

Scott Jones  
Early Russian Readings

Radzinsky, Edvard. The Last Tsar: The Life and Death of Nicholas II. (New York: Doubleday, 1992). 462 pages

Every so often a history book comes along that is different from the rest. Edvard Radzinsky's The Last Tsar: The Life and Death of Nicholas II is such a book. A historian and playwright, Radzinsky's book reads like a fast paced thriller novel. Written in a style that jumps off the page at the reader, The Last Tsar is an account of the Nicholas II's life up to the minute he was assassinated by the Bolsheviks in 1918. At the same time, the book is a study in the life of Nicholas II and the reasons for his downfall. Radzinsky states in the introduction that he hopes to give a new account of Nicholas, which he is able to do since the opening of Soviet documents.

The first part of the book deals is an attempt by the author to give a portrait of the life of the monarch. The result, however, is average at best. Constantly jumping around from event to event with no connections, the study provides little insight into the Russian society that Nicholas was governing. Instead, the reader finds out what is going on within the royal family of Russia, and for that matter, the royal family of other European nations. The high point of the portrait of Nicholas II in the book is the author's work in portraying the real Nicholas II, not the public persona of the monarch. Radzinsky shows a nervous Nicholas II during the failed revolution of 1905. Using a letter the Tsar had written his mother, the author argues that the monarch was truly worried about the events and felt he needed to appease the people of Russia before things got out of hand. This characteristic of Nicholas reappears until his overthrow in 1917.

Radzinky's strongest feature of his book is the account of the Tsar and his family and their life after the installation of the Provisional Government during the first part of 1917. Using documents and first hand accounts that had been unavailable to the public since the creation of the Soviet Union, the author portrays the flight of the royal family, their arrest and then eventual assassination. The story reads as a minute-by-minute thriller that captivates the reader, who finds himself hoping for the royal family to be able to escape the fate that awaits them.

This is probably the highest compliment an author can receive. The reader knows the outcome of the book, but still finds the account breathtaking. In fact, the author's style of writing almost allowed him to get away with a critical flaw in his historiography. The author, maybe hoping to sell more books, claims that the order to kill the Tsar and his family came directly from Lenin. However, the only proof the author has of this claim is a document from the Central Executive Committee of the Bolshevik Party that ordered the Tsar be killed. Lenin's name appears nowhere on the document. While he was definitely the leader of the Bolshevik Party, Lenin can only be implemented into the assassination of the Tsar by Radzinky's circumstantial evidence. Other authors have been able to better implicate Lenin into the plot to assassinate the last Romanov.

Despite the shortcoming with the role of Lenin, Radzinky has written a wonderful book. If you want to learn about the Russian society that turned on Nicholas II, this book may not be the best bet to begin reading. However, if you are looking for an account of what it must have been like for not only the Tsar, but also of his family, Radzinky's book is the best choice. It is rare to find a history book that the reader can not put down, but The Last Tsar is such a work.

