

BOOK REVIEW



Montefiore, *The Romanovs*

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The Russian Empire represents the litmus test for anybody who tries to verify one's modern sensitivity (fundamentally progressivist). The attitude in front of the most traditionalist political regime tells everything one needs to know about the fundamental political orientations of a person.

With the occasion of the celebration of one century from the Revolution that overthrew the Empire of the Tsars, the editorial market was flooded, as it was expected, by many books about Russia, about the tsarist regime and the Revolutions of 1917.

Editura Trei (Trei Publishing House) has published the translation of the very successful book of Simon Sebag Montefiore, „The Romanovs,” an ambitious attempt to reconstruct the Empire's history through its most important characters: the tsars and the tsarinas. The book has the merit of being written in an excellent manner, very easily readable, with an unusual dramatic sense, sometimes even unbalanced, from a perspective that favors the central figures, which make the reading of the book very pleasant. Moreover, Montefiore had the chance to rely on a remarkable recent bibliography about Russia (one may distinguish the name of Dominic Lieven) and on the opening of the

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Soviet archives. However and unfortunately, the book disappoints from the beginning to the end, being a skilled revival of the main Occidental stereotypes about Russia.

The decline of "The Romanovs" is explained by employing the same political philosophy perspective in which the entire book is written, the main flaw of which is its incapability of distinguishing between the regime of the tsars, communism and the Russia under Vladimir Putin, all of which are equivalent in the opinion of the author.

The framework used to interpret Russian history can be identified in the first pages of the book. For instance, Montefiore (2017, p.) states that:

In the 21st century, the new autocracies from Russia and China have many elements in common with the tsarist regime, being ruled by small opaque coteries, huge wealth grabbers and connected by business owner – client type hierarchic relationships, all at the mercy of the caprices of the autocrat.

The end of the book re-enforces the same idea:

[N]o tsar had ever ruled Russia after 1917, even if each one of the successors of Nicholas II, who ruled the same Empire with many of the same challenges in completely different circumstances, aligned, adapted and combined the prestige of the Romanovs with the spirit of the times they were living in. (p.)

While nowadays, Montefiore (p.) maintains that "Putin rules based on the principles of the Romanovs: autocracy and the leading of a clique in exchange of internal prosperity and external fame."

The poor impression that one is left with after reading such an interpretation would not be problematic in itself if it was not based on falsities. It suffices to point out that, among other forces, the Orthodox autocracy was kept in check by the Church, that was able to excommunicate the tsars (as was the case of Ivan the Terrible) or to summon the people to war if the tsar renounced at

the Orthodox belief (the case of Ermoghen Patriarch and False Dmitry who proclaimed himself as a Catholic) and was characterized by the Byzantine symphony between the emperor and the patriarch. Despite all the slipups faced in practice by this model, it remained an aspiration which was constantly taken into account especially by the monarchs that followed the reign of Catherine the Great. None of these characteristics can be found in today's autocracy simulations or the ones from the communist period. But this does not prevent the very popular historians like Montefiore, to present the same old image of the identity between the tsar and criminal dictators, communists, and post-communists.

Moreover, even setting aside such exegeses adjacent to theology - an element that is totally missing from the books of the British historians, but indispensable for anyone who want to understand the functioning logic of the Orthodox autocracy -, it is enough to read the books authored by, Dominic Lieven, a Cambridge professor, or Antony Sutton, in order to discern the indisputably qualitative difference at the level of the economic and politic institutions not only between the communist regime and the modern imperial Russia, but even between the latter and the Western constitutional regimes from the respective period. However, to Montefiore, the Romanovs are the perfect definition of "despotism, insanity and arrogance of the absolute power". (p.)

Another interpretation manner, which the reader is advised to adopt, is represented by the model of the Imperial Rome. Unfortunately, the comparison is with Roman decadence, especially sexual (and one can notice a certain lust of the author in the description of the orgies), with the excesses of Messalina, with Caligula (Montefiore sees in the observations of Tsar Pavel a similarity with the words of the villain Roman emperor), with the assassinations from the palace and the astonishing glamour. It is not like they never existed, but they were rather absent during the period of the Orthodox tsars, from Pavel to Nicholas II. Also, these excesses were especially characteristic of the "enlightened"

despots of 18th century Russia, the very ones that the author considers to be the greatest rulers of Russia (not accidentally, Peter the Great and Catherine) and, essentially, the most Westernized tsars that the Empire had. We should also mention, in this context, that the moral libertinism and sadism that Montefiore describes could also be found, with no difficulties, all over Europe, in those times, as noted by an English reviewer of the book (Author, yr.).

But, in the opinion of Montefiore (2017, p.), the Russia of the tsars "is a world where obscure foreigners claim to be the reincarnation of deceased monarchs, the brides are poisoned, the parents torture their children until they die, the sons kill their fathers, the wives kill their husbands, a saint is poisoned and shot and, apparently, he raises from the dead, barbers and shavers come to have the power, the giants and freaks are collected, (...) the flash is pulled up with the knut, buttocks are impaled, the children are slaughtered; here one can find two nymphomaniac empresses, crazy about fashion, ménage a trois, lesbians and an emperor who wrote the most erotic correspondence ever written by a state ruler". After such a characterization, there is nothing else you need to know about Russia.

It is indubitable that only a people of beasts could have such rulers, and Montefiore does not refrain from describing many practices presented by him as being specific to Russia. For instance, he quotes from the memories of a German traveler, who was in Moscow in the 16th century, who noticed the voluptuous dances, the naked and drunk women in front of the taverns, the appetite of the inhabitants "for sodomy, not only with boys but also with horses". In the same manner, according to the author, during the riot of Bogdan Hmelnițki, the Hebrews suffered the hardest regimen up to the moment of the Holocaust: the children were disjointed, roasted and eaten in front of their raped mothers. The description is borrowed by Montefiore from a Talmudist and cabal initiated person from that period, Nathan Hannover, and, perhaps, it would have been advisable for it to be mitigated by other more objective sources, or placed in a wider critical context.

But, if the objective is to present a people of gnomes coming from the depths of the Hell, any negative impression is acceptable and any doubtable proof, however singular, is welcomed.

Such a Hell-emerged people can obviously be only a plague for the neighbors, and Montefiore reminds about the persecution of the many populations of the empire, as the "Polish, Georgian and Finish people, and especially, the Jewish people." But the history is slightly different and, for this, no deep research is necessary. For instance, the Finish and Polish peoples (until their rebellion) had, under the Russian occupation, the most liberal constitutions existing until then in Europe. As for the ascension of the non-Russians within the empire, it is enough to enumerate the numerous ministers, generals and high-rank officials of the Empire in order to see how permeable was the regime of the tsars at the passing of the foreign elites. From Dimitrie Cantemir or the Prince Bagration, distinguished in the Napoleonic wars, to the Muslim, Khan Hussein, the only tsarist general who remained faithful to Nicholas II, a long list of non-Russians testify to the opening of the Romanovs towards the persons considered to be competent. This does not mean that there were no dark episodes (the example of Georgia or Bessarabia, subjected to a process of Russification, flash into our minds), but these are rather isolated in the Russian context and explainable in the circumstances of the era. It is certain that in the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, small and extremely different countries, like Korea or Ethiopia, considered Russia as the only world power able to defend their independence and legitimacy. With respect to persecutions, even Montefiore admits with a slightly noticeable dissatisfaction, that the tsars ordered no pogroms, even if he fails to mention that the Romanovs were trying very hard to repress them.

It is no wonder that, since the general perspective is flawed, some relevant information, which sometimes supports the theory on the whole, are at least ambiguous or rather false. For instance, Tsar Alexander III is presented as a huge drinker. The primary

historical source is represented by the memories of an adjutant, named Cherevin, and the secondary source is represented by certain words of wisdom of Trotsky, quoted in several places. Besides these, there is no reference to the works of a recognized scholar that studied Imperial Russian history. The main issue related to the memories of Cherevin is represented by the fact that they do not exist, as it was proved by many historians. Practically, the myth of alcoholism came from a revolutionary source and it has been perpetuated in a comfortable manner, with no verification whatsoever, until today, by most of the Western historians. In fact, Alexander III was a person of many virtues, who only drank kvas and, rarely, champagne with water, and was very strict with the fasts of the Church. His autopsy revealed no liver disorders, and the cause of death (nephrosis) was not related to the consumption of alcohol.

Another major flaw of the book is represented by the description of Rasputin, who was presented in the classical colors of a mystic person, with uncontrollable sexual urges and strange tastes. Again, the recent researchers, including a British author with academic credentials (Author, yr.), who, in fact, reviewed Montefiore's book favorably, have shattered most of the information, considered until now as being true, with respect to this pilgrim. For instance, the incident at a restaurant where Rasputin undressed completely, is, now, after the opening of the archives, proved as being a pure invention of the tsarist police forces, but Montefiore presents the entire story as being authentic.

This is not the only false information from such an ambitious book, and some of it can be understandable. Except that all errors are convergent to the general idea according to which the Romanovs were a type of sadistic and oppressive Oriental despots. One must not be surprised if nothing good about the tsars and the Russian empire results from the book, though even Montefiore notes somewhere that a reader can justly ask himself/herself how Russia could have had such a success being ruled so badly by such monsters?"

After reading this book, one remains unaware that, during the reprisals of the Decembrist uprising, Russia had to import an executioner from Scandinavia, because the executions were no longer performed in Russia. Also, there is no reference to the fact that the terrorist murderers were exonerated in trials with jury, that Lenin was hunting freely during the Siberian exile, or that the protection of the tsars was so permeable and superficial that Alexander II survived many attempts of murder until he was finally killed. No where is the reader told that the tsars were constantly paying attention to the Church, and that the last one, Nicholas II, was unanimously considered by the saints of the era as a truly pious person, one able to convert to the Orthodox religion only through his simple example and the example of his family, one of the Anglican tutors of the children, etc. Instead, the preconceptions of the reader, with no immunity to Occidental ideological stereotypes, shall be strengthened, and after he finishes reading the Montefiore's work, he shall have no doubt regarding the fact that Russia, from the beginning until now, is a dark spot of the history, ruled by dark characters, leading a people of monsters.

REFERENCE

The Romanovs: 1613-1918, Simon Sebag Montefiore, 2017, Editura Trei.