



*The Race to Save Romanovs:
The Truth Behind the Secret Plans
to Rescue Russia's Imperial
Family*

Helen Rappaport

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The Race to Save the Romanovs: The Truth Behind the Secret Plans to Rescue Russia's Imperial Family. By Helen Rappaport. London: Windmill Books, 2018. ISBN 978-1-786-09017-1. xxviii + 372 pp. £9.99

Nicholas II signed his abdication on the imperial train at Pskov on 15 March 1917. The news did not come as a surprise to the Tsar's first cousin, Britain's George V, who had read foreign office despatches from Sir George Buchanan, the British ambassador in Petrograd, which chronicled the autocracy's descent towards catastrophe. Sixteen months later, the Russian Imperial Family were brutally murdered in the basement of the Ipatiev House, where they had been imprisoned since the end of April 1918.

In her new book, *The Race to Save the Romanovs*, Helen Rappaport sets out to explain why the vast monarchical web that held sway over Europe in the early twentieth century—connected via German DNA, state visits, family holidays in Denmark, Faberge eggs, and communicating in the common language of English—failed to save the doomed Romanovs. Rappaport is well placed to accept this daunting task. As a linguist with a degree in Russian Special Studies, Rappaport has already completed invaluable work that shines light on the lesser known, and often neglected, dimensions of Late Imperial and Revolutionary Russia. The author of numerous popular history books including *The Last Days of the Romanovs: Tragedy at Ekaterinburg* (2009), *Conspirator: Lenin in Exile* (2010), and *Caught in the Revolution: Petrograd 1917* (2016), this book is the culmination of her previous works and marks the 100th anniversary of the murder of the Russian Tsar and Tsarina, along with their four daughters and only son.

In May 1915, Margot Asquith, wife of British Prime Minister H.H. Asquith, recorded in her diary that George V had described the Tsar as “the best, straightest, most clear and decided man I know.” Days after the King heard of the abdication, he dispatched a sympathetic telegram, declaring that “Events of last week have greatly distressed me. My thoughts are constantly with you and I shall always remain your true and devoted friend, as you know I have been in the past.” It can be concluded from the above statements that the British monarch and Russian ruler were undoubtedly friends. Yet, Rappaport's research attempts to debunk the often-repeated conclusion that the indecisiveness of George V in giving asylum to his Russian relatives in England contributed to the eventual fate of the Imperial family.

Focusing on the period from the time of Nicholas's abdication, until the murders in July 1918, Rappaport introduces a host of key players, including the Danish Royal Family, the German Kaiser Wilhelm II, and the true surprise and hero of the book, Alfonso XIII of Spain. In her vivid

storytelling approach that has the reader hooked from start to end, Rappaport consults the papers of Russian diplomats in Europe, located in notoriously difficult to access archival institutions, to highlight the first messages of support that were sent to Nicholas from an unlikely source: Alfonso XIII.

In attempting to explore fresh angles, which she undoubtedly succeeds in, Rappaport's enthralling study unearths new and insightful material. For example, one of her sources is the unsorted papers from the literary estate of a fellow royal-watcher, which contains the transcripts of royal correspondence hidden deep in the Romanian royal archives. From this extensive collection we learn of the hatred that bristled for the Empress Alexandra from her monarchical relatives. The Duchess of Coburg declared to her daughter, Crown Princess Marie of Romania, in February 1913, of her "innermost conviction is that she [Alexandra] is suffering from a mild, but morally serious kind of insanity" (26).

The meticulous research that has been ploughed into the book is evident in the titbits of information that Rappaport reveals in the process of the book. Far from interrupting the flow of this fascinating story, which at times reads like a detective novel, they demonstrate the extreme lengths that Rappaport has gone to in order to present arguments that have been omitted from previous studies, asking "Why did the Allied governments with which Russia had so doggedly been fighting a war for three and a half years let them down? Why did Germany not take advantage of its upper hand at the Brest-Litovsk peace talks with the Bolsheviks in 1918 and insist that the Romanovs be released?" (5).

The most fascinating chapters of Rappaport's book cover the numerous rescue schemes by Russian monarchists, and the heart-rending devotion of the family's loyal retainers. These sections reveal the full, and diverse, scope of the efforts made to save the ill-fated Romanovs. Alongside the diplomatic channels and dynastic network at work, Rappaport documents the rescue plans that were being formulated inside Russia by anxious monarchist officers, complete with "special secret codes, covering addresses, false names, and words with secret meanings" (96–97). Rappaport devotes attention to the sheer logistics of trying to rescue a family of seven and their vast entourage, describing how the country's extreme winter weather, the sick children, the state of the railways and who controlled them, the importance of the geographical landscape, and the potential safe escape routes in light of the impact of World War I all had to be taken into account and played a crucial part in any rescue attempts. The drama and tension of this is revealed in Chapter 5, when Rappaport observes that "A fast torpedo boat and a few bags of British sovereigns could have got the family out across the Gulf of Finland. But it had to be done within a fortnight" (88).

Rappaport's book chronicles the well-known story of how the British government offered the Romanovs asylum, and how George V feared for his own monarchical position. While focusing on the actions, and importantly, the inactions of the British monarch, until the Foreign Office complied with the King's wishes and withdrew the invitation. Rappaport treads new ground by exploring the vast network of ruling royal cousins that Nicholas and Alexandra belonged to. Rather than adhering to the often-expressed view that the blame should be laid entirely at the door of George V, Rappaport considers the haphazard plots to save the Russian royals by the ex-Emperor's former subjects, and the scattered attempts by diplomats in Copenhagen and Madrid, asserting that "their murders were everybody's—and nobody's—fault" (294). But, as Rappaport skilfully shows, there was never really a moment when the Romanovs might plausibly have been rescued. Seven days after Nicholas's abdication, Petrograd Soviet's seized power from the Provisional Government and tightened security, making it impossible for them to flee, which ultimately sealed their fate.

Placed within the historical context, which included the impact of World War I, the diplomatic and political climate, and the complex dynastic family relationships, Rappaport's sterling work acknowledges the responsibility of other important European players in the fate of the Romanov family. Perhaps most revealing is the multi-faceted audience that Rappaport's work will appeal to: from the general reader interested in Imperial Russia, to the serious minded research-conscious academic, intrigued by the puzzling gaps in the literature and neglected questions that have now been filled by Rappaport's groundbreaking research.

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