



The Romanovs: 1613-1918

By Simon Sebag Montefiore

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The Romanovs were the most successful dynasty of modern times, ruling a sixth of the world's surface for three centuries. How did one family turn a war-ruined principality into the world's greatest empire? And how did they lose it all?

This is the intimate story of twenty tsars and tsarinas, some touched by genius, some by madness, but all inspired by holy autocracy and imperial ambition. Simon Sebag Montefiore's gripping chronicle reveals their secret world of unlimited power and ruthless empire-building, overshadowed by palace conspiracy, family rivalries, sexual decadence and wild extravagance, with a global cast of adventurers, courtesans, revolutionaries and poets, from Ivan the Terrible to Tolstoy and Pushkin, to Bismarck, Lincoln, Queen Victoria and Lenin.

To rule Russia was both imperial-sacred mission and poisoned chalice: six of the last twelve tsars were murdered. Peter the Great tortured his own son to death while making Russia an empire, and dominated his court with a dining club notable for compulsory drunkenness, naked dwarfs and fancy dress. Catherine the Great overthrew her own husband (who was murdered soon afterward), enjoyed affairs with a series of young male favorites, conquered Ukraine and fascinated Europe. Paul I was strangled by courtiers backed by his own son, Alexander I, who in turn faced Napoleon's invasion and the burning of Moscow, then went on to take Paris. Alexander II liberated the serfs, survived five assassination attempts and wrote perhaps the most explicit love letters ever composed by a ruler. *The Romanovs* climaxes with a fresh, unforgettable portrayal of Nicholas II and Alexandra, the rise and murder of Rasputin, war and revolution—and the harrowing massacre of the entire family.

Dazzlingly entertaining and beautifully written from start to finish, *The Romanovs* brings these monarchs—male and female, great and flawed, their families and courts—blazingly to life. Drawing on new archival research, Montefiore delivers an enthralling epic of triumph and tragedy, love and murder, encompassing the seminal years 1812, 1914 and 1917, that is both a universal study of power and a portrait of empire that helps define Russia today.

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Editorial Review

Review

“Don’t let its size fool you: There’s never been a more inviting 700-plus-page historical tome. That’s because the author, who matches rigorous scholarship with a novelist’s eye for delicious details, is clearly having so much fun. And why not? In three centuries, the Romanovs produced titans and weaklings, war and peace, and enough salacious behavior to make us say, ‘Turn off thy Kardashians! Pick up thy Montefiore!’”

—O, *The Oprah Magazine* (Oprah’s 10 favorite books of 2016)

“Simon Sebag Montefiore’s *The Romanovs* is epic history on the grandest scale . . . A story of conspiracy, drunken coups, assassination, torture, impaling, breaking on the wheel, lethal floggings with the knout, sexual and alcoholic excess, charlatans and pretenders, flamboyant wealth based on a grinding serfdom, and, not surprisingly, a vicious cycle of repression and revolt. *Game of Thrones* seems like the proverbial vicar’s tea party in comparison . . . Reading Montefiore’s excellent account, it is hard to imagine how the monarchy could ever have survived under their catastrophic leadership.”

—Antony Beevor, *Financial Times*

“Spellbinding . . . it takes true historical daring to tackle such an immense subject. . . . Montefiore’s novelistic gift of drawing vivid characters with a few choice words never fails him. . . . The main portraits are invariably memorable. . . . This monumental work is an essential addition to the library of anyone interested in Russian history and the doomed dynasty of the Romanovs.”

—Olga Grushin, *The New York Times Book Review*

“Wonderfully written and fascinating down to the last footnote. . . . [Montefiore’s] style is polished, lively, informed. . . . Montefiore is an accomplished storyteller, and what might have been a plodding succession of reigns reads instead like a novel—specifically, in its interplay of themes and motifs, and especially its pairing of opposites, like Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. . . . [The Romanovs’] stories—freshened, compressed, filled in and corrected—achieve new power and meaning in this fast-moving narrative. . . . Like a novel, too, this is a hard book to put down. As historical reconstruction and as storytelling, *The Romanovs* is an achievement of the first rank.”

—David Walton, *The Dallas Morning News*

“The book is a marvellous read and the last third, from fin de siècle to revolutionary cataclysm, is dazzling . . . The pages on Nicholas and Alexandra are perhaps the best ever, economical in expression, simultaneously poignant and trenchant. Vignettes are used to reveal depths of personality . . . And just as a novelist wields dialogue, Montefiore renders of the birth of each daughter with pithy quotations from memoirs. Here in the sweeping story of the downfall, the salaciousness delivers more than just sparkling passages as in Montefiore’s incisive telling of Rasputin’s machinations and murder or his accounts of the executions of 18 Romanovs in 1918 . . . Thanks to the talents of Simon Sebag Montefiore, Romanov rule will hereafter appear still more improbable and haunted.”

—Stephen Kotkin, *The Wall Street Journal*

“Drawing on a wide array of Russian sources, Sebag Montefiore paints an unforgettable portrait of characters fascinating and charismatic, odd and odious. Magnificent palaces, elaborate balls, and a culture that produced Pushkin, Tchaikovsky and Tolstoy existed alongside pogroms, torture and murder . . . Monarchs over one-sixth of the globe, they played at Western niceties while clinging to Byzantine notions of

absolute rule. . . . Erudite and entertaining.”

—Greg King, *The Washington Post*

“Captivating . . . The story of the Romanovs has been told countless times but never with such a compelling combination of literary flair, narrative drive, solid research and psychological insight. *The Romanovs* covers it all, from war and diplomacy to institution building and court intrigue, but it is chiefly an intimate portrait that brings to life the twenty sovereigns of Russia in vivid fashion . . . Montefiore writes with subtlety and sophistication about the nature of court life, the dynamics of power and the shifting configurations of the various players.”

—Douglas Smith, *Literary Review*

“This enthralling and gruesome book mixes sexual exploits, torture, war, betrayal and diplomacy. It partly describes how Russia morphed from miserable weakling into mighty empire. But it is mainly the story of the personalities: the cruelty of Ivan the Terrible, the unstoppable willpower of Peter the Great, and then Catherine, perhaps more deservedly ‘the Great’ for her brains, charm, vision and sex drive.”

—Edward Lucas, *1843 magazine*

“A mammoth, sparkling history of Russia’s royal history. Montefiore has an eye for the telling details that lifts an unfamiliar narrative. His mammoth history features many vivid, amusing surprising particulars, indeed it’s startlingly lubricious and gory. Gore and sex aside, the author’s pen produces reams of fluent sometimes sparkling prose. Many of his reflections on the Romanov era apply well to Vladimir Putin’s domains now...The Russian court was an entrepot of power; its role as a broker allowed participants to amass wealth and bonded them in shared loyalty but it also allowed them to compete without restoring to civil war or revolution. That sounds pretty like the modern Kremlin.”

—*The Economist*

“Charts the rise and fall of Russia’s Romanov dynasty, which began in 1613 and ended with the whole royal family being shot dead in a basement in 1918. It has been painstakingly researched and the attention to historical detail is breathtaking. The lives of 20 tsars and tsarinas are recorded in exquisite detail through words and pictures. Although some of their escapades are not for the faint-hearted (the Russians were barbaric in their punishments) the rich and vibrant history is utterly compelling. It grabs you by the hand and thrusts you into the world of Imperial Russia with all its decadence and finery. Montefiore has become a popular presenter of BBC history programmes on subjects ranging from Jerusalem to Spain, and here his clear, concise narration and wonderful tone make this a delight to read. Ideal for students of history or for those just seduced by the BBC’s version of War and Peace and wanting to brush up on their history.”

—Tania Findlay, *The Sun* (London)

“With its sordid power struggles, violence and brutality, its cast of magnificent monsters, tragic victims and grotesque ‘holy men,’ this is an extraordinary and gripping tale . . . By turns horrific, hilarious and moving, but ultimately tragic, this is essential reading for anyone interested in Russia.”

—Adam Zamoyski, *The Spectator*

“Wonderfully compelling and insightful . . . Sebag Montefiore provides fabulously revealing pen-portraits of the 20 Romanov tsars, as well as their spouses, mistresses and senior advisers . . . The author has already written excellent books on Catherine the Great and Stalin. This one is even better, combining as it does his expert knowledge of Russian history with the narrative wizardry displayed in his previous bestseller, *Jerusalem*. *The Romanovs* is the gripping and scarcely credible tale of the most successful royal dynasty since the Caesars, and Sebag Montefiore tells it brilliantly.”

—Saul David, *Evening Standard*

“Exquisite prose . . . rigorous research . . . depravity in boundless detail. Behind the dissonant degeneracy, one finds a perceptive analysis of the Russian addiction to autocracy. *The Romanovs* contains the most bizarre cast of characters I’ve ever encountered . . . The Romanov family was heavily populated with raving sex addicts . . . He writes with perfect cadence.”

—Gerard de Groot, *The Times* (London)

“Montefiore’s journey through 300 years of the Romanov dynasty is a study of brutality, sex and power . . . riveting . . . the research is meticulous and the style captivating.”

—John Kampfner, *The Observer* (London)

“This magisterial and magnificent history . . . a wonderfully ambitious account of 300 years of Russian history . . . an authoritative and gripping account of the Romanovs. The last section is especially powerful. This is a superb book and it will surely become the definitive work.”

—Jane Ridley, *The Oldie*

“This splendidly colorful and energetic book . . . is structured simply, as a helter-skelter chronological narrative of 300 years. Sebag Montefiore expertly selects the best (most shocking, bizarre, sensationalistically theatrical) bits from that long history . . . Sebag Montefiore rises to the gaudy, gruesome subject matter, pulling all the stops out . . . Sebag Montefiore is alive to the way his story resonates across time, from Genghis Khan to Gorbachev, but he doesn’t allow his erudition to hold up the narrative’s gallop . . . with great gifts for encapsulating a character and storytelling *con brio*.”

—Lucy Hughes-Hallett, *New Statesman*

“It is a considerable achievement of expository prose that the detailed research that underpins this account of the Romanovs and their courts makes this long book never less than readable.”

—Claire Hopley, *The Washington Times*

“Mr. Montefiore, whose research is extensive, has an ear for the pithy anecdote. . . . The depth of his research has resulted in reassessments of many of Russia’s better-known rulers.”

—Marilyn Bowden, *Miami Today*

“A new book from Simon Sebag Montefiore is something of a literary event these days. . . . His latest project is in some ways his most ambitious yet . . . However it’s one that [he] pulls off with aplomb. As much a riveting read as a prodigious work of scholarship . . . he could not have picked a better time to publish this epic and enthralling history of a dynasty that rose up drenched in blood and died out in exactly the same manner.”

—Dominic Midgley, *Daily Express*

“The dynasty is a marvellously rich bag of deshabille, despotism and diplomacy as Montefiore’s feisty history brilliantly shows.. Countless illuminating details gleaned from archives stud the pages of *The Romanovs* . . . The gems are priceless . . . Immensely enjoyable full-blooded and totally enthralling.”

—Judith Armstrong, *The Australian*

“Montefiore brings an historian’s intellectual rigour to bear in this book while managing to make it both informative and entertaining. It is aimed at the general reader but is an obvious work of great scholarship and research.”

—*Melbourne Sun-Herald*

“A comprehensive overview of the Romanov dynasty . . . which skillfully interweaves the personal with the political . . . Montefiore is the perfect author for a book of the ambition and scope of *The Romanovs* . . . *The Romanovs* is old-fashioned narrative history at its colorful and unpretentious best. Montefiore is a wonderful guide . . . the writing sparkles . . . *The Romanovs* deserves the best praise any book can get: it never bores . . . Montefiore has much to say about political machinations as he does about personal friendships and love which lifts his work far above drily academic history.”

—Andre van Loon, *Sydney Morning Herald*

“Simon Sebag Montefiore has written a magisterial account of unlimited power and sexual decadence based on a remarkable correspondence.”

—*The Mail On Sunday*

“From dramatic rise to revolutionary fall, 20 autocratic Romanov tsars and tsarinas ruled over three centuries of blood-soaked war and brutal peace, breathtaking riches and absolute power, passionate love and ruthless ambition, madness and decadence. With ease and expertise, Simon Sebag Montefiore brazenly presents the Romanov royal history as a mesmerizing family saga, always spectacular and finally in 1918, tragic.”

—Iain Finlayson, *SAGA magazine*

“It’s like reading 20 riveting, plot-thickening novels in the space of one volume. And the packaging looks equally scintillating.”

—Caroline Sanderson, *The Bookseller*

“In another great work of history, Simon Sebag Montefiore, author of *Jerusalem*, tells the bloody and decadent stories of the 20 tsars and tsarinas of Russia’s last imperial dynasty. The Romanovs like 20 gripping novels in one.”

—*Sunday Express* (London)

“As Simon Sebag Montefiore demonstrates in this magnificent, sweeping history, the Russian royal family was a remarkable dynasty, turning a vast but backward country into a mighty empire capable of defeating Napoleon at the zenith of its power. Despite the extraordinary depth and range of his research, the author avoids the dryness of more academic volumes. Instead he embarks on a rollicking, racy narrative across more than three centuries of Romanov rule, weaving a tale that is packed with salacious gossip and gruesome details.”

—Leo McKinstry *S Magazine, Sunday Express*

“Panoramic . . . Montefiore tells it compellingly.”

—Roger Lewis, *Daily Mail*

“In a brilliant introductory essay, Sebag Montefiore discusses the principle of tsarist autocracy, the limits of imperial power, the challenges of succession and the operation of government . . . Sebag Montefiore’s book is an immensely entertaining read . . . it features some of the most outrageous characters you are likely to find in a history book . . . The story of the last Romanovs has been told a thousand times, yet it is a tribute to Sebag Montefiore’s skill as a narrator that you turn the pages with horrified fascination.”

—Dominic Sandbrook, *Sunday Times* (London)

“A glorious history of the Romanov dynasty bursting with blood, sex and tears.”

—Peter Frankopan, *Daily Telegraph*

“Simon Sebag Montefiore’s blockbuster history of the Romanov dynasty arrives with exquisite timing . . . The historian’s account of the last months, days and hours of the Romanovs will not disappoint . . . [and] show

Sebag Montefiore's narrative bravado at its scintillating best. There is unlikely to have been a racier account of how the last Romanovs met their end . . . Masterly."

—Mary Dejevsky, *The Independent*

"This history of Russia's famous (and infamous) dynasty is compelling, accessible stuff, covering its huge timespan and vast cast of characters in typically vibrant fashion. It's insightful about the continuing legacy of the Romanovs in Russia today, too."

—Matt Elton, *HistoryExtra.com*

"A lively work illustrating the personalities, sensuality, and steely wills of the long line of Russian rulers. Master British biographer Montefiore presents a staggeringly ambitious work of scholarship and temerity. . . . The author tosses in plenty of detail to fully bring to life each ruler. . . . The violence of jealously guarding power knows no bounds in this spirited account of sycophants and bedfellows. A magisterial portrayal of these 'megalomaniacs, monsters and saints' as eminently human and fallible."

—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

"[*The Romanovs*] reveals the author's gift for storytelling and research acumen. . . . Montefiore's compassionate and incisive portraits of the Romanov rulers and their retinues, his liberal usage of contemporary diaries and correspondence, and his flair for the dramatic produce a narrative that effortlessly holds the reader's interest and attention despite its imposing length."

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

"Montefiore lets each sovereign exhibit, in telling detail, his or her distinctive qualities while he judiciously weighs their strengths and weaknesses against the turbulence that has been the hallmark of czarist Russian history. The chapters on Peter the Great and Nicholas II stand out as particularly discerning in this major work."

—Brad Hooper, *Booklist* (starred review)

"Historian Montefiore delivers an impressive telling of the Romanov autocratic dynasty in Russia. . . . Hefty . . . but the reward is worth the time. Fans of Russian and world history, those who enjoyed the author's previous works, and anyone interested in royal intrigue and betrayal will find great pleasure here."

—Jason L. Steagall, *Library Journal* (starred review)

About the Author

SIMON SEBAG MONTEFIORE is a historian of Russia and the Middle East. *Catherine the Great and Potemkin* was short-listed for the Samuel Johnson Prize. *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar* won the History Book of the Year Prize at the British Book Awards. *Young Stalin* won the Los Angeles Times Book Prize for Biography, the Costa Biography Award, and le Grande Prix de la biographie politique. *Jerusalem: The Biography* was a worldwide best seller. Montefiore's books are published in more than forty languages. He is the author of the novels *Sashenka* and *One Night in Winter*, which won the Paddy Power Political Fiction Book of the Year Award in 2014. A Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, Dr. Montefiore graduated from Cambridge University, where he received his PhD. He lives in London.

www.simonsebagmontefiore.com

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ACT I

THE RISE

SCENE 1

The Bridesshows

CAST

THE LAST OF THE RURIKID TSARS

IVAN THE TERRIBLE 1547–84

Anastasia Romanovna Zakharina-Yurieva, his first tsarina

Ivan Ivanovich, their eldest son and heir, murdered by his father

FYODOR I, their second son, tsar 1584–98

Dmitri Ivanovich, Ivan the Terrible's last son, mysteriously killed. Identity assumed by three impostors, the False Dmitris

THE TIME OF TROUBLES: tsars and pretenders

BORIS GODUNOV, tsar 1598–1605

THE FALSE DMITRI, tsar 1605–6

VASILY SHUISKY, tsar 1606–10

Second False Dmitri, known as the “Brigand of Tushino”

Ivan Dmitrievich, the “Baby Brigand”

Marina Mniszech, daughter of a Polish nobleman, wife of the First False Dmitri, Second False Dmitri and Ivan Zarutsky, mother of the Baby Brigand, known as “Marinka the Witch”

Warlords

Prince Dmitri Pozharsky, hero of the resistance

Kuzma Minin, merchant of Nizhny Novgorod, leader of the resistance

Prince Dmitri Trubetskoi, aristocrat and leader of Cossacks

Foreign invaders

King Sigismund III of Poland

Prince W?adys?aw of Poland, later king

Gustavus Adolphus, king of Sweden

THE FIRST OF THE ROMANOVS

Nikita Romanovich Zakharin-Yuriev, brother of Anastasia, first wife of Ivan the Terrible

His son Fyodor Nikitich Romanov, later the priest Filaret

Ksenia Shestova, later the Nun Martha, Fyodor's wife

Their son, MICHAEL, the first Romanov tsar, 1613–45

Ivan Romanov, Fyodor's brother, Michael's uncle, boyar

Anna Khlopova, Michael's first fiancée

Maria Dolgorukaya, his first wife

Eudoxia Streshneva, his second wife

Irina, tsarevna, daughter of Michael and Eudoxia

ALEXEI, son and heir of Michael and Eudoxia, tsar 1645–76

COURTIERS: ministers etc.

Fyodor Sheremetev, Romanov cousin, boyar and chief minister

Mikhail Saltykov, Romanov cousin, royal cupbearer and armsbearer

Prince Ivan Cherkassky, Romanov cousin of Circassian descent, boyar

Prince Dmitri Cherkassky, Romanov cousin of Circassian descent, boyar

Prince Dmitri Pozharsky, patriotic warlord, later boyar and chief commander

Prince Dmitri Trubetskoi, aristocrat and Cossack warlord, candidate for tsar

Michael was in no rush to proceed to Moscow, but Moscow was desperate for him to arrive. In the civil war, the contestants for supremacy—aristocratic magnates, foreign kings, Cossack chieftains, impostors and adventurers—had fought their way towards Moscow, hungry to seize the crown. But Michael Romanov and the Nun Martha were unenthusiastic. There has never been a more miserable, whining and melancholic procession to a throne. But the plight of Russia early in 1613 was dire, its trauma dystopian. The territory between Kostroma and Moscow was dangerous; Michael would pass through villages where dead bodies lay strewn in the streets. Russia was far smaller than the Russian Federation today; its border with Sweden in the north was close to Novgorod, that with Poland–Lithuania close to Smolensk, much of Siberia in the east was unconquered, and most of the south was still the territory of the khanate of the Tatars. But it was still a vast territory with around 14 million people, compared to about 4 million in England at the time. Yet Russia had almost disintegrated; famine and war had culled its population; the Poles were still hunting the boy-tsar;

Swedish and Polish–Lithuanian armies were massing to advance into Russia; Cossack warlords ruled swathes of the south, harbouring pretenders to the throne; there was no money, the crown jewels had been looted; the Kremlin palaces were ruined.

The transformation of Michael’s life must have been convulsive: the court of a tsar had to be reconstructed, courtier by courtier, silver spoon by silver spoon, diamond by diamond. He and his mother were undoubtedly terrified of what awaited them in the capital and they had every reason to be anxious. Yet now this teenager of an untitled noble family, whose father was lost in a foreign prison, found greatness thrust upon him, a greatness that he owed, above all, to the family’s first patron, Ivan the Terrible.

Thirty years after his death, Ivan still cast his dread shadow over Russia and the boy Michael. Ivan had expanded the Russian empire—and almost destroyed it from within. He had first boosted its splendour and then poisoned it—a fifty-year reign of triumph and madness. But his first and favourite wife, the mother of his first brood of sons, was a Romanov—and the founder of the family’s fortunes.

Ivan himself was the scion of a royal family descended from Rurik, a semi-mythical Scandinavian prince who, in 862, was invited by Slavs and other local tribes to rule them, becoming the founder of the first Russian dynasty. In 988, Rurik’s descendant Vladimir, grand prince of Rus, converted to Orthodoxy in Crimea under the authority of the Byzantine emperor and patriarch. His loose confederation of principalities, known as Kievan Rus, bound together by the Rurik dynasty, would ultimately extend almost from the Baltic to the Black Sea. But between 1238 and 1240 it was shattered by the Mongol armies of Genghis Khan and his family who, during their two centuries of Russian dominion, allowed Rurikid princes to rule small principalities as vassals. The Mongols’ view of a single universal emperor under God and their brutally arbitrary judicial decisions may have contributed to the Russian idea of autocracy. There was much mingling and marriage with the Mongols; many famous Russian families were descended from them. Gradually the Russian princes started to challenge Mongol authority: Ivan III the Great, grand prince of Moscow, had collected many of the Russian cities, particularly the republic of Great Novgorod in the north and Rostov in the south, under the Muscovite crown and in 1480 he decisively confronted the Mongol khans. After the fall of Byzantium to the Islamic Ottomans, he claimed the mantle of leadership of Orthodoxy. Ivan married the last Byzantine emperor’s niece, Sophia Paleologue, which allowed him to present himself as heir to the emperors. Ivan the Great started to style himself “Caesar,” which was russiaized into “Tsar,” his new imperial status allowing his monkish propagandists to assert that he was regathering the territories of Rus. His son Vasily III continued his work, but Vasily’s son predeceased him so it was his grandson Ivan IV, Ivan the Terrible as he became, who succeeded to the throne as a toddler. His mother may have been poisoned and the child was traumatized when the rivalries of courtiers erupted into violence, growing up to be as magnetic, dynamic and imaginative as he was volatile and unpredictable.

At his coronation in 1547, when he was sixteen, Ivan was the first grand prince to be crowned tsar. The young autocrat had already launched his ritual search for a wife. In a tradition that derived from both of the precursors of tsardom—Mongol khans and the Byzantine emperors—he called a brideshow. Every choice of royal bride raised new clans to power and destroyed others. The brideshow was designed to diminish such turbulence by virtue of the tsar’s deliberate choice of a girl from the middle gentry. Five hundred virgins were summoned from throughout his realm for this Renaissance beauty-contest, which was won by a girl named Anastasia Romanovna Zakharina-Yurieva, the great-aunt of the boy Michael.

The daughter of the minor branch of a clan that was already at court, Anastasia was ideal, thanks to her combining a safe distance from influential potentates with a comforting familiarity. Ivan knew her already since her uncle had been one of his guardians. She was descended from Andrei Kobyla, whom the grand prince had promoted to the rank of boyar in 1346–7, but her branch of the family stemmed from his fourth

son, the boyar Fyodor, who was called Koshka—"the Cat." Each generation was known by the name of the male in the generation before, so the Cat's children were dubbed the Koshkins, an appropriate designation given the Romanov family's feline gifts for survival. Anastasia's great-grandfather, Zakhar, and her grandfather, Yuri, were boyars, but her father Roman died young. However, he gave his name to the Romanovichi, who would become known as the Romanovs.

Soon after the coronation, on 2 February 1547, Ivan married Anastasia. The marriage was a success. She gave him six children of whom two male heirs survived, Ivan and Fyodor, and she had the gift of being able to calm his manic temperament. Yet he still exhausted her with his unpredictable frenzies and constant travels. At first his reign prospered: he marched south-eastwards on a Christian Orthodox crusade to defeat the Islamic Tatars, the descendants of Genghis Khan who were now divided into smaller khanates. First he conquered the khanates of Kazan and Astrakhan—triumphs he celebrated by building St. Basil's Cathedral on Red Square; he despatched merchant adventurers and Cossack buccaneers to begin the conquest of vast, rich Siberia; he brought in European experts and merchants to modernize Muscovy and fought the Commonwealth of Poland–Lithuania to control the rich cities of the Baltic. But it was to be a long war which undermined the sanity of the tsar and the loyalty of his overmighty grandees, many of whom had their own links to the Poles. At the same time, he was often at war with the other regional power, the khanate of the Crimean Tatars to the south.

In 1553, Ivan fell ill. His wife's brother Nikita Romanovich tried to persuade the courtiers to swear allegiance to the tsar's baby son—but they refused, because they favoured his adult cousin, Prince Vladimir of Staritsa. The tsar recovered but emerged fixated on the treachery of his nobles and the independent allegiances of Prince Vladimir and the other magnates. In 1560, Anastasia died at the age of twenty-nine. Ivan was distraught, convinced she had been poisoned by hostile grandees. She may indeed have been poisoned, but she may just as easily have died of a disease or well-intentioned medicine. Either way, the defections and intrigues of his own magnates now sent Ivan into a spiral of violence: he suddenly withdrew from Moscow to a provincial stronghold whence he divided the realm between his private fief, the Separateness—Oprichnina—and the rest of the country. He unleashed a fearsome corps of black-clad upstart henchmen, the oprichniki, who astride black horses decorated with brooms and dog's heads, to symbolize incorruptibility and ferocious loyalty, launched a reign of terror. As Ivan lurched between spasms of killing, praying and fornication, no one was safe. His instability was exacerbated by the fragility of his dynasty: only his son Ivan seemed likely to survive to adulthood since the youngest Fyodor was not strong. It was essential to marry again—which became an obsession like that of his contemporary Henry VIII. While he sought foreign brides, a princess from the dynasty ruling Sweden and Poland in the hope of winning the Polish throne, and an Englishwoman, possibly even Elizabeth I herself, Ivan worked his way through as many as eight wives, three of whom may have been poisoned, and some of whom may have been murdered on his own orders. When his second wife, a Tatar princess, died in 1569, another suspected victim of poisoning, he went berserk, purging his own ministers, cutting off noses and genitals, then descending with a posse of dog-headed oprichniki on to the cities of Tver and Novgorod, killing virtually their entire populations, treating victims with boiling then frozen water, hanging them from hooks inserted through their ribs, roping women and children together and pushing them under the ice. Taking advantage of Ivan's demented distractions, the Tatar khan captured and burned Moscow.

After the oprichniki had done his bidding, Ivan reunited the tsardom but then abdicated and appointed a Tatar khan's son, converted to Christianity, as grand prince of Russia before taking back the throne. There was some method in the madness: Ivan's cruelties broke the power of the territorial magnates—even though they were garnished with the personal sadism of his diabolical idiosyncrasy. Anastasia's brother Nikita Romanovich remained the uncle of the heirs to the throne, but the Romanovs were no safer than anyone else from the tsar. In 1575, at least one Romanov was killed and Nikita's lands ravaged.

At a brideshow in September 1580, Ivan chose a new wife, Maria Nagaya, who gave him the son, Dmitri, that he craved. Yet, in 1581, in a rage he killed his own eldest son by Anastasia, Ivan, driving his iron-tipped staff into the boy's head, the awful climax of his reign. He had already debased Russia, but now he condemned it to chaos for the heirs to the throne were his other son by Anastasia, the weak and simple-minded Fyodor—and the baby Dmitri.

On Ivan the Terrible's death in 1584, Nikita Romanovich helped ensure the succession of his nephew Fyodor I. But Nikita died soon afterwards and his influence was inherited by his son Fyodor Nikitich Romanov, future father of Michael.

Tsar Fyodor left the ruling to his able minister Boris Godunov, who had risen as one of Ivan's oprichniki and now consolidated his power by marrying his sister to the tsar. The last Rurikid heir was Ivan's youngest son, the eight-year-old Dmitri, who now vanished from the scene. He officially died from a knife wound to the throat, self-inflicted during an epileptic fit. This would have been such a freak accident it may actually have happened, but inevitably many believed he had either been assassinated by Godunov—or been spirited away to safety.

When Tsar Fyodor died childless in 1598, the Muscovite line of the Rurikid dynasty was extinct.

There were two candidates for the throne—Fyodor's minister and brother-in-law Boris Godunov, and Fyodor Romanov, eldest nephew of the late Tsarina Anastasia, and son of Nikita Romanovich, who was known as the best-dressed boyar at court. Fyodor Romanov married Ksenia Shestova, but of their six children, including four sons, only one daughter and one son survived: the future Tsar Michael was born in 1596 and was probably raised in a mansion near Red Square on Varvarka Street. He was showered with gifts but his childhood was not stable for long.

Godunov was elected tsar by an Assembly of the Land, so he was the nearest thing to a legitimate ruler after the extinction of the rightful dynasty, and he was initially backed by Fyodor Romanov. Godunov was gifted, but luck is essential in politics and he was unlucky. His enduring achievement took place on his eastern borders, where his Cossack adventurers managed to conquer the khanate of Sibr, opening up the vastness of Siberia. But Russia herself suffered famine and disease, while Boris's own illness undermined his tenuous authority.

Fyodor Romanov, whose intrigues and escapes displayed all the agility of his cat-like ancestors, helped spread the fatal rumours that Ivan the Terrible's late son Dmitri had escaped and was still alive. A showdown was nearing, and the Romanovs brought military retainers into Moscow. When Michael Romanov was only five, his world was destroyed.

In 1600, Godunov pounced on Fyodor and his four brothers, who were accused of treason and sorcery; their servants testified under torture to their practice of witchcraft and stashes of "poisonous herbs." Tsar Boris burned down one of their palaces, confiscated their estates and exiled them to the Arctic. To ensure that Fyodor Romanov could never be tsar, he was forced to take holy orders, under a new priestly name Filaret, while his wife became the Nun Martha. Michael was sent to live with his aunt, the wife of his uncle Alexander Romanov, in the remote village of Belozersk. He remained there for fifteen frightening months before he and his aunt were allowed to move to a Romanov estate fifty miles from Moscow. Three of the five Romanov brothers were liquidated or died mysteriously. "Tsar Boris got rid of us all," Filaret remembered later. "He had me tonsured, killed three of my brothers, ordering them strangled. I now only had one brother Ivan left." Godunov could not kill all of the Romanovs, with their special connections to the Rurikid tsars, not after the murky demise of Tsarevich Dmitri. The vanishing of royal children at the hands of power-

hungry relatives has a fitting way of destroying the very power they seek.

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