

RASPUTIN AND THE DOWNFALL OF THE ROMANOVS

Review by **John Davis**

Rasputin and the Downfall of the Romanovs

by Anthony Beevor

MENTION the name Rasputin to anyone and an immediate response is almost guaranteed. But does he really deserve the much-used epithet “The Mad Monk”, should he warrant his place in the list of history’s bogeymen and to what extent was he responsible for the downfall of Russia’s three-hundred-year-old ruling dynasty?

The evidence to help answer these questions is presented in Beevor’s meticulously researched book which takes a well-rounded, measured view of the crisis and the events which precipitated it. Beevor writes straightforwardly, carefully juxtaposing narrative with perceptive insight. His style resembles that of an investigative journalist as he presents and dissects the actions and words of all relevant parties to assist our deliberations while also highlighting the fact that fake news is certainly not a recent phenomenon. Rasputin, for whom the word enigmatic might have been invented, may have been an influential and contributory figure to regime change, we are encouraged to consider, but was he just one wave in the perfect storm that finally led to the collapse of the Romanovs in 1917?

Grigory Efimovich Rasputin was born in Pokrovskoe, Siberia in 1869 of peasant stock but later assumed the guise of a wandering pilgrim. In St. Petersburg, regardless of his wholesale drunkenness and debauchery, he captivated high ranking church officials and a malleable self-indulgent aristocracy by acting as a mystic and a faith healer despite the fact his Okhrana (Czarist Secret Police) file was bursting at the seams. As one Russian academic remarked, “When the social and political order is about to disintegrate, rulers always seek the support of the supernatural.”

Rasputin meets Czar Nicholas II and the Czarina, Alexandra. The Czar is a deeply religious autocrat; his wife believes faith can achieve miracles. The heir, Alexei, unbeknown to anyone beyond the palace, is a haemophiliac and has several near-death episodes. Rasputin soothes the boy, calms

the mother, reassures the father and the adult trio form an unshakeable bond. So appropriate that the photographs on the book’s dustcover show both Nicholas and Alexandra looking benignly inward towards Rasputin while the centrally located monk stares fixedly at the viewer.

When Nicholas leaves to take command of the disastrously under-performing Russian army during the First World War, Alexandra and Rasputin effectively run the country causing deep unrest in both aristocracy and military. It is sarcastically called the ‘boudoir cabinet’. The Czarina, remember, is a former German princess while Rasputin gives meaning to the phrase ‘a loose cannon’.

Readers with some historical knowledge will know how this will all end. Nevertheless, it is engrossing to follow how Beevor forensically unpicks the crucial components in this complex Siberian monk’s rise to power, his severe flaws, undoubted charisma, ruthless opportunism and eventual demise.

Pity that the large selection of black and white photographs should appear as low-quality grainy prints and that the glossary could not have been more expansive. Given the subject matter, Russian names occur frequently. They may cause one or two pronunciation headaches which can be a hiatus when reading. My own tip, if a name is going to appear frequently, is to use abbreviations. So, for example, Dmitry Ovsianiko-Kalikovskiy might morph down to DO-K.

How should history then judge Rasputin? Religious charlatan or altruist? Sympathetic shaman or spurious rogue? Even after Beevor’s comprehensive re-assessment, the jury may still be out.

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