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A Muscovite myth

by *Paul du Quenoy*

A review of *Rasputin: Faith, Power, and the Twilight of the Romanovs* by Douglas Smith

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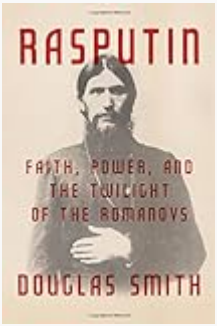

Douglas Smith

Rasputin: Faith, Power, and the Twilight of the Romanovs

Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 848 pages, $35.00

For the last century the legend of Grigory Rasputin—that of a lascivious peasant who breathed religious fervor, held the Romanovs in mystical thrall, and single-handedly brought down their empire—has seemed as immortal as the man himself was said to have been during his own murder, which conventional accounts claim required extraordinary effort to slay an almost supernatural being. In Rasputin: Faith, Power, and the Twilight of the Romanovs, a doorstopper of a book clocking in at over 800 pages, Douglas Smith tries to make sense of Rasputin as both a man and a phenomenon. Already the well-regarded author of a brace of excellent books on the fate of the Russian nobility through the ages, he has taken up the challenge of demystifying the mystic and writing his proper place into the history of his country.

Six years of painstaking research took Smith not only on a colorful journey through the voluminous literature on Rasputin, but also deep into archives and contemporary periodicals that few scholars—and in some cases no scholars—have ever seen. Work in Moscow and St. Petersburg

repositories produced robust results, but so, too, did labor in the more distant regional archives of places like Tyumen and Tobolsk, Siberian cities nearer to Rasputin's village of origin (a remote hamlet called Pokrovskoye), and in archives in the United States, Britain, France, Germany, Austria, and Sweden.

Smith's prodigious investigation culminates in an especially profound point: very little of the fantastic in Rasputin's popular legend turns out to be true or even plausible. So forget about Rasputin as a degenerate sex machine who used his superhuman powers to seize control of Russia's government and plunge the Empire into revolutionary disaster. This was simply not him. Did he have vices? Certainly. Like many a standard Russian *muzhik* enjoying exciting new urban vistas and unexpected notoriety, he picked up prostitutes, peddled minor favors for sex and cash, and drank a bit much. But did he extend his priapic tendencies to the Imperial Court, as an especially bad song written decades later and several lousy plays and films made in between would have us believe? Absolutely not. Overwhelming evidence decisively proves the contrary: that his relationships with the ladies of the palace were entirely spiritual and platonic.

Forget about Rasputin as a degenerate sex machine with superhuman powers.

Did Rasputin control government appointments and policymaking? Not at all. Officials who were well or poorly disposed toward Rasputin came and went, but their promotions and demotions depended on larger factors of power, politics, and personalities that rarely had anything to do with him. Overwhelmingly, his policy "advice"—of which there was rather little and even less that was coherent or detailed—was simply ignored. Very often, so were his representations on behalf of people who tried to curry favor with him. In an ironic twist, his neglected advice was not even necessarily bad: though hardly a sophisticated geopolitical thinker, Rasputin advocated keeping Russia out of the First World War, an ill-advised conflict that caused far more damage to the Russian Empire than anything he ever did. History would thus have turned out very differently if he indeed *had been* influential, but it was far from the case, as his murderer Prince Felix Yusupov claimed in memoirs that were biased to say the least, that "Rasputin ruled Russia."

Was he an overindulgent lout whose outrageous public escapades knew no limit? Again, no. While his private life did not ascend to anyone's ideal of blameless bourgeois domesticity, the sordid tales of orgies, public drunkenness, and wild boasting about his sexual prowess and political power seem to have been just that: tales. Many of them were simply nasty rumors made up by enemies who envied his favor and popularity. Others were clumsily contrived by police officials sent to spy on Rasputin so that their ill-willed superiors could build a moral case against him. Ironically, the very outlandishness of these accusations led many of the people who counted—including Tsar Nicholas II himself—not only to dismiss them as the obvious slander they were but also to pay no heed to legitimate complaints raised alongside them. Even the frequently retold circumstances of

Rasputin's death do not withstand the available record. The incredible story that Rasputin was first poisoned, then shot, then drowned, and finally done in by hypothermia (or some variation thereof)—turns out to be yet more invention and romanticization, again awkwardly based on the memoirs of Prince Yusupov, one of the men who killed him and whose honesty we may thus properly doubt. In reality, according to the doctor who performed his autopsy, he was shot three times and simply died of his wounds, as any mere mortal would have done.

So why did the legend persist? One could argue that Rasputin was an early victim of "fake news" in a world that became dizzyingly modern during his lifetime. Then as now, lurid stories mixing decadent sexuality and political corruption sold papers, thrilled dour social gatherings, and tantalized squirming appetites repressed by the quotidian banality of bourgeois existence. Just as importantly, there was no realistic way to disprove them. As a reputed mystic with increasing popular appeal, Rasputin suffered a fair amount from this in peacetime. But during the difficult World War I years the Russian public—both high and low—badly needed someone to blame for their country's multiplying woes. Their Tsar may have been able to see through all the hateful gossip, but millions of his subjects, from illiterate peasants to his grand ducal cousins, could not or preferred not to, while hordes of bumptious politicians, muckraking journalists, and shameless self-promoters stood ready to cash in on any scandal, however vulgar. In the popular imagination, the stories about Rasputin were simply too juicy to be anything other than true. To make the power of modern legend all the more inescapable, his eventual murder by elite conservatives who claimed to be acting in defense of the throne immediately boomeranged by serving, however circumstantially, to verify all the tall tales. As so many cynics at the time asked, why did the peasant mystic have to die at the hands of such august people (Yusupov was the Tsar's nephew by marriage and arguably his richest subject) unless the stories were true. And, naturally, neither the Provisional Government, which replaced Russia's monarchy in March 1917, nor the communist regime that overthrew it in turn later that year had any incentive to dispel popular notions of Rasputin's degenerate villainy. Nor did many Russian émigrés, who eased the pain of their precarious exiled lives by telling, retelling, and, of course, believing a legend that helped absolve themselves and those like them of responsibility for military defeat and revolutionary catastrophe.

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Who, then, was Rasputin? Smith contextualizes him in a category that personal rule can easily produce: the favorite. Access to all- or nearly all-powerful people can result in a chutes-and-ladders game of meteoric rise and fall for the favored and obsequious few. The last Tsar was exceptionally unfortunate in the cruel sweep of history, but his more successful predecessors had elevated street urchins, shepherds, subalterns, barbers, and priest's sons to power and fortune, just as his Soviet and post-Soviet successors did with their private secretaries, schoolmates, sons-in-law, security guards, and kgb buddies. What made Rasputin different was the unique constellation of factors that fashioned the historical moment he occupied. As the Romanovs faced fierce and

unprecedented challenges to the nature and tradition of their rule, they valued him as a simple man of the people, a source of emotional and spiritual reassurance whose ways were appealingly alien to the incomprehensible modernity that surrounded and threatened them. He spoke directly while others talked in euphemisms. He understood and empathized rather than concealed and judged. He coveted harmony and peace rather than raw power and vaulting position. Their relationship with him was a matter of personal choice, and even need, guarded by what they believed to be the absolute inviolability of their private lives. In those circumstances the public vitriol leveled at their favorite was not merely a foul product of envy they felt (however wrongly) that they could ignore, but an obnoxious intrusion into their personal privacy. Tragically, they could never understand that public perception weighs mightily in what was beginning to become an information age. Blissfully ignorant of the perils of the celebrity they enjoyed and not comprehending that the personal was for people like them inevitably political, they went to their doom trusting a man who for all his foibles was what they most needed him to be: a true Christian with their best interests at heart.

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