The Romanov dynasty

Long they ruled

A cruel story of hereditary power

R

ULINGRussia wasnota temptingpros-

pect in 1613, when the first Romanov

reluctantly took the throne. Over the next

three centuries the shrunken, war-torn

principalityofMuscovybecame a colossal

empire, though ata huge costto the Roma-

novs’ long-suffering subjects—and to the

family itself, where the currencies of dy-

nastic politics included murder, torture

and betrayal (sexual and otherwise), as

well ashabitual cruelty.

 Simon Sebag Montefiore’s story starts

with the miserable, melancholic Michael,

dragged to the smouldering ruins of the

Kremlin by feuding boyars who were des-

perate for unity in the face of defeat by

mighty Poland. It features the greats: Peter,

manically debauched, and Catherine, the

“regicidal, uxoricidal German usurper”;

and also dismal failuressuch asAlexander

III, who ruled Russia as a “curmudgeonly

landowner”. Itconcludeswith the pathetic

Nicholas II, the last tsar, deposed and hur-

riedly murdered alongside his wife and

children (pictured) by the Bolsheviks in

1918. His ill-starred reign was redeemed

only by the “grace, patience, humour and

dignity” which the doomed royal family

showed in theircaptivity.

 The system rested on the idea that only

“an all-powerful individual blessed by

God” had the clout (the authorprefers “ef-

fulgent majesty”) to run such a vast state,

while also personifyingthe sacred mission

of Orthodox Christianity. The key was

delegation. Peter and Catherine, for all

theirwhimsand tyrannical ways, were su-

perb at this: Catherine’s favourite, Grigory

Potemkin, was an outstandingly gifted ad-

ministrator; AlexanderSuvorovan equally

impressive military commander. The oth-

er monarchs mostly tried to run Russia

themselves, with results ranging from the

indifferentto the disastrous.

The author’s many fans will find much

to please them. As with his previous

books, notablyon Stalin, MrSebagMonte-

fiore, a British historical writer, has an eye

forthe tellingdetail which liftsan unfamil-

iarnarrative. Hismammoth historyof Rus-

sia’s royal dynasty features many such

vivid, amusing and surprising particulars.

Indeed it is startlingly lubricious and gory.

The abundantmutilations, executionsand

other horriblenesses which the principal

charactersinflicted on each otherand their

subjects are described in nightmarish

detail. In particular, the private passions of

the Romanov court, preserved in letters

and diaries, are on public parade. A fortu-

itously placed wart on the penis of the

“mad monk” Rasputin, whose scandalous

behaviour and bad advice helped bring

about the dynasty’s downfall, is cited as a

possible reason forhissuccesswith aristo-

craticwomen.

 Gore and sex aside, the author’s pen

producesreamsoffluent, sometimesspar-

kling prose. Many ofhis reflections on the

Romanov era apply well to Vladimir Pu-

tin’sdomainsnow: the “Russian pattern of

behaviour”, he writes, is“servilityto those

above, tyranny to those below.” The Rus-

sian court was an entrepot of power: its

role as a broker allowed participants to

amasswealth and bonded them in shared

loyalty. But it also allowed them to com-

pete withoutresortingto civil waror revo-

lution. That sounds pretty much like the

modern Kremlin.

 However, the complexity of the mate-

rial isstill daunting. Mostreaderswill need

to make full use ofthe familytreesand cast

lists placed helpfully at the start of each

chapter. A great many names make very

briefappearances. The colourillustrations

help fixthe main charactersin the reader’s

mind; a fewmore mapsmighthave helped

illustrate the ebb and flowofnations.

 The focus is tightly on the intrigues of

the court, and on the Romanovs’ role in

European high politics. Economics, busi-

ness, society and culture get only the

skimpiest treatment. That is a pity. Alex-

ander Etkind, an émigré historian, has

argued that the root of Russia’s misfor-

tunes is its natural wealth, which encour-

ages its rulers to plunder the country, like

colonial masters, ratherthan develop it. Yet

despite its mostly dreadful rulers, the vast

land did begin to modernise. The tragedy is

that the later Romanovs were too scared,

and in Nicholas II’s case also too out of

touch, to start the reforms that could have

saved them. Thatdilemma isasfamiliar as

itisancient.