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Interview with Simon Sebag Montefiore: The Romanovs

Simon Sebag Montefiore's new book explores the dramatic, brutal world of the centuries-spanning Romanov dynasty - and shows why it matters today. Matt Elton met up with him to find out more

In context

The Romanov dynasty ruled Russia for more than 300 years from 1613 to 1917. From its first tsar, Michael I (1596-1645), the often violently contested line featured a diverse array of autocrats. Peter the Great (1672-1725) is known for his court's extravagance; Catherine the Great (1729-96) was Russia's longest-serving female leader; Alexander I (1777-1825) ruled during the the Napoleonic Wars and Alexander II (1818-81) is known for his liberal reforms. The dynasty ended in 1917 with the forced abdication of Nicholas II who was later executed with his family by revolutionary forces.

What's your take on the earliest days of the Romanov dynasty?

The first Romanov to be made tsar was Michael I, and it was a job that nobody wanted to go near. He was a hopeless ruler, really, but in a Russia filled with swaggering warlords, the very fact that he was young and innocent, and his links to the old dynasty – his great-aunt Anastasia was the first wife of Ivan the Terrible – made him a perfect tsar.

It's hard to get a clear sense of his personality, but there were lots of strong characters around him, including his father – the real power behind his reign. But when you're studying the Romanovs, it's important to remember that it's not that different from what's happening in England or other powers at the time. We're often very smug about the supposed primitiveness of Russian autocracy, but even in western democracies prime ministers have entourages: look at Tony Blair's 'sofa government', for instance.

The succession was notably fraught. What frailties do you think it reveals about the regime?

The tsar's deathbeds were always fraught because there was no fixed succession until the 1790s. Until then, a tsar could choose any member of the family to succeed to the throne – but as we know from Tony Blair, Margaret Thatcher, and many other cases, nobody wants to name their successor.

So the problem was that anyone could say that the dying tsar had whispered something to them. Successions in autocracies, as in democracies, are great for historians analysing how regimes really work, because everything came down to the fundamentals of power.

How important was choosing a wife, and how did that happen?

The selection took the form of a 'brideshow', a very exotic ritual that was literally a beauty contest. All of the pretty girls were invited to Moscow and went through various rounds until the final viewing when the tsar started to choose his favourites. The point of the brideshow was that the girls weren't related to, or connected to, anyone important, so they were 'safe'. But, of course, behind the scenes people were backing different girls.

There are some huge characters in this story. Are there any that haven't gained enough attention elsewhere?