisher at no cost.

This book is a physical example of how hard it is to do complete histories of stuff from much before the 18th, even really 19th, century. Of the 650-odd pages, the last half covers less than the last century of the Romanov dynasty (which started in 1613 and went to 1918). Not because Michael or Peter the Great or Catherine the Great did less stuff, but because there's less stuff firmly attested. Or attested at all. Whereas there are heaps of diaries and letters and non-Russian people talking about the goings-on certainly around Napoleon, and then even more so afterwards with the various power struggles, the Crimea, and then into the 20th century.

Anyway: this book is, as the name suggests, a biography of a dynasty. As with any biography there's a certain frisson in knowing how everything ends - in this case, in a damp cellar with gunshots. I've done a fair bit of reading around the end of the dynasty (this bio of Alexander Kerensky was great, and I also read a bio of Nicholas and Alexandra recently), and I know names like Catherine the Great (it's always weird to make connections like she's active during the French Revolution), but I didn't really know how it all connected. The answer is with blood, and sweat, and more blood, and a lot of trial and tribulation. Then more blood.

I was intrigued by, and quite liked, the format of the book. It's divided into Acts: The Rise, The Apogee, The Decline. Each Act is divided into scenes, like The All-Drunken Synod and The Golden Age and Colossus, where the names are intended to reflect the individual Tsar (or, occasionally, Tsarina) who is the focus. It's not quite a chapter per Tsar, in the earlier half, but it comes close. Additionally there's a map early on showing the extent of the Romanov empire at different times, and each Act opens with a family tree, while each scene opens with a cast list - family, courtiers, other hangers-on. Which is a good thing because if I learnt nothing else I learnt:

By golly there's a lot of people with the same name in Russia over this period. I'm not just talking about the number of men called Alexander or Nicholas - Montefiore's use of nicknames was a lifesaver - but the surnames! There's like three important families! For three hundred years! ... which also tells you something about the dynasty and who was important of course.

If I thought the English royal family had a complicated family tree, I was kidding myself. The Romanovs are incredibly hard to follow - partly from marrying across generations, occasionally, but also with cousins coming and going and multiples wives and WHOA. I just gave up eventually.

There's also quite a few pictures, in four different sets across the book, showing portraits and architecture and such things. I love that part of a good history book.

Other things I learnt:

There were a surprising number of important women. Catherine I had acted as empress even before Catherine II reigned so superbly, and Anna was between both of them and Elizaveta, while Sophia was 'Sovereign Lady' for a while in the late 1600s and another Anna was briefly regent.

Did I mention the blood? There was a lot of blood spilt by and for this dynasty. Like, a lot. Even if you don't count the Napoleonic Wars (which were EPIC) and then World War I, of course, there was a LOT of fighting. Some of the blood was even Romanov blood... looking at you, Peter III, and all you would-be usurpers.

There was a lot of infidelity. Two of my favourite picture captions are one depicting "A rare happy marriage" between Nicholas I and his Prussian wife Mouffy (this is another thing: the nicknames), while immediately below is a picture of Varenka Nelidova, "the beauty of Nicholas I's court," whom "he visited twice daily" because she was his favourite mistress. Not just mistress; favourite mistress. These Romanovs, they could not keep their pants on.

How German the Romanovs were. So many princesses came from the German principalities - Hesse-Darmstadt, Wurttemberg, Holstein-Gottorp and so on - I'm frankly amazed that some more-Russian types didn't do some maths and throw them over on account of not being very Russian. I guess that's partly what Catherine II did, to her husband Peter III - where SHE is the formerly German princess and HE is acting all "I wish I were Prussian."

Napoleon was a cad. So were many of the Tsars.

The one thing that really bugged me was the use of footnotes. I want a history book to have copious endnotes where sources are detailed - this reassures me that the author really has done their research. When these are presented as footnotes, it clutters up the page too much. When the author uses endnotes for sources and footnotes for extra stuff that didn't quite fit into their narrative, well, I'm largely ok with that - if it's done well. Here it felt like there were footnotes on almost every other pages, and the thing that MOST annoyed me was that the symbol was almost never at the end of the sentence. Which for someone like me meant I was breaking in the middle of a sentence to go read a footnote that WASN'T ALWAYS ACTUALLY RELEVANT. I mean, what even is that about? By the second half I was basically training myself away from this compulsion and at least waiting to the end of the sentence, so that I wasn't wasting time going back and re-reading the whole sentence. I'm still very bemused by a bunch of those footnotes because I don't know why they were included, except to imagine Montefiore was just so excited by the fact that he wanted to include it.

While there were a few other stylistic tics that occasionally annoyed me, there was nothing bad enough to prevent me from reading this pretty steadily and basically enjoying the whole book. It's a big book, but it doesn't require much in the way of prior knowledge, so if you want an overview of Russian political history from 1613 to 1918 this is a pretty good place to get it. It's also got violence and sex. Quite a lot of both. And some comparisons with modern Russian politics that gave me pause, too.

happy says

[I really didn't need to know the pet names Nicholas and Alexandra had for their genitals, the size of Rasputin's penis, or t

Emily says

I'M DONE!!! This is a behemoth of a book... But it's so worth it!

The Romanovs is absolutely wonderful historical nonfiction. Montefiore clearly knows his stuff, and it's a joy to read. I will say, if you don't read a ton of nonfiction (and more specifically, historical nonfiction), this may be a bit difficult. It's a WHOLE LOT of exposition. If you're used to that, or think that's no problem, then DEFINITELY pick this up! But it's something to keep in mind. If you don't think huge, unbroken paragraphs are your thing, I'd recommend checking this out on audiobook. I often find that exposition works *better* when you're listening rather than reading.

I do think that the structure of this book REALLY helps with its size, both literal and figuratively. This book is well over 600 pages of text (plus an extensive bibliography), and it covers about 300 years. Montefiore breaks the book up into several different parts, and the chapters in each part are described as "scenes." The beginning of each scene has a cast--all of the important figures he'll be discussing--and I found that **wildly** helpful. There are lots of similar, if not identical, names, and being able to flip back to the cast list really helped with keeping track of who's who.

Montefiore's tone throughout the novel was great--he's informative, but happily pokes fun at the (quite frequent) ridiculousness of the Romanov family. Many of the footnotes, while not essential to the story, are full of wonderful little tidbits.

I definitely recommend picking this up!

Chrissie says

Having now completed the book has my view changed? No it hasn't. Please see what I have written below. What is written here are either additional thoughts or that which I feel must be emphasized.

While the book does indeed provide facts of interest I feel the author all too often sensationalizes, emphasizes the bad over the good and has excessive details on the sexual behavior of not only of the Romanovs but also every darn person mentioned. I really don't need to know the size of Rasputin's penis. Seriously, given the amount of details pertaining to sex, a more appropriate title might be: *The Sex Lives of the Romanovs and Their Compatriots 1613-1918*. I am kind of joking but there is also a message to be taken note of. The mix of historical facts and the pronounced emphasis on sex is just plain weird. In any case a prospective reader should be warned. The sex is not graphic, but excessive and unnecessary.

Furthermore, I felt I was wading through an immense amount of irrelevant details, not just those related to sex. The writing is dense. Lots of names, dates and minutiae. Important historical details are there if you can wade through the muck to get to them.

Perhaps the book's wide scope, covering **all** of the Romanovs, makes it difficult to achieve adequate depth. The Napoleonic Wars, the Crimean and Balkan Wars, the Russian Revolution and the First World War are all, albeit cursively, covered. Below I have recommended books by Robert K. Massie, but also George, Nicholas and Wilhelm: Three Royal Cousins and the Road to World War I should be mentioned. I gave it 4 stars.

I did not find the personalities of the eighteen different Romanov czars to be sufficiently analyzed. Each one's most important actions are spoken of but their personality traits remain diffuse. Each one's physical appearance is described but their thoughts get much less attention. Negative attributes come to the fore over the positive. For me a balanced portrayal is lacking. I left the book with the feeling that the author immensely dislikes the Romanovs as a group and was unable to acknowledge their achievements. All of them are pretty much classified as anti-Semites with little attention paid to those actions which counter this sweeping judgement.

I think the positive actions of Peter the Great, Catherine the Great and Alexander II's abolition of serfdom warranted more attention. Not only were the serfs emancipated but also given land. The emancipation occurred in 1861. It is interesting to note that the Civil War in the States began this year. Blacks were not given land.

By the end of the audiobook I was sick and tired of having to rewind to catch the Russian names. The narration should have been slower and names more distinctly pronounced.

This is my second non-fiction book by the author. I gave Jerusalem: The Biography also two stars. My review: <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>

I am providing my review because I believe by comparing the two one sees similarities. I have decided on the basis of these two books that most probably even the author's fiction will not fit my tastes though the topic might attract me. It is interesting to note that in **both** of these books the author goes off on a tangent about his own family's roots and how his ancestors knew famed personages. This doesn't belong in either book!

Please read below. I have tried to avoid repetition.

Halfway through:

I have gotten thorough the Romanov Czars up to Nicolas I.

I am not (for the most) critical of the factual content but rather its focus. However, please see below the paragraph about Alexander von Benckendorff! This author loves to stun, loves to point out violence. Beheadings, impalements, dismembering of bodies, torture, tongues ripped out, rapes, deviant sexual behavior and physical abuse abound. He doesn't merely document, he dramatizes. One example is that written about the Congress of Vienna. Less is said about its political consequences than the partying and sexual liaisons of the delegates.

You get a whiff of the author's way of writing from the fact that rather than the book having chapters the different sections are called scenes and acts.

This author prefers to detail the bad rather than the good. One example: very little is said about the magnificent buildings erected by the Romanovs. Sure, they are mentioned, but few details are given. Art

collections, literary works are scarcely mentioned. A quote is taken from Pushkin, but what does the author choose to quote? A line about the the size of General Aleksey Arakcheyev's penis. Sigh.

The author enjoys throwing out statements that shock or at least surprise. Some sentences leave you wondering what exactly is being implied; I prefer clarity. I was surprised by the statement that Alexander von Benckendorf, head of the Secret Police under Nicolas I, "didn't know his own name and had to consult his business card". The author leaves no comment on the validity of this statement. Who said this? What are the sources? Which facts are pure gossip and which true? If this is to be considered a serious work on the Romanovs why is this statement presented in such a fashion?

Reading this is not a waste of time. I am learning, but I don't like the presentation, the author's dramatization and penchant for salacious details.

I **MUCH** prefer the writing of Robert K. Massie. I have read and highly recommend the author's books Nicholas and Alexandra and Catherine the Great: Portrait of a Woman. I would grab Peter the Great: His Life and World if I could.

I should say something positive. I liked how the author wrote about the Napoleonic Wars.

I am furthermore disappointed that family tree information provided in the written version is not made accessible in the audiobook format via an accompanying PDF file. Not a big problem though, since one can easily find the information on the web. The audiobook is narrated by Simon Russell Beale. I don't love it, but there is nothing actually wrong. For the most part the lines are clearly pronounced and presented at a good speed. He seems to be fluent in Russian, so he whips off the names quickly. This makes it hard for me to jot them down. It can be hard to guess the correct spelling, but I have come close enough to be able to find them on the web.

I continue.

Michael Finocchiaro says

As astounding and astonishing survey of this epic imperial family, The Romanovs is an incredible and insightful read. Did you know that Putin's grandfather was Rasputin's cook? The horrible fate of the Romanovs made me almost physically ill at the end - I of course was repulsed by their corruption, autocracy, anti-Semitism, and blind devotion to the despicable (yes occasionally wise) Rasputin, their ignoble assassination filled me with horror and sadness.

The Romanov dynasty had an unlikely beginning in 1613 with Michael I being reluctantly brought in to quell the chaos that reigned in Russia at the end of the 16th C in the aftermath of Ivan the Terrible. The Romanov family then ruled with a heavy hand for just over three centuries fraught with politics, intrigue, Times of Trouble, revolutions, wars, and lots and lots of massacres. It was fascinating to learn more about all the Tsars - most of which I had heard about and knew next to nothing about their reigns. The tragedies of Peter III, Paul I, and Nicholas II (and Michael II as well although he was only tsar for a day) were horrific but still the violence was not out of proportion to the times they lived in. I believe my favourite stories in the book were

those of the greatest tsars (and tsarinas): Peter the Great, Catherine the Great, and Alexander I. I had no idea of the incredible sexual appetite of this regime (of all regimes?) and how interrelated they were with the British and German dynasties (Nicholas II's wife Alix was related to Queen Victoria and many of the tsars and their children intermarried with German families). I learned as well that many of the tsars ruled for extremely short periods of time (Paul only 5 years, Ivan VI and Peter III for only a year, and both Constantine and Michael II for a few days or even less!).

The author breaks up the Romanov period into three Acts (Act I: The Rise - Michael I to the advent of Peter I, Act II: The Apogee - Peter the Great to Alexander I, and Act III: The Decline - Nicholas I to II to Nicholas II/Michael II) and each of those into Scenes that are introduced with a very useful casting which helps keep the myriad of names straight which cover the major events of a reign or reigns - or towards the end, the phases of the ultimate fall of the Romanovs.

I really enjoyed Act II Scene 6, the Duel which narrated the great contest of the beginning of the 19th C between Napoleon and Alexander I. It was absolutely fascinating and I realised to what degree that Europe was really saved from Napoleon by Alexander I because the Germans and British were completely sidelined in 1812/1813 and it was the Russian army that beat Napoleon in 1814. Having read War and Peace (but having as yet to have neglected to review it :), I loved learning of the political history behind the meeting of these two geniuses who could have become friends (they were nearly brothers-in-law), but for Napoleon's ambition and Alexander's pride became bitter foes. I learned that Alexander did not order the burning of Moscow. He had returned to Petersburg and left control and decision making in the army to Kutuzov who - faced with either losing the entire Russian army after the incredible carnage of Borodino or losing the capital, chose to live and fight another day. The scorched earth policy was devastating to Alexander, but it turned out to be the right decision as Napoleon squandered his time for a week in Moscow and was defeated by a combination of the onset of wintry conditions and famine and the marauding techniques of the Russian army pursuing him all the way back to Paris. If Alexander had preferred Paris to St Petersburg, we might be speaking more Russian words in Paris than just "bistro" which entered the French vocabulary during the Russian occupation of March to May 1814.

The only drawback to this book is the lack of detailed maps to explain the geopolitics. Otherwise, the writing is excellent (as good as Montefiore's *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar* which was excellent!) and the level of research is truly amazing. I believe that Montefiore had access to many documents that have only been accessible inside the Soviet Union or just recently found which allows him to belay certain myths and legends and give the reader a truly interesting and factual history.

Laurie Anderson says

This enormous book covers an enormous topic: 300 years of the Romanov dynasty. Toward the end of the book, when it reached the stories of Czar Nicholas II (whose reign was ended by the Communist Revolution), I found myself wishing the author would go deeper into the lives of the common people and help us understand the roots of the revolution better. But that is not within the scope of this book - this is a survey that has a lot of ground to cover and does a magnificent job of it.

And now I need to find more books about Russia in the late 19th century!

Ray says

The Romanovs ruled Russia for 300 years. This book catalogues the rise and fall of the dynasty, atop a multi ethnic empire spanning one sixth of the globe.

I liked the authors attention to detail and his erudite and gossipy style. I particularly liked the evocative opening chapter which bookends the teenagers Michael, first czar of Russia, and Alexei, doomed tzaraevitch and son of the hapless Nicholas II - one hunted by Polish death squads, the other destined to be murdered by Bolsheviks.

In between we have a parade of the mad and the bloodthirsty, the cruel and the murderous, with dramatic succession struggles and an empire that somehow survives and thrives. Palace intrigue is a constant, as a succession of strongmen (and women - these mainly princesses imported from minor principalities in Germany) accede to the throne. We even have a Russian version of the man in the iron mask.

In the end the dynasty fails, as the incompetent Nicholas II proves unable to change even as the world changes around him.

Today, although the Romanovs are gone, Russia still needs a Czar. Stalin was perhaps the epitome of an autocrat, and Putin now holds the throne in an iron grasp. The author draws interesting parallels between the political system under the Romanovs and modern day rulers - a supreme leader surrounded by and supported by a kleptocratic elite - and he points out the inherent instability of a country where the rule of law is subject to the whim of one person.

Worth a read.

Dave Cullen says

My early read on this book is enthralled. I'm just on p. 37 (plus the epilogue that I started with, and half the intro that I dispensed with), and I'm totally sucked in.

I've already learned a great deal about how the peculiar Russian aristocracy works, and when I plunge back into Anna Karenina soon, it will be with much clearer vision.

The pace feels just right for now, giving me the clarity I hoped for on the origin of the line, starting just far back enough to set the stage, and a clear picture of the machinations that went on to establish things.

We'll see if I tire of that after 600 pages. (A book on the whole Plantagenet line started similarly for me, but I eventually grew weary of the minutiae. These seems to be avoiding some of those traps, though: detail yes, but not drowning in it: details that illuminate the patterns, so far.)

I've got a long way, but I read slowly, and expect to go back and forth between this and Anna. So that's my early take. I'll update.

Zorka Zamfirova says

Pravo je zadovoljstvo ?itati. Poslastica! Neverovatan uvid u splet okolnosti koje su stvorile istoriju. Kakve sudbine. Montefiore piše lepo. Knjiga prosto klizi.

Dem says

Simon Sebag Montefiore's blockbuster history of the Romanov dynasty was a great choice for me to read prior to my much anticipated trip to St. Petersburg next month. I had been looking for a book on the Romanov dynasty and this was exactly what I was looking for. It's a unique and compelling read and quite a shocking insight into all twenty of the Romanov tsars and tsarinas.

Some books especially non fiction need to be read in good old fashioned paperback in order to get the best out of them and the Romanovs is a prime example.

I originally purchased this on Audio but very quickly realized this was a mistake and switched to the hardback edition. I was so glad I did as each chapter is prefaced with a cast list and I found this extremely helpful as there is a vast amount of characters in each chapter and I found myself consulting the Cast List on numerous occasions to remind myself of who was who and I think this is reflected in the length of time it took me to complete this book. I also enjoyed the inclusion of the Family tree, maps and illustrations which really added to the enjoyment of the book and are so important additions for the reader.

From the first paragraph of the Introduction I was hooked.....

" It was hard to be a tsar. Russia is not an easy country to rule. Twenty sovereigns of the Romanov dynasty reigned for 304 years, from 1613 until tsardom's destruction. by the revolution in 1917" The Romanovs were actually the most spectacularly successful empire builders since the Mongols" ,

This is an epic history of The House of Romanov which was the second dynasty, after the Rurik dynasty, to rule over Russia, and ruled from 1613 until the abdication of Czar Nicholas II on March 15, 1917, as a result of the February Revolution. its packed full of facts and intrigue and details that any reader who enjoys reading about the Romanov family from its beginning until its shocking massacre of the entire family in 1918 may well find this a very interesting read. Its also a story of power, love, lust sex and violence and greed and I was at times quite shocked by the debauchery and cruelty of the time although I had come accross it in other accounts of the Romanov family its seems more highlighted in this account and may not be for the feint hearted.

A very comprehensive and detailed book and therefore a slow but extremely satisfying read for me. Its perfectly paced and meticulously researched and while it could have been a slog with such a vast amount of information and details to pack in, the author manages to bring Russian Histroy and the house of Romanov to life in a most unique and modern way and I found myself engrossed throughout.

Delighted I had the opportunity to read this before my visit to St. Petersburg and looking forward to visiting a number of places mentioned in the book.

Carlos says

This is one of those books some people feel that they must rate 5 out of 5 star because of all the time they invested on it, but I do feel without any imposition that this book clearly does deserve the rating of 5 stars, because of its magnitude and its amazing detail, it is an epic research work into the life of the Romanov dynasty that rules over Russia for over 300 years. If you are interested in ancient or modern Russian history this is the book for you because the only way to understand Russia now is to go back into its past and learn. I highly recommend it!.

Maria Espadinha says

The Hell Farmers

Depravation

Perversion

Despotism

Were some of Romanov's favourite hobbies!

Hobbies?!... Did I say hobbies?!...

Mabey hell seeds will provide a better match for such a context?!

If you're interested in a testimony of their iniquity, just take a look at the list of atrocities committed by Peter the Great -- Great in bestiality, for sure!...

There, you'll meet a beheaded brother, a murdered mistress, a son tortured till death, etc, etc,...

Romanov have been hell farmers -- they lived and died in hell!

Nobody escapes the Law of Karma!...

Emma says

Review to follow.

But it's basically just going to say it's excellent so if you don't need any more info than that, you're good to go.

BAM The Bibliomaniac says

Heavy reading but well worth it. Unbelievably well researched none of the myth of this great house

Family trees and fantastic photos

Each chapter begins with a "cast of characters" which primes the reader for whom to expect to read about keeps the timeline straight as well as who is related

Explores beginning links to other royal families, the construction of palaces, formation of armies.

Torture, espionage, murder, intrigue, war, sex

I thought at first to write quick synopses of each section, but this review would have been entirely too long.

Each Tsar's reign was so eventful, so much violence and drama.

I'm buying this book

2017 Lenten nonfiction Buddy Reading Challenge book #31

1/14/18 Audio reread wanted to know how everything is correctly pronounced so bought the audible

AUDIO READ #5 of 2018
