



*The Romanov Sisters: The Lost Lives
of the Daughters of
Nicholas and Alexandra*

Helen Rappaport

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Press, 2014)

Review by: Carolyn Harris

The Romanov Sisters: The Lost Lives of the Daughters of Nicholas and Alexandra. By Helen Rappaport. New York: Macmillan, St Martin's Press. 2014. ISBN 9781250067456. 492 pp. \$27.99 US/\$31.99 CDN

The last imperial family of Russia is one of the best documented families in history. Emperor Nicholas II, his wife Empress Alexandra, their four daughters, Grand Duchesses Olga, Tatiana, Maria and Anastasia and their son, Grand Duke Alexei, lived at a time when photography and newsreels captured the royal image for a world audience and they all kept daily diaries and wrote numerous letters. The Russian Revolutions of 1917 (the abdication of Nicholas II in March and the Bolshevik seizure of power in November) and the murder of the entire family in 1918 resulted in an exodus of courtiers from Russia who wrote books about their time with the Romanovs. Even Russian emigrés who had little contact with the imperial children included their impressions of life behind palace doors.

Despite all these sources, the distinct personalities and achievements of Nicholas and Alexandra's daughters are little known. The public image of the grand duchesses emphasized their similarities instead of their differences. In official photographs, the grand duchesses often wore matching white dresses, appearing interchangeable to the public. Following their murder when the eldest was twenty-two and the youngest was seventeen the public viewed them collectively as "the children" or as martyrs rather than as individuals. In *The Romanov Sisters: The Lost Lives of the Daughters of Nicholas and Alexandra* (2014), Helen Rappaport, author of numerous popular history books including *The Last Days of the Romanovs: Tragedy at Ekaterinburg* (2009), *Conspirator: Lenin in Exile* (2010) and *A Magnificent Obsession: Victoria, Albert, and the Death that Changed the British Monarchy* (2012), reconstructs the lives of Olga, Tatiana, Maria and Anastasia led behind palace walls.

Popular histories that discuss the grand duchesses are often dominated by their last days, deaths and the numerous women who claimed to have miraculously survived the murder – especially Franziska Shanzkowska, whose decades-long claim to be Anastasia inspired plays and films that captured the popular imagination. Rappaport, however, keeps the focus firmly on the young women's lives. (Readers interested in their deaths should consult her previous book, *The Last Days of the Romanovs: Tragedy at Ekaterinburg*. 2009). The book analyses newspapers, letters and diaries revealing how the four young women were viewed during their lives. After the murder of the imperial family, surviving courtiers who fled into exile wrote memoirs that repeated the popular views of the grand duchesses and newspaper reporters speculated about what life had been like behind palace walls. Rappaport also makes use of previously unpublished material, such as Anastasia's correspondence

makes use of previously unpublished material, such as Anastasia's correspondence with one of her closest friends during the last months of her life.

Alexandra may have hoped to shield her daughters from what she perceived as the corrupting influence of the Russian nobility but the general public was intensely curious about them. The years leading up to the First World War saw intense speculation about the princes they would marry and the potential for change to Russia's semi-Salic succession laws. Possible husbands included the future King Edward VIII, King Carol II of Romania, Czar Boris III of Bulgaria and Prince Christopher of Greece. For the eldest daughter, Olga, there were rumours that she might become the first sovereign Empress of Russia since Catherine the Great. Nicholas II's conflicts with his male relatives and the haemophilia of his only son made him explore the possibility of female succession at various points during his reign. The grand duchesses' writings reveal that they had their own, more modest goals. Olga confided to a friend during the war that she hoped, "To get married, live always in the countryside summer and winter, always mix with good people, and no officialdom whatsoever" (260).

The most fascinating chapters of Rappaport's book cover the First World War because these sections reveal the full scope of the grand duchesses' nursing and philanthropy and the impact of this work on Russia. Like other young women of their social station, Olga, Tatiana, Maria and Anastasia found leadership opportunities during wartime that expanded their horizons. While other works on the Romanovs focus mainly on how Olga and Tatiana were trained as nurses alongside their mother, Rappaport also looks at their committee work and fundraising opportunities in detail. Tatiana, in particular, excelled at these activities. She chaired a committee for the aid of displaced refugees, wrote a newspaper article to increase awareness of this issue, collected donations from an international array of donors and did administrative work for her charities. Along with their mother, the four sisters made frequent visits to Russian military headquarters in Mogliev, which were usually off limits to women, giving them a unique perspective on the war effort.

Rappaport devotes much of the first third of the book to Alexandra's upbringing as a granddaughter of Queen Victoria and Princess of Hesse-Darmstadt and the influence she had over her daughters. Alexandra suffered from a range of health problems and her daughters spent much of their childhood taking turns caring for her. As they grew older, they represented her on numerous public occasions. While this material is crucial to understanding the worldview of the grand duchesses, more analysis of Nicholas II's childhood would have been useful here. The last Czar was an involved father who spent a great deal of time with his daughters and was undoubtedly also a strong influence during their lives. Nicholas II's mother, Princess

-ly also a strong influence during their lives. Nicholas II's mother, Princess Dagmar of Denmark, came from a close family that maintained strong ties across Europe. Nicholas II's happy memories of annual family gatherings in Denmark may have informed the private domestic sphere that he and Alexandra created for their children.

Rappaport's book restores the individuality of Olga, Tatiana, Maria and Anastasia. They were among the most famous royal personages of the early twentieth century and continue to fascinate people around the world today. Rappaport has written the definitive biography of four young women whose lives were cut short by war and revolution.

CAROLYN HARRIS,

University of Toronto, School of Continuing Studies