



## **The Diary of Olga Romanov: Royal Witness to the Russian Revolution**

*Helen Azar*

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In August 1914, Russia entered the First World War, and with it, the Imperial family of Tsar Nicholas II was thrust into a conflict from which they would not emerge. His eldest child, Olga Nikolaevna, great-granddaughter of Queen Victoria, had begun a diary in 1905 when she was 10 years old and kept writing her thoughts and impressions of day-to-day life as a Grand Duchess until abruptly ending her entries when her father abdicated his throne in March 1917. Held at the State Archives of the Russian Federation in Moscow, Olga's diaries during the wartime period have never been translated into English until this volume. At the outset of the war, Olga and her sister, Tatiana, worked as nurses in a military hospital along with their mother, Tsarina Alexandra. Olga's younger sisters, Maria and Anastasia, visited their own infirmaries to help raise the morale of the wounded and sick soldiers. The strain was indeed great as Olga records her impressions of tending to the officers who had been injured and maimed in the fighting on the Russian front. Concerns about her sickly brother, Aleksei abound, as well those for her father who is seen attempting to manage the ongoing war. Gregori Rasputin appears in entries too, in an affectionate manner as one would expect of a family friend. While the diaries reflect the interests of a young woman, her tone increases in seriousness as the Russian army suffers setbacks, Rasputin is ultimately murdered, and a popular movement against her family begins to grow. At the point Olga ends her writing in 1917, the author continues the story by translating letters and impressions from family intimates, such as Anna Vyrubova, as well as the diary kept by Nicholas II himself. Finally, once the Imperial family has been put under house arrest by the revolutionaries, observations by Alexander Kerensky, head of the Provisional Government, are provided, these too in English translation for the first time. Olga would offer no further personal writings as she and the rest of her family were crowded into a basement of a house in the Urals and shot to death in July 1918.

The Diary of Olga Romanov: Royal Witness to the Russian Revolution, translated and introduced by scientist and librarian Helen Azar, and supplemented with additional primary source material, is a remarkable document of a young woman who did not choose to be part of a royal family and never exploited her own position, but lost her life simply because of what her family represented.

## **The Diary of Olga Romanov: Royal Witness to the Russian Revolution Details**

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## **From Reader Review The Diary of Olga Romanov: Royal Witness to the Russian Revolution for online ebook**

### **Mary Chambers says**

This is a great way to read about the Romanovs.

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### **Helen Azar says**

Here is a wonderful video for the book that my friend Anne Lloyd, a Philadelphia based Romanov artist made. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y-iGRY...>

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### **Jo says**

A glimpse into a sheltered life filled with family, devotion, duty and such promise. If anything, these diary entries and, especially, letters between Olga and her father shed light on how tragically misunderstood this particular family was in the eyes of the Russian people. So many if only's ...

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### **Amanda Edwards says**

I enjoyed reading this account of the Russian Revolution from the eyes of an innocent caught in the middle. The Grand Duchess, Olga Nicholavna Romanov, oldest daughter of Nicholas II, the last tsar of Russia, is shown to be a strong, caring, yet naive. She knows nothing out side of her fishbowl life. She knows only of living in palaces and castles, sleeping on monogrammed sheets, eating gourmet meals, and yet, sleeping on an army cot every night and taking only cold showers. She sees the war from the inside, but her vision is clouded by her very upbringing. She sees the "mad monk" Rasputin as a beloved family friend. She idolizes her "poor mama".

Since the diary ends abruptly, the author chose to fill in holes by supplementing the book with letters written by Olga, her family, and friends. This adds greater depth and outlook into the events as they unfolded. Anyone who is a Romanov reader will enjoy this simple yet insightful book.

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### **Cheryl says**

Author Helen Azar is a librarian in Philadelphia who has worked at the Rare Book Foundation at the Museum of Tsarskoe Selo in Russia. She has compiled a translation of diary entries of Olga Romanov, the eldest daughter of Nicholas II. The translations encompass the years 1914-1918. Although Olga's entries stop in March of 1917, entries from other diaries—namely those of Czar Nicholas II and Alexander Kerensky are also included along with letters written by friends and relatives of the royal family.

These translations of primary sources present a picture of the lives of the last Russian royal family from their

last ordinary days as royalty to the months immediately following the Czar's abdication, and, finally, their rude and increasingly harsh treatment as captives of the Bolshevik regime.

Ms. Azar's compilation is interesting, and leaves the reader saddened to know the fate that awaited Nicholas, his family, and their loyal servants.

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### **Lin S. says**

Not worth the effort to translate. I have always had a avid interest in her family was very disappointed in what was written. She mostly visited family members and wrote sugary letters to her father.

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### **Mary Dempsey (BigonBooks) says**

I really enjoyed having a glimpse into one of the children's lives. Besides Anastasia's Royal Diaries historical fiction book, we've never really seen a lot of what the children have to say. I do admit that it was a little misleading because most of the book was not Olga's diary, but history of before and after the attack, plus other people's diary entries, which was nice to see from time to time but it seemed like it overtook what was supposed to be OLGA'S story rather than just from one time period to another.

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### **Rachel Jackson says**

One of the last entries in this book of diaries, written not by Olga Romanova but her father, former Tsar Nicholas II, strikes an ominous tone. It reads: "The external relations have also changed in the past few weeks: the jailers are trying not to talk to us, as if they feel guilty, and it feels like they have some anxiety or are afraid of something. Confusing!"

Anyone familiar with the history of the Romanovs knows that that ominous, foreboding tone in that quote means that their end is near, but few diary records were kept beyond that point, a month or two before the Romanovs' execution. Thankfully we have the words of Olga and her family and friends, collected in this book by Helen Azar, to show us what their final few years of life were like. Olga's entries are short, to the point, emotionless, but they show what it was like to be a grand duchess, a nurse, an exile and a prisoner. Over the rapid changes in her short life, we can see her continued desperation through prayers and hopes that she writes quickly in her diary.

Her father, Nicholas, and family friends, like Anna Vyrubova, offer similar but more detailed insights to those last few months and years. In many ways, the combination of all of the voices in this collection—largely Olga's but continued by those who kept writing after Olga stopped—add up to a valuable collection of first-hand reactions and opinions about what was happening in their lives. A very important read for anyone who wants to know what was really occurring to the once royal family in their last few difficult years.

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### **Jeanet Alessandra says**

He amado con locura este libro, es fácil de leer, no es aburrido, y me gusta que tiene pie de página, porque muchas veces mencionan palabras en Ruso y a personas que no me acuerdo o no sé quienes son y sólo tengo que leer abajo para saber.

Poco se habla de Olga, la hija más grande del último emperador de Rusia, con este libro pude conocer más de ella, sus intereses, su amor por ayudar y hacer sentir bien a los demás, como dijo uno de sus tutores "Olga Nikolaevna has a crystal soul."

La última entrada del diario de Olga fue escrita el 15 de Marzo de 1917, a partir de esa fecha hasta el 21 de junio del 1918, el encargado de contarnos la historia, a través de su diario, fue su padre, Nicolás II.

Elisavetgradetz ♥

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### **Nicole says**

Had tea. Had lunch. Like a very bad twitter feed from the last days of the Russian Court.

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### **MeriBeth says**

As this was the first of the diaries of the Imperial Daughters to be translated into English and published, I really looked forward to reading it. However, I was greatly disappointed in the book as a whole. The essays at the beginning about Olga's childhood and the discovery of the Romanov remains were actually the best, most coherent portions of the book. Even then the writing seems more Young Adult in tone and style than being geared for historians or adults. When you get to the actual diary entries you feel like you're reading someone's Facebook or Twitter feeds rather than a diary. It's extremely dry notes of daily events rather than any emotional content at all. Additionally, and completely unknown unless you paid close attention to the introductory material, these are excerpts from and portions of Olga's diaries extensively supplemented by material from her father's diaries and letters and those of one of her mother's ladies in waiting. In the end, this book is a letdown of great proportions. I can only hope that someone eventually publishes a more complete translation of Olga's diaries.

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### **Sandra says**

Helen Azar has given us a real treat by translating snippets of Olga Romanov's diary entries and letters. "The Diary of Olga Romanov: Royal Witness to the Russian Revolution" offers insights into the life of Tsar Nicholas II's eldest daughter and brings her to life. The book also includes diary entries and letters of those who were close to or had contact with the grand duchess.

The book begins with a nice 25 page introduction providing some necessary background information. The diary reads a bit like a laundry list of events that happened throughout the day but the letters were more descriptive and colorful. I very much appreciated the fact that Azar included a list of names and descriptions

of the imperial family and those in their circle at the end of the book – I referred to it quite often as many names are mentioned throughout the book.

We find out that Olga was very loyal to her family and was best of friends with her sister, Tatiana. All the members of the family babied Alexei, as he was the heir to the throne, who had unfortunately inherited hemophilia. By many accounts, Olga was not a beauty, but her personality and character more than made up for whatever she lacked on the outside. Tutors described her as studious, inquisitive, and most intelligent of all her siblings. Some of her favorite pastimes included: reading, playing the piano, riding the bicycle, and playing games with her family. During WWI, she was trained, along with her mother and sisters, as a nurse and worked in the infirmary. She took and passed the exams to become a knowledgeable surgical nurse and spent much time assisting in surgeries, treating the patients, reading to them, and helping to write letters. Needless to say, she grew quite attached to some of her patients.

It is evident that she loved her country but like many in her position, she was out of touch with reality and did not understand the struggles of the average Russians. When her father abdicated the throne in 1917, the quality of life for the family quickly deteriorated. By 1918, they were placed on soldier's rations and under house arrest at a two-story house in Yekaterinburg. On July 17, 1918, she was murdered along with her family by the revolutionaries. Though I already knew her tragic fate prior to reading this, I still felt an incredible sadness as I reached the end of the book. It is so wrong that this kind and generous woman was cruelly killed simply because she was the daughter of the Tsar.

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### **Abbey says**

This diary and some letters of a member of the Russian imperial family is well edited and annotated, and the introduction is excellent. I commend Azar for curating the material so well and I'm glad it's been translated into English for the first time. This slim book will add to the sum of scholarly research on imperial Russia.

I found some of the excerpts of letters quite intriguing when the subject matter was the events around the country, or serious conversations with wounded soldiers, or concerns for the health of the son and heir, or a visit from close family friend Rasputin - all these entries were interesting in themselves, and were also tinged with the foreknowledge of how it would end.

Far too much of the diary, I thought, had all the interest of reading a log file, a bare recording of the guests who visited, what they ate, the gossip they shared, what games they played, with little commentary or expression of emotional reaction. This is the stuff of everyday life and it shows the family in an intimate setting, but it could be quite dull. On balance, it was worth a perusal. I recommend it for readers who already have a strong and broad understanding of the events and want to round out their knowledge with a more personal perspective.

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### **Simon says**

The five stars are really for the execution of the book as opposed to the actual content of Olga's diaries and letters. Azar provides a vivid translation of the girl's diary entries that gives you a strong sense as to how

Olga actually expressed herself, peppering them and her letters with mild (and occasionally funny) slang. It also conveys a better idea of how close Tatiana and Olga were as a pair, as opposed to the usual OTMA assemblage (and incidentally, is there evidence that the four girls actually referred to themselves with this acronym?). Azar rounds out the translations with letters and descriptions from those who knew Olga --- Nicholas II by no means least --- as well as fluent accounts of Olga's childhood and intra-familial relationships. There are notes providing details concerning most of those mentioned by the Grand Duchess in either her entries or letter. It might have been helpful to have included a family tree, but that's a minor quibble.

The sad fact, though, is that Olga *wasn't* a literary witness to the Russian Revolution, at least not in her diaries. Azar is perfectly upfront in defining what Olga's diaries were *not*, i.e. a reflection of her innermost thoughts. The entries tend to be overwhelmingly a banal account of her daily life with precious few details. Azar teases out the hidden meanings of Olga's coded entries regarding soldiers she knew who became romantic crushes, but there isn't any scandal; she is as reticent in code as she could possibly be. Did she expect that her sisters would crack the diaries? Her mother? Olga will often mention that she either chaired or attended committee meetings, presumably having to do with her hospital work during the war, but never gives details. There are frustrating notations about tea with Rasputin, and an extremely opaque account of his murder. This isn't Azar, this is Olga herself. The diaries are more an *aide-de-memoire* as to what she did, whom she saw on a more or less --- sometimes much less --- day to day basis.

But the diaries end just as the Revolution gets under way, and Olga more or less disappears into the background until her death in 1918. There is evidence from outside witnesses that Olga, more than the other three daughters, was aware of the the danger in which the family found itself. It also fell to her to steer Tatiana, Marie and Aleksei to Ekaterinberg after the family was separated at Tobolsk. It is frustrating that she seems to have made a deliberate decision to end her diaries in March, 1917. At the same time, given the evidence, it is unlikely that she would have confided her thoughts and feelings to paper for the next year.

Azar's book fills an important niche, however. Marie and Anastasia destroyed their diaries during early captivity. Olga's accounts are now added to those of her parents (equally circumspect), and provide a glimpse into the activities of this fascinating family.

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### **Carole P. Roman says**

A slice of life of the Russian court told from the perspective of Tzar Nicholas's oldest daughter, Olga. Sometimes giddy, at other times grounded in the stark realities of the first world war, it is a firsthand account in the form of a diary that outlines her day to day life and the impact of her changing world. Sweetly innocent, and charmingly devoted to her family, it's an insider's look into the everyday details, filled with Olga's warmth. Seemingly unaffected by her title, yet understanding her vital role in the royal family, it was a pleasure to read. Too often Alexander's two youngest children, Alexsie and Anastasia steal the show. This book gave illumination to the personality of a budding, young woman born into a changing world and then destroyed because of it.

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