

The House of Romanoff.

There is great resounding of church bells and guns in Russia to-day (March 8th), says a correspondent in the "Daily News". The Emperor of the Czars is celebrating the three-hundredth anniversary of the accession of Mikhail Feodorovich, the first Romanoff, to the Moscow throne. Students of history know the genealogical fiction which vitiates the tradition of the dynastic continuity of the Russian Imperial House. All the Czars, beginning with Alexander I. (1801-1825), are the descendants of

Paul I., but Paul I., though the son of his mother, Catharine the Great, was not the son of his father, Peter III., and Peter III. himself, though the nephew of his predecessor on the throne, Elizabeth, was neither a Romanoff nor even a Russian. He was the son of Elizabeth's sister Anne, who had been married to a Prince of Holstein, and was therefore himself a Holstein. These are important facts from a dynastic point of view. Politically, however, they are immaterial, and are only mentioned here as a matter of historical curiosity.

Who, then, are (or were) the Romanoffs, and what was the part they played in Russian history? They came to power in troublous times. The old Rurik dynasty having come to an end in 1598, six Czars, including even a Pole and a Catholic, were tried by the Boyar oligarchy in succession, but without success. The great desideratum was a Czar strong enough to assert his authority over the people, yet willing enough to serve as a tool of the Boyars.

None of the six Czars just mentioned satisfied the two conditions, and the Boyars at last decided to exact from the future candidate only one qualification. Their choice accordingly fell upon the "young and silly" (as he was attested by his proposer) son of the Metropolitan Philaretus, Mikhail. (The choice was exceedingly lucky, for both the new Czar and his two successors proved exceedingly pious men, with no taste or capacity for State affairs, and the Boyars did pretty much as they wanted. The peasantry was attached to the soil; its repeated risings were suppressed in torrents of blood; Ukraine was annexed on the pretext of being saved from Polish domination; and a new criminal code, the most barbarous Russia ever had, was issued.)

But then came Peter I. and took his revenge. He, too, was no friend of the people, whom he riveted still more firmly to the servile yoke, but neither was he a friend of the Boyars, whose power he soon curbed with an iron hand. Peter was the true successor of Ivan the Terrible in the work of establishing the autocracy of the Czarism, and he was also like him in character, wild and cruel; his own and only son Alexis suffered death at his hands after long torture in prison. But Peter was a genius. He forced Russia into new paths, and determined her foreign policy for centuries to come, as the embodiment of her endeavour to reach the warm sea.

Who were his successors? A whole phalanx of figures, men, women, and even children, pass before our eyes, one more unlovely than the other, with one sole exception. There was Catharine I., Peter's widow, a German woman of low birth and loose morality, drinking heavily from morning till night, and unable even to sign her name. There was Peter II., the son of the murdered Alexis, a vicious boy of thirteen, who soon died. Then there was a niece of Peter the Great, another German, who did not know a word of Russian, a certain Duchess of Courland who ruled the Empire through one of her favourites, also a German of low birth, named Bühren. Then we catch a glimpse of a one-year-old infant, Ivan Antonovitch, who was soon deposed, thrown into the Schlüsselburg fortress, and there eventually put to death by order of Catharine II. Then we see Elizabeth, the pre-nuptial daughter of Peter the Great and Catharine, ascending the throne with the help of the palace guards and scandalously lazing away on the throne for twenty years. Then we see the above-mentioned Peter III., an imbecile and drunkard, reigning for five months, and then deposed and murdered by courtiers acting on behalf of his highly gifted and cultured wife, Catharine II., who now ascended the throne. This was the second remarkable figure on the Russian throne—a Messalina, it is true, and to this day remembered with execration by the people of Ukraine whom she deprived of their personal liberties, but with a genius in statecraft.

Her successor, however, Paul, of obscure parentage, was a lunatic and also bad to be "removed." In this case it was his own son, Alexander I., with whose knowledge and permission the stark deed was accomplished. That, however, was the turning-point in the history of the Russian throne. Alexander I. was an attractive personality, though he turned afterwards a mystic. Nicholas I. was a ruthless despot, but his personal character was blameless. Alexander II. was animated with good intentions, but he lacked decision, and this proved the tragedy of his life and death.

On the other hand, his son, Alexander III., was an autocrat to the tips of his fingers and of great power of will, while the present Czar combines the chief traits of his two predecessors.

Three hundred years are a large span of time, but the historian's eye discerns but few bright spots in the long record of the reigns which fill them.

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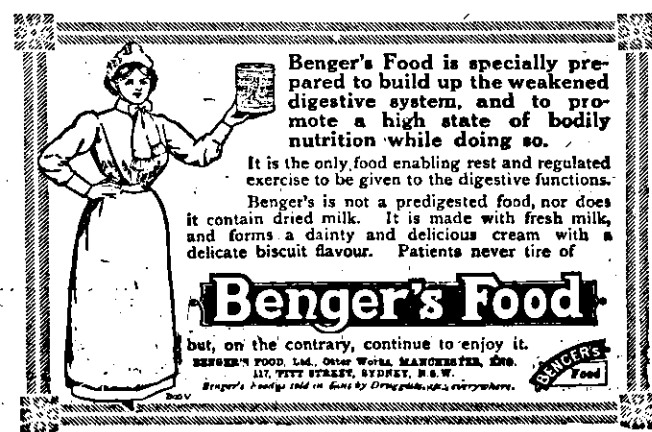
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