

Helen Azar. *The Diary of Olga Romanov: Royal Witness for the Russian Revolution*, Westholme Publishing of Yardley, PA, 2015. 180 pp. Illustrations. Glossary. List of Romanov family members. Index. Cloth and Paperback.

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On Wednesday, March 15, 1917, Olga Nikolaevna Romanova, daughter of Tsar Nicholas II, wrote, “On the 23rd [February] at breakfast got sick with measles – was put to bed. Aleksei [got sick] during the day, and Anya too” (93). She then proceeds to list the other family members who fell ill as well, making no note of the more enormous event occurring in those same days – her family’s imprisonment at Tsarskoe Selo and her father’s abdication from the throne. This was the grand duchess’s last diary entry. We know nothing of what Olga thought of these events, nor what her family might have discussed, nor what fears they might have shared as their entire world came crumbling down. We are left wanting to know more about the inner lives of these people who ruled a nation and died in a hail of gunfire the following year.

In an effort to tell Olga’s story, Helen Azar has taken the grand duchess’s diary from the war years (1914-1917) and supplemented it with some of her letters, as well as with excerpts from the diaries and memoirs of other well-known players in the Russian Revolution and the last days of the Romanov dynasty, including the tsar himself and Alexander Kerensky, the doomed head of the Provisional Government. It is an effective approach, one that allows the reader to get a fuller view of what life was like for the royal family. Olga’s diary entries are frustratingly vague and mundane in many places. Much like her father’s diary, Olga’s does not contain a great deal of self-reflection or emotion, but occasionally there is a glimpse of anger or frustration with the war. On August 21, 1914, for example, Olga observed, “It’s sunny – and good news: [we] took Lvov and Galich. Thank God. The Serbs are also winning over those dirty scoundrels” (9). Almost exactly two years later, on August 19, 1916, she wrote, “Yesterday Romania declared war on Austria. What fools, they could have done this earlier. But then today, Germany declared war on them” (67). But these remarks are few and far between; the majority of Olga’s entries reveal a focus on the health and interactions of her immediate family. She records meal times and bedtimes, the weather, and the physical ups and downs of her siblings and mother. Olga’s letters to her father at the front are more descriptive; she recounts her mother and family friends playing various games with the other royal children, comments on Tatiana’s piano playing (“boring”), and Maria’s (“hitting a lot of wrong notes”) (27, 32). We do, however, get a sense of just how involved Olga and her sisters were in the infirmary that had been set up in the Catherine Palace at Tsarskoe Selo. There the grand duchesses and the Empress worked alongside other Sisters of Mercy, reading to patients, assisting in surgeries, cleaning instruments, and changing dressings. It is clear that Olga took her duties seriously and became familiar with the patients, referring to them by name in her diary. On January 8, 1915, for example, she wrote, “Changed bandages for Sychev, Gumanuk, and Emelyanov, of the 21st Sibirsky Shooters Regiment ... he is very sweet, left shoulder is fractured” (21).

Once the tsar has abdicated, we no longer hear Olga’s voice, but must rely on others’ accounts. Nicholas’s diary entries may be familiar to many readers, but the juxtaposition of his

observations with those of Kerensky and others makes for interesting reading. Nicholas describes walking outdoors with his children, working on various projects, but mentions only occasionally that they were under guard and often observed through a fence by their former subjects. Kerensky, on the other hand, gives a darker account: “The curious passers-by surrounded the park, eyeing them through the fence, especially on Sundays and holidays. When they saw the tsar taking his walk, they booed and whistled. When the imperial daughters and other women who lived at the palace appeared, they were met with various playful comments” (108).

Azar has done a good job of assembling, translating, and annotating related primary sources to shed some light on Olga’s life between 1914 and 1918. This is certainly a welcome addition to the collection of English-language primary sources on the final days of the Romanovs.