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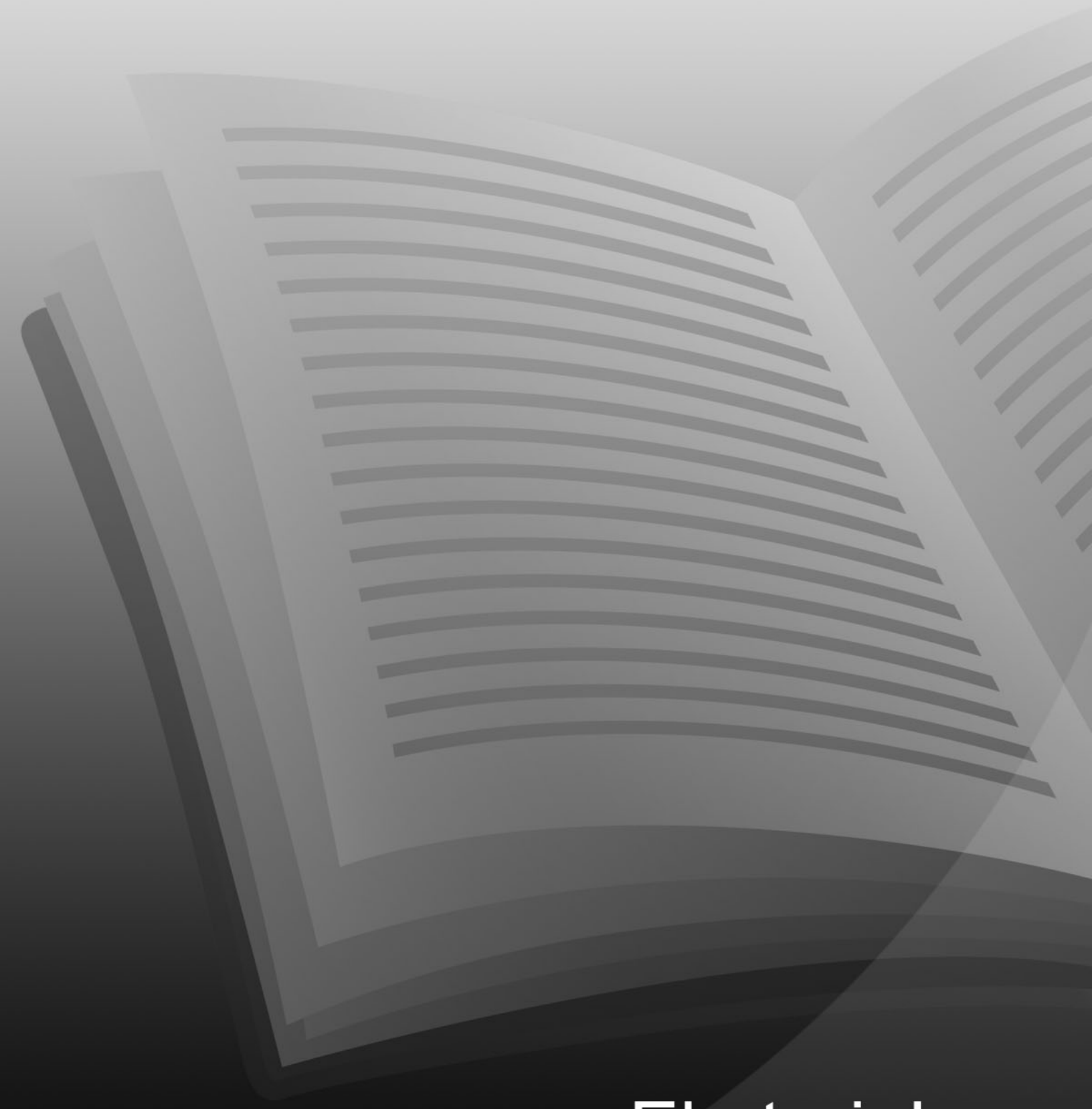

Ekaterinburg

Helen Rappaport

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About the Book

A vivid and compelling account of the final thirteen days of the Romanovs, counting down to the last, tense hours of their lives.

On 4 July 1918, a new commandant took control of a closely guarded house in the Russian town of Ekaterinburg. His name was Yakov Yurovsky, and his prisoners were the Imperial family: the former Tsar Nicholas, his wife Alexandra, and their children, Olga, Tatiana, Maria, Anastasia and Alexey. Thirteen days later, at Yurovsky’s command, and on direct orders from Moscow, the family was gunned down in a blaze of bullets in a basement room.

This is the story of those murders, which ended 300 years of Romanov rule and began an era of state-orchestrated terror and brutal repression.

About the Author

Helen Rappaport is the author of the acclaimed *No Place for Ladies: The Untold Story of Women in the Crimean War* (Aurum) as well as biographical reference works on Joseph Stalin, Queen Victoria and women social reformers. A fluent Russian speaker and specialist in Russian history and 19th-century women's history, she was the Russian consultant in 2002 to the National Theatre's Tom Stoppard trilogy, *The Coast of Utopia*. She and William Horwood are co-authors of *Dark Hearts of Chicago* (Hutchinson, 2007), a thriller about journalist Emily Strauss of the New York *World.*

ALSO BY **HELEN RAPPAPORT**

No Place for Ladies
Joseph Stalin
Queen Victoria
An Encyclopaedia of Women Social Reformers

with William Horwood
Dark Hearts of Chicago

Ekaterinburg

The Last Days of the Romanovs

Helen Rappaport

WINDMILL BOOKS

For my daughters, Dani and Lucy

‘Don’t you forget what’s divine in the Russian soul – and that’s resignation.’

—Joseph Conrad, Under Western Eyes, 1911

Acknowledgements

The Ural Mountains are a very long way from home – or so they seemed to me back in October 2006 when I began this project. I knew that I simply could not write the story of the Romanovs in Ekaterinburg without going to the city where it all happened. Despite my apprehensions, it proved to be a most wonderful, memorable experience; the one moment I shall never forget is standing among the thousands of worshippers at the all-night vigil held at the Church on the Blood to commemorate the murder of the Romanovs on the night of 16–17 July. Here at last I got a sense of the power of the story and its continuing impact on Russian history and culture, and realised why Russia, its history and its people have always been and will remain a consuming passion in my life.

During my stay in Ekaterinburg there were several people without whose kindness and good company it might have been a lonely research trip. First and foremost, Alex Kilin of the History Faculty of the Urals State University proved an irrepressibly good companion and guide through two hot days in July walking the streets of Ekaterinburg from north to south and east to west. I am deeply grateful for his time, his energy and his lively discourse on the city, and for the fact that he spoke no English – it made me work very hard at my Russian.

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Lake Baltysh. Valery Gafurov gave up time to meet and talk with me and drive me round the city. He also kindly set up my meetings with Professors Alekseev and Plotnikov. Professor Venyamin Alekseev found time in a very busy schedule as Vice-President of the Urals Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences to talk to me about his long-standing research on the Romanov murders. Irina Bedrina of the Ural State Law Academy accompanied me across Ekaterinburg to visit Professor Ivan Plotnikov (about whose outstanding contribution to Romanov studies see Note on Sources). Despite being in frail health, Professor Plotnikov generously gave of his time to talk to me about his many fascinating theories. Konstantin Brylyakov of the Ekaterinburg Guide Centre arranged my trip to Ganina Yama with guide Nadezhda Sokolova, who provided a vivid non-stop Russian commentary on the Romanov story. Princess Svetlana Galitzine of Oxford, while visiting family in Ekaterinburg, kindly met up with me to talk about the city.

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Back home in England I am hugely grateful to the specialist knowledge and help of Phil Tomaselli, an outstanding expert on British Secret Service and Russian-related Foreign Office and War Office records at Kew for the period. Phil helped me dig out the fascinating reports from

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My good friend Michael Holman, former Professor of the Department of Russian and Slavonic Studies at Leeds, put me in touch with Jonathan Sutton, the present incumbent, who provided several useful suggestions and contacts in Ekaterinburg. I owe special thanks, too, to James Harris of Leeds University's School of History – himself an expert on Urals regional history of the period – for putting me in touch with Alex Kilin in Ekaterinburg. At the Brotherton Library I worked in the incomparable Leeds Russian Archive and am particularly grateful to Richard Davies for his help in making material available and to the Liddle Collection and the Leeds Russian Archive for allowing me permission to quote from it. Roger Taylor alerted me to the wonderful Galloway Stewart photographs at Bradford, and Brian Liddy kindly made available all 22 volumes for me to see. Nick Mays at News International Archive allowed access to the papers of the *Times* correspondent Robert Wilton, part of the Geoffrey

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It was a joy to discover, during the writing of this book, that I lived but a five-minute walk from the place of worship of the Russian Orthodox community of St Nicholas the Wonderworker, founded in 1941 by Father Nicholas, formerly Charles Sidney Gibbes, the Tsarevich's tutor. Its members gave me a most warm welcome at their services and I would like to take this opportunity to commend their work in the Russian Orthodox community in Britain.

From the United States, Joshua Wearout at Wichita State University kindly sent photocopies of the material and photographs gathered in Siberia by Paul James Rainey. Ronald M. Bulatoff at the Hoover Institution sent photocopies of the papers of Riza Kuli Mirza (Commander of the Ekaterinburg Garrison 1918–19) from the Vera Cattell

collection. John Jenkins at the Spark Museum provided information on telegraphs and telephonograms and David Mould at Ohio University also answered questions about Russian telecommunications. In New York I enjoyed the wonderful facilities of the Yivo Institute for Jewish Research on 16th and 5th (now part of the Center for Jewish Studies), where I studied the extensive and greatly undervalued archive of Herman Bernstein (see Note on Sources). At Yivo, Jesse Aaron Cohen helped me locate Bernstein's Siberian photographs as well as those taken by the US Expeditionary Force in Siberia. Gunnar M. Berg graciously ferried large numbers of files back and forth from the Bernstein collection and photocopied much reference material for me. Finally, my trip to New York would not have been such a joy without the good companionship and support of my friend John Reiner.

In the wider community of the World Wide Web, I must express my gratitude for the wonderful work in making available material by and about the Romanovs carried out at the Alexander Palace Time Machine website and in particular its enormously interesting, lively and informative discussion list. This list is populated by hundreds of amateur enthusiasts, many of whom have made a lifetime's study of the Romanov family. Here I drew on a wealth of interested and informed opinion and recommend the list most heartily to anyone wishing to learn more. See www.alexanderpalace.org/palace/.

During the writing of this book I greatly appreciated the love and support of my family – especially my brothers Christopher and Peter Ware who helped me in the construction of my website and were a continuous source of encouragement, as too was my dear friend Christina Zaba. William Horwood offered insightful comments and constructive criticism on some key passages. At Hutchinson, my commissioning editor, Caroline Gascoigne, offered lively support and enthusiasm for the book, as too did my

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Finally, but most importantly, I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to my agent, Charlie Viney. When he first mooted the idea of a book about the Romanovs to me I groaned, insisting there was nothing left to say. But with his encouragement, I went away and looked at the story again, from different perspectives, and came up with the tight 14-day scenario. Thereafter, Charlie cajoled and praised and guided me to the right way of writing this book, involving as it did a major rethink of how, till then, I had approached history writing. I am profoundly grateful to him for his patience, support and belief in this project and for all his hours of hard work. Without him, *Ekaterinburg* simply would never have happened.

Helen Rappaport
Oxford
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INTRODUCTION

The Red Urals

ON THE EVENING of 29 April 1918, a special train stood in a siding at the remote railway halt of Lyubinskaya on the Trans-Siberian railway line, not far from the city of Omsk. It was abnormally well guarded. Inside its first-class carriage sat Nicholas Alexandrovich Romanov, former Tsar of All the Russias, and his German-born wife Alexandra.

Stripped of all privileges, a captive awaiting trial or exile, Nicholas was being moved after 13 months under house arrest with his family, first at the Alexander Palace in St Petersburg and latterly at Tobolsk in Western Siberia. If he did not know it already, some of those around him most certainly did: the Tsar was making his final journey. But even those who guessed what might happen to their former monarch could not possibly have imagined the true, appalling horror of what was to come.

Nicholas had been in good spirits till then, but his hopes of a safe refuge were brutally dashed when he and his wife discovered they were not being taken to Moscow, or to exile out of Russia, as they had hoped.

The train they were on was heading for the very last place Nicholas wished to be sent. Ekaterinburg.

‘I would go anywhere at all, only not to the Urals,’ he is reported to have said that night as the train slowed in its approach to the city. Having regularly read the local papers whilst at Tobolsk, he was well aware that the mood among

workers in the Urals was ‘harshly against him’. He had good reason to dread being forcibly taken to such a place, among such people – whether as deposed monarch or as a loving family man with a sick wife, four vulnerable daughters, and an ailing, haemophiliac son. Ekaterinburg was violently anti-tsarist and, as the historic hub of Russia’s old penal system, had been a point of transit to places and horrors from which there was no return.

Outside Ekaterinburg there once stood a stone obelisk in a lonely forest glade, its plaster facing pitted and worn by the harsh Russian climate. On one side was inscribed the Cyrillic word ЕВРОПА – Europe – and on the other, АЗИЯ – Asia – for this monument marked the symbolic boundary between European and Asian Russia. Straddling the Great Siberian Highway, Ekaterinburg had been Imperial Russia’s gateway to the East since the city’s foundation in the early eighteenth century, and beyond it the original post road stretched 3,000 miles to the Manchurian border.

The natural boundary was formed by the Ural Mountains, a 1,700-mile-long range which split Russia from north to south. To the east lay the arctic wastes of the Siberian plain, stretching like a vast sea and ending, as the writer Anton Chekhov observed, ‘the devil knows where’. But the Great Siberian Highway was no grand thoroughfare. For two centuries or more this ‘brown streak of road running like a thread’ right across Russia was better known as the Trakt. From Ekaterinburg, convoys of exiles and criminals, after being transported by steamboat and barge to Tyumen from the central prisons in Moscow, would tramp along its narrow, meandering gravel path – in columns of dust in the dry summer months and in the arctic snowstorms of winter, their legs in clanking fetters.

During their two-year forced march into imprisonment or exile, hundreds of thousands of men, women and children passed this way during the worst years of Tsarist oppression.

Their arrival at the Ekaterinburg obelisk marked a Dantesque point of transition, the portal to a Russian kind of hell beyond which unfortunates abandoned all hope of seeing homes and families again. Stopping briefly here, they would look their last on European Russia before venturing into the pagan wilderness beyond. Many would kiss the obelisk in a final farewell; others scratched their names on the plasterwork. Most would never pass this way again.

Pronounced *Ye-ka-tyer-in-boorg*, the city has an oddly Western-sounding name, but Asia is all around. Nestling on the eastern slopes of the Urals, the low horizon lies open to expanses of swampy *taiga*, the forests of pine, birch and larch extending far to the north and east, where wild bears, elk, wolves and mountain cats roam. The climate here is unforgivingly Siberian, with spring not arriving until mid-May. Even then snow is on the ground, the lakes are still under ice and the earth is muddy from spring floods. Accompanied by swarms of mosquitoes, summer makes a brief appearance in June, bringing with it the brief idyll of the midnight sun, as well as fierce thunder and lightning storms sparked by the rich mineral deposits in the hills. But late August sees the return of frosts and the cycle tightens its grip once more.

Given its name in 1723 after Peter the Great's second wife, Ekaterinburg started as a distant outpost of empire – little more than a wooden fortress built to protect the valuable iron-smelting works established there. Despite its remoteness, it was to grow in importance as an economic, scientific and cultural centre, eventually becoming wealthy as a city of mining engineers, merchants and bankers and home to the Russian Imperial Mint. Ekaterinburg's prosperity was founded on the vast mineral resources of the Urals; the semi-precious stones which decorated Russia's imperial palaces and cathedrals were mined here, their deep hues seen in exquisite inlay work, in columns of jasper, porphyry

and lapis lazuli and the distinctive dark green of the superb urns, vases and tables of malachite that graced the great palaces of the tsars. The mountains here held an abundance of diamonds, amethysts and emeralds, as well as warm, rosy rhodonite and the rare and fascinating alexandrite with its ever-changing hues of red and green. Supplied to the Imperial Lapidary works in Ekaterinburg and St Petersburg, these gemstones provided much of the raw material for the fantastically elaborate jewellery and *objets d'art* created by craftsmen such as Karl Fabergé, the Romanovs' court jeweller.

The Urals were equally rich in precious metals. Gold had been discovered here in 1814, platinum five years later. Indeed, there was gold in such abundance that the locals claimed that 'where it has not been found, it has not been looked for'. By the time revolution came, Ekaterinburg was supplying 90 per cent of the world's platinum, and a profusion of luxury goods, perfumes and furs of the finest quality – beaver from Kamchatka, sable, ermine, mink, black and grey fox, bearskin rugs – were all to be found in the city, brought in from all over Siberia. But the city's real wealth lay in iron ore and the pig iron produced from it. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, with the Urals now the biggest iron producer in the world, Ekaterinburg was building the new industrial plants of modernising Russia. But by the end of the century the once dominant ironworks of Ekaterinburg were being outstripped by a powerful new metallurgical industry in the Don basin in the south, powered by vast resources of coal. Industry began to stagnate, only to be rescued by an intensive period of modernisation and the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway.

Passing through Ekaterinburg in 1890, Chekhov found it dull and provincial, only being taken by 'the magnificent, velvety' sound of its many church bells ringing out in the crisp spring air during Lent. Seeking refuge in the comforts

of the Amerikanskaya Hotel, the 30-year-old playwright retreated to his room and kept the blinds down in order not to have to look out on what seemed to him an alien world. All night long he had heard the distant thud-thud of machine presses. You would need a head of cast iron not to be driven mad by them, he wrote. As for the inhabitants of this semi-Asiatic city, he found them inscrutable, intimidating even. They inspired in him ‘a feeling akin to horror with their prominent cheekbones, large foreheads, tiny eyes and utterly enormous fists’. Stunted by heavy labour, brutalised by the appalling climate, Ekaterinburgers were ‘born in the local iron foundries and brought into the world not by midwives, but mechanics’.

By the 1900s Ekaterinburg had mushroomed from an eighteenth-century settlement of single-storey log houses into a powerful regional city with armies of peasants labouring in its iron-smelting factories, flour and paper mills, soap works and tanneries. Legions of tsarist officials had settled here to run the Ural Mining Industry and Imperial Mint. There was a large foreign contingent too, at the British-owned Hubbard candle works, the Tait mechanical works and the Sysert iron foundry, as well as a strong diplomatic presence, the British Consulate having opened its imposing premises on Voznesensky Prospekt in 1913. French, Swiss, American, German, Swedish and Danish consulates soon were operating nearby. Framed by linden trees, Ekaterinburg’s broad, stone-paved boulevards were grand and airy in the all too brief summer, its parks and ornamental gardens glowing with flowers. The city had its own ‘millionaire’s row’ of fine houses, a museum of natural history, two theatres that were visited by tours from the Moscow Art Theatre, and an imposing opera house where Chaliapin came to sing. It offered several comfortable and grandly named hotels such as the Eldorado and the Palais Royal. Heartily recommended by Baedeker, the

Amerikanskaya Hotel was undoubtedly the best in town and comparatively clean by Siberian standards; it also provided good dinners for less than four roubles.

Many travellers arriving here after weary weeks on the road were captivated by the city's beauty. It was a welcome sight after the sombre, bleak wastes of Siberia – the first 'really cultivated place' they had seen since leaving Shanghai. Ekaterinburg had much to offer: stone-built, stuccoed houses of classical architectural beauty, a skyline of golden-domed churches and the cream and turquoise baroque beauty of its Voznesensky and Ekaterininsky cathedrals. Crowning the three-mile-long Voznesensky Prospekt, which intersected the heart of the old city, the Rastorguev-Kharitonov House, a finely proportioned Palladian mansion built by Ekaterinburg's platinum king, looked down on a regional city flexing its industrial power and basking in its economic prosperity. Ekaterinburg was in the vanguard of a rapidly modernising Russia: a place with street lighting, telephones, electric trams and a substantial rail depot at the junction of seven railway lines, through which the Trans-Siberian Railway powered its way into the East.

But the October Revolution of 1917 brought seismic changes to the city. In November, the 'agitators' arrived and with the support of local railway workers staged a Bolshevik *coup d'état*. This was swiftly followed by industrial and financial crisis as the city fell into debt and bankruptcy. Then followed arrests, shootings, confiscations and fear. Russia's fifth largest city had become one of its most forbidding strongholds of conflicting political forces and a major hub of Bolshevik activity. Of its population of about 100,000, a large proportion was workers and soldiers, many of them tough young militants notorious for their radical political line.

It was into this menacing hotbed of revolutionary fervour that Public Enemy No. 1, Citizen Nicholas Alexandrovich

Romanov, arrived on 30 April 1918. It seemed poetic justice that he should end up in a city through which so many of those condemned into political exile by the old tsarist system had passed on their own journey into Siberia.

But how had one of the world's most wealthy, powerful autocrats found himself here, in the notorious 'Red Urals'? And how had this devout, insistently dull and dogmatic little man, whose primary interest was family life, come to be demonised as the repository of all that was corrupt, reactionary and despotic about the Romanov dynasty?

Tsar Nicholas II was not the first monarch to have kingship unexpectedly thrust upon him, nor was he the first to be emotionally and politically unprepared for its onerous responsibilities. As a man of limited political ability and vision, Nicholas had done what came naturally. He had assiduously maintained the autocratic rule of his father whilst blindly resisting all political innovation and condoning the suppression of the empire's turbulent minorities. His stubborn belief in his role as God's anointed representative made him turn a blind eye to increasingly anxious calls for political change. But political and social unrest, fanned by revolutionary activity among the urban workforces of St Petersburg and Moscow, had finally forced Nicholas into token gestures of constitutional reform in 1905. The democratic powers of the newly inaugurated Duma were, however, greatly circumscribed and Nicholas routinely subverted its activities, refusing any real concessions to representative government, and condemning moves to modernise, as he had since the day he ascended the throne, as mere 'senseless dreams'. He retreated instead into domesticity; playing contentedly with his children, closeted away at the Alexander Palace at Tsarskoe Selo outside St Petersburg and seeing only a small inner circle of family and friends.

Nicholas's increasing invisibility from public view and his continuing resistance to reform rapidly set in motion the inexorable collapse of an already moribund political regime, despite a degree of economic recovery and growth in the years between 1907 and 1914. The process of collapse was accelerated after Russia's enthusiastic entry into the First World War in August 1914. The initial euphoria of national solidarity, which Nicholas could and should have capitalised on politically, rapidly crumbled in the face of catastrophic losses. By September of the following year continuing gross ineptitude in both the conduct of the war and the supply of materiel, coupled with serious territorial losses to the Germans in Galicia, finally dragged Nicholas away from family preoccupations to assume supreme command at the front. But by now, despite the presence of its *batyushka* – 'little father' – at the head of the army, Russia was engaged in a war of attrition, fuelling unprecedented desertion rates in its demoralised, ill-equipped and starving peasant army. After centuries of unquestioning loyalty, the long-suffering conscript had begun to ask what he was fighting for. The Tsar, it seemed, only wanted him to plough, and fight, and pay taxes. And so Nicholas's peasant army began deserting in their thousands.

Back in Petrograd (as St Petersburg had been renamed in August 1914), Nicholas's deeply unpopular wife, Alexandra, had been left in effective political control at a time when she was increasingly spellbound by Grigory Rasputin, the charismatic but hugely manipulative 'holy man' who had demonstrated an inexplicable ability to control her haemophiliac son Alexey's attacks of bleeding. Alexandra's intimacy with Rasputin had thrown her into hysterical conflict with government ministers and fuelled unbridled and increasingly virulent gossip about the true nature of their relationship. Meanwhile, Nicholas ignored the repeated and increasingly urgent warnings from members of his government about the escalating situation in Petrograd. He

would not even listen to his devoted uncle, Grand Duke Nikolay, whom he had relieved of supreme command of the army, when the duke begged him to make compromises and save the dynasty from annihilation. The juggernaut of revolutionary change in Russia was now clearly unstoppable; politicians and foreign diplomats had been predicting it for years. Yet Nicholas stubbornly trusted only to his own counsel and that of his wife, a woman determined to protect the Romanovs' absolute sovereignty, their divine right to rule, and with it the inheritance of their precious only son.

Early in 1917, urban economic chaos in Petrograd finally triggered violent industrial strikes, marches and bread riots, bringing mutinous soldiers out on to the streets. The volatile situation erupted into outright revolution at the end of February. Away at the front, Nicholas believed he had no option but to abdicate 'for the good of Russia', the morale of the army and – most pressingly – the safety of his family. He had already been told by his ailing son's doctors that Alexey was unlikely to live to the age of 16, so he took the decision simultaneously to abdicate on behalf of his heir.

Six months of house arrest followed for the Romanov family at the Alexander Palace at Tsarskoe Selo, where they tried to carry on domestic life as best they could. Unburdened of affairs of state, Nicholas appeared to thrive, enjoying the outdoors no matter what the weather, sawing wood, vigorously sweeping snow and breaking ice in the park. He was not deterred by the ominous presence of crowds, who made their way out to Tsarskoe Selo, paying the guards a rouble for the privilege of being able to stand at the perimeter fence and gawp, deriding him with the pejorative names of 'Nikoluchka' and 'Nikolashka'.

With an increasingly tense political situation in St Petersburg and the growing threat of a mob descending on the Alexander Palace, by July 1917 Aleksandr Kerensky, head of the provisional government, was coming under

pressure to incarcerate the Tsar and Tsaritsa in the Peter Paul Fortress as ordinary prisoners – or worse, to see them transferred to the custody of the radicalised island naval base at Kronstadt. Diplomatic moves to send the family to England had come to nothing, and Kerensky therefore decided to move them to a place of greater safety, not wishing, he said, to become ‘the Marat of the Revolution’. From here the Romanovs could hopefully be evacuated east to Japan or north to Scandinavia. The family were bitterly disappointed not to have been allowed south to the warmth of their much-loved palace at Livadia on the Black Sea, where they would have happily lived out their lives in seclusion as an ordinary family. Instead they found themselves boarding a train for Tyumen in Western Siberia and from there a steamship to what in those unstable times still seemed the politically safe backwater of Tobolsk.

By August 1917, Nicholas, Alexandra and their five children – the Grand Duchesses Olga, Tatiana, Maria and Anastasia and the Tsarevich Alexey – had been installed in the former Governor’s House, the grandest accommodation Tobolsk could offer. Here they came perversely to enjoy the simple pleasures of rural life as well as a degree of freedom, whilst still retaining a substantial entourage of 39 courtiers and servants. They had also been allowed to bring many of their most treasured possessions with them from the Alexander Palace: cameras and photograph albums – at least 16 of them, made of Moroccan leather – as well as diaries and letters, and even vintage wines from the Imperial Court Cellars.

But three months into their stay in Tobolsk, a second revolution took place, during which the Bolsheviks overthrew Kerensky’s provisional government and seized power. Lenin’s new government now determined on a campaign of terror and revenge against 300 years of Romanov rule. Whilst the former Tsar and Tsaritsa languished in the Governor’s House, the flamboyant Leon