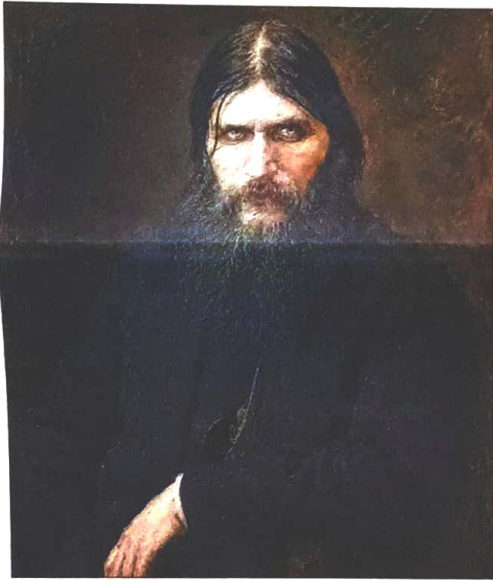


# How rumour felled power

RASPUTIN: AND THE  
DOWNFALL OF THE  
ROMANOV

By Antony Beevor,  
W&N, ₹699



Most of us received our first biography of Rasputin from Boney M.'s eponymous track — three-and-a-half disco minutes that somehow managed to cover the mystic, the healer, the debauchee, and his assassination. I had come across him since in books and films, yet the enigma never quite resolved itself. Antony Beevor's book, in a manner of speaking, is a rather longer and more demanding work — but it is also a far more unsettling one.

Beevor opens with a question that should, by now, have a settled answer: how could a barely literate Siberian peasant have done more than any revolutionary to bring down the greatest autocracy in the world? That this is still an open question is the first sign that Beevor has found in Rasputin a subject worthy of his formidable gifts.

This is not a conventional biography, and Beevor is honest about that from the outset. The real subject is the space

between fact and legend — the “no-man's-land”, as he calls it, where Rasputin's actual deeds were consistently less consequential than the stories told about them. A Tsar whose officer corps were so demoralised by rumour — of debauchery, of a peasant controlling the Empress, of treason in the palace — that

they raised no sword in his defence when the February Revolution came in 1917. Perception, Beevor shows us, was more powerful than reality. Rasputin mattered not because he governed Russia, but because people believed he did.

This is a sharper and more original argument

than it might at first appear. Beevor is not merely retelling a lurid tale of mystic excess. He is writing about the political consequences of what we call fake news today. The “Dowager Empress's Dream” in the title (used in the UK edition) captures this perfectly. A prophecy — possibly forged, possibly apocryphal — that a peasant would destroy her son. True or not, she believed it, and belief, in Beevor's telling, is where history is actually made.

He brings his characteristic strengths to the telling. The research is vast and meticulously deployed without ever becoming burdensome. He moves with confidence between the Siberian village where Rasputin was born, the salons of *fin-de-siècle* St Petersburg, and the front lines of a war that was eating Russia alive. His portraits are precise and unsentimental: the empress, Alexandra, whose capacity for self-deception was matched only by her ferocity of will; the Tsar, genuinely decent, genuinely inadequate; and Rasputin himself — mystic, rapist, healer, drunk, prophet — a man whose contradictions Beevor refuses to resolve because they cannot honestly

be resolved.

The assassination chapter is gripping in the manner of the best true crime writing. Bodies, incompetence, champagne corks, and a corpse that kept refusing to stay still — Beevor narrates the killing in a style which could remind discerning readers of Truman Capote. Beevor reminds us that by the time Rasputin was dropped through the ice of the Malaya Nevka, the dynasty was already finished. The bullet, as the poet, Alexander Blok, wrote, struck the heart of the ruling house. But the mortal wounds, Beevor shows us, were cumulative and long in coming.

There are moments when the sheer volume of characters — a court populated by grand dukes, Montenegrin princesses, mystics, and min-

isters with interchangeable names — tests the reader's patience. A firmer editorial hand might have trimmed some of the middle chapters. Jonathan Gregson's *Massacre at the Palace* — which deals with a similarly vast terrain (albeit in Kathmandu) — is a useful comparison. But this is a small price for a book that ranges so boldly across biography, political history, and the study of how rumour shapes events.

Ultimately, *Rasputin* carries a message that is both timely and timeless — about the fragility of power — and how thoroughly it can be undone not by armies or ideologies but by a single strange man and the stories people told about him.

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