



*The Last of the Tsars:
Nicholas II and the
Russian Revolution*

Robert Service

London: Pan Macmillan, 2017

Review by: Ala Creciun

The Last of the Tsars: Nicholas II and the Russian Revolution. By Robert Service.
London: Pan Macmillan, 2017. ISBN 978-1-44-72-9309-5. xviii +382 pp. £25.

The centenary of the October Revolution has prompted a surge of new studies revisiting the dramatic events of 1917. Robert Service makes a timely contribution with this study of Nicholas II and his family after his fall from power. The book focuses on the sixteen months of the Romanovs's detention in Tsarskoe Selo, Tobolsk, and Ekaterinburg from March 1917 until their execution in July 1918. While the story of the Romanovs's gruesome end has been told many times, Service's account of their captivity offers new insights about Nicholas, his family, their captors, and the Revolution itself.

The forty-nine short and chronologically-ordered chapters follow the Romanovs through Nicholas's abdication, his family's detention, and their execution. It shows the gradual tightening of security around the Romanovs, their growing isolation and surveillance, and the receding courtesy and growing contempt of their captors. Service details their daily lives in captivity: their pastimes and personalities, their rapport with their captors, and even their financial management during detention. His account is set apart by three hitherto-underexplored topics.

First, Service is interested in "Nicholas's thoughts on the revolutionary situation of 1917–18 and on his vision of the prospects for Russia" (2). Service argues that, while in captivity, Nicholas never expressed regret about his political opinions or decisions. The diaries of Nicholas and his captors reveal that he believed the Revolution was an international conspiracy concocted by Russia's Jews; his reading of anti-Semitic authors like Baroness Orczy or Sergei Nilus reinforce this idea. Service's extensive work with Nicholas's diary, particularly his attention to these readings, offers a glimpse into the former monarch's thoughts, but some claims invite caution. The reading list, recovered from Nicholas's diary, is often eclectic and the origins of these books are at times haphazard. It is unclear whether Nicholas chose his readings, or to what extent mere titles suggest the conclusions he may have reached. Though Service's argument is at times closer to an intelligent surmise, Nicholas's readings merit the attention they receive in the book.

Second, Service explores the "political, economic and social environment around the Romanovs' places of detention" (2). He exposes the political fragmentation and chaos of decision-making around the Romanov family, and reveals the divided opinions within the Provisional Government, and later the Bolshevik government, as they weighed internal versus foreign exile and degrees of imprisonment or execution for all or some family members. Service shows that Kerensky's decision to send the Romanovs to

the remote town of Tobolsk—beyond the reach of revolutionary vigilante justice—inadvertently placed them beyond the reliable reach of the leadership in Petrograd (and later Moscow). Service’s study is at its best when it underscores the powerful influence of local elements on fate of the Romanovs. He exposes the numerous and often conflicting parties and opinions involved. At the Ipatiev house, Petrograd plenipotentiaries struggled to keep the Romanovs safe from both hostile locals and the soldiers tasked to guard the family. Locally, the Tobolsk Soviet was beset by political struggle among Bolsheviks, Mensheviks, and Left Social Revolutionaries: each with their own plans for the Romanovs. Regionally, Ekaterinburg and Omsk leaderships competed for influence in Tobolsk, and for control over the royal detainees. When it came to assuring the Romanovs’s safety, the discretion of the plenipotentiary occasionally overrode Petrograd orders. Service’s narrative of the Romanovs’s captivity ultimately serves as a prism onto the conflicted nature of the Revolution: its dilemmas, factional struggles, and the difficulty of the centre in controlling peripheries.

Finally, Service seeks to pinpoint “exactly why the murders took place when, where and how they did” (2). He argues that the Romanovs’s execution was relatively spontaneous and circumstantial, rather than premeditated and ideologically motivated. Service claims that Moscow’s initial plan was to have a show trial for Nicholas, or to leverage the family in the Brest-Litovsk negotiations. It was only when the White Army allies were approaching Ekaterinburg that Lenin and Sverdlov endorsed the executions. According to Service, the fatal role for Nicholas and his family was played by local and regional struggles, miscommunication, and the start of the Civil War. One is left with a striking impression of Moscow’s inability to enforce the party line among local Bolsheviks, or to safeguard an important political symbol and diplomatic gambit.

A notable strength of the book is Service’s ability to place the Romanovs in the midst of the Revolutionary drama. Rather than being merely a bygone, the family appears very much dependent on revolutionary outcomes. This creates a continuity that is rich in insight on the tumultuous transition from the old regime. The book’s attention to the Romanovs’s captors—their social origins, political views, and interactions with the family—reveals the complex attitudes toward the monarchic family in the first years of the Revolution. Service marshals a wealth of sources and forensic information, including the Hoover Institution archives. The book’s lucid and clear prose, delivered in short chapters, underscores the volatility and quick turn of events in Revolutionary Russia, but also makes this book a veritable page-turner. It is handsomely produced and includes two sets of photographs.

The book suffers from a number of unfortunate typos, such as “A terrorist group killed Alexander III in 1881” (28) and “[Polish] national revolt in 1867” (82). However, this does not diminish its valuable and timely contribution. An exciting and enjoyable read, this book is recommended to anyone interested in Russian history.

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