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Book Review: Helen Rappaport's Fascinating 'After the Romanovs'

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In 1981, Cato Institute co-founder Ed Crane traveled to the Soviet Union with his fellow co-founder, industrialist Charles Koch. Crane subsequently wrote a long-form essay about his visit that remains a must-read to this day.

The trip clarified for him what he felt before seeing the U.S.S.R. up close. Basically, the Left had missed the boat in flamboyant fashion given its belief that communism worked economically, and that the Soviet economy rivaled the U.S.'s in any kind of way. Just the same, however, the Right vastly overstated the Soviet military threat as evidenced by an arms and military buildup seemingly without endpoint. Crane's view was that contra the Left, there was no Soviet economy to speak of. And contra the Right, precisely because the Soviet economy was a mirage, the country lacked the resources to pose any kind of warring threat.

In the essay, Crane predicted the demise of the Soviet Union based on the thorough human contradiction that was communism. As he described it, the people were hunched over and miserable. Communism quite literally had a "smell" to it that was overpowering.

What Crane saw came to mind while reading Helen Rappaport's excellent new book, *After the Romanovs: Russian Exiles In Paris From the Belle Epoque Through Revolution and War*. About Russians in Paris, it should be said that it didn't begin with Vladimir Lenin and the Bolsheviks taking control in 1917. As Rappaport makes plain, particularly for the Russian well-to-do and titled, Paris had long been "a safe haven in winter from the bitter cold of the northern Russian climate." It was also a city for Russians of an intellectual or artistic bent. This included Lenin for a time, who lived in the 14th arrondissement with his wife and mother-in-law. Kind of like the London of today is France's third largest city, and arguably one of Russia's too, Rappaport notes that by the close of the 19th century "Paris was fast becoming 'the capital of Russia out of Russia' – for those with plenty of money."

In that very real sense, a book that often reads as a stream of consciousness is one that begins as stream of anecdotes about Russians playing in their favorite playground of all. Grand Dukes

Alexis and Vladimir Alexandrovich made Paris the center of their hedonism, and did so without much restraint. Alexis in particular "made no bones about his love of wine, women, and carousing with gypsies." His motto, according to Rappaport was that "'you must experience everything in life," and so he did. So much so that "it was a common joke in St. Petersburg that 'the ladies of Paris cost Russia at least a battleship a year.'"

At the same time, it's crucial to note what many readers will already know: the Russians of means didn't just bring plundered money that they spent thoughtlessly. Russian literature was highly regarded in Paris, not to mention individuals profiled by Rappaport including Sergey Diaghilev, a ballet impresario who founded in Ballets Russes in Paris. It's people like Diaghilev that had this reader most thinking about Crane, and what he saw in a wrecked Soviet Union in 1981. As evidenced by Rappaport's history, the Russians are a highly creative people who brought great culture to Paris, among other locales. No wonder then, that they were so miserable and hunched in the aftermath of 1917, and well towards the end of the 20th century. Talented people had what animated their lives and lives of others to varying degrees suffocated by authoritarians cruelly trying to foist equality on a country and a world that is made ever-more-wonderful by the *differences* among people.

Rappaport is mostly writing about the Russians in Paris after 1917, and that's when the book really takes off. There are so many ways to begin, but the anecdote that sticks out begins with "Pardon me, but haven't I met you somewhere before?" The questioner was prominent American journalist Frederick J. Collins, and the individual being questioned was "a man of erect carriage and patriarchal mustache" who seemed out of place. Collins met him after midnight in April of 1922 in a garage. He handed him a ten-franc note as payment for his car being washed by morning.

They had met. The man who "wore overalls and carried a hose" was Sergey Posokhov who, in a former, pre-1917 life had been *Admiral* Sergey Posokhov, commander-in-chief of Russia's Imperial naval forces, and once a "proud owner of four Rolls-Royces." The Posokhov anecdote is but one of many fascinating and sad stories about how profoundly life had changed for the frequently aristocratic, "White Russians." They were the Russians who had "a shared confidence that the Soviet government was a temporary phenomenon and that in a few months or at most a year it would be replaced by something else." Let's call the "whites" passionate anti-communists.

Their post-1917 experience elicited more than a few thoughts about the present. For one, there seemed to be a consensus that the reign of the Bolsheviks would be the opposite of lengthy. In an historical sense, 1917-1992 was certainly short. But the tragedy of communism surely outlived its optimistic critics. Government doesn't give in easily, and certainly doesn't readily give back power. March of 2020, and the tragic political panic over the coronavirus was a hard thought to shake in reading about Russian expectations of an imminent Bolshevik collapse. So many Americans, and arguably more than a few *libertarian-leaning* Americans thought it would just be two weeks, at which point they embraced a two-week break from reality that extended to months, and realistically years. It's a lesson. Never give up freedom. It's hard to get back. If you're doubtful, observe those around you celebrating the right to be in public without a mask, or

in a crowded bar, restaurant or stadium. *In the United States*. Without knowing Russian history, it's hard not to wonder if the anti-communist Russians accepted the rise of the Bolsheviks on a somewhat similar assumption.

Other Russians thought that the Bolshevik victories were a good thing. The Russians of the "starving artist" variety who populated Paris before and after 1917 had a different view of the revolution. They celebrated it ahead of the result. More than a few returned to the "paradise" that awaited them, including frequently discussed writer Ilya Ehrenburg. Oh well, collectivism can't exist without authoritarianism simply because the former runs counter to human nature. Readers can probably sense where this is going. Rappaport writes that of those who cheered the ascendance of Lenin and the Bolsheviks, and who returned to what became the U.S.S.R., many of them would "soon find themselves oppressed and hounded by the new social order" in "ways worse than they had experienced under the tsars."

It brought to mind something we hear to this day about how the superrich would be wise to be quiet about the riches, and would be wise to be kind to those less equal to them financially, so that they're not singled out when the proverbial revolution comes. On its face, it's hard to take such a view seriously in that at least in the U.S., most superrich got that way and get that way by brilliantly discovering ways to improve the lives of individuals who soon enough can't live without the fruits of their commercial genius. For readers made skeptical by the previous assertion, please ask yourself how long it's been since you picked up your iPhone, logged into Facebook, Instragram or both, and ordered something on Amazon. Tick tock, tick tock.

Applied to the Russian aristocracy, without knowing the history of the Romanovs and others like them, the guess is that their wealth was inherited. And since it was, the simple truth expressed by Rappaport that Grand Dukes like Paul Alexandrovich were "oblivious to the lives of their less privileged compatriots" on the other side of Paris could in a sense excuse the Bolshevik-style hatred of them, but hate doesn't hurt. Or shouldn't. Eventually individuals like Paul, and countless other individuals of royal heritage were murdered; frequently in brutal fashion. They had their wealth taken from them. Were the Bolsheviks noble? Sorry, but they weren't. They were murderers, and greedy murderers at that.

As for the aristocratic wealth inciting or inspiring revolution, and for it cheering on the Russians who were "starving" for their art in Paris ahead of a Bolshevik revolution that they cheered, shame on them. Really, what did they have to complain about? No doubt people like Grand Duke Paul were "oblivious" to their relative struggles financially, but *relative* is the operative word. Anyone who is pursuing a passion like acting, ballet, or writing is an extraordinarily privileged person by any reasonable definition. In other words, the artists who cheered on the "victory" of the Bolsheviks were spoiled brats. And reality ultimately mugged them.

Indeed, the Bolshevik revolution wasn't limited to plundering and often killing off the old tsarist order. It was broader than that. "Bourgeois" to the Bolsheviks meant those who were privileged "not just financially, but also culturally." As mentioned previously, poor didn't get you anywhere in the new U.S.S.R. if you were also culturally advanced. Worse, the Bolsheviks were out for their sick version of revenge born of some kind of hateful, pathetic anger. Rappaport writes that

by 1918, "the new Bolshevik government had made it obligatory for all the bourgeoisie to work – at jobs as abject as possible, such as sweeping the streets, cleaning toilets, and digging graves." Which once again explains why it wasn't just the titled who soon departed for Paris. According to Rappaport, by 1930 there were over 40,000 Russians there.

The problem, particularly for the formerly rich, was that they found themselves in very challenging financial situations. Not only had much of their wealth in Russia been taken, individuals like Sandro, Grand Duke Alexander Mikhailovich, husband of Tsar Nicholas II's sister (Grand Duchess Xenia), had failed to "take the advice of friends in London and New York before the war to keep 'at least a quarter of'" his fortune outside of Russia. About this, some reading the lament may view this reviewer as a royal sympathizer. No, it's not that. The sympathies of your reviewer are always with limiting the wealth controlled or taken by governments. Nothing more, nothing less.

The main thing is that not only had the titled Russians had their palaces and much of their physical wealth taken, they also found themselves in a difficult market. The jewels and art they were eager to sell in order to pay the bills were being sold into crowded markets. Heirlooms that should have funded decades, or even a lifetime, were fetching much less than that. Which meant that Sandro and others like him would soon be acquainted with "this business of 'How It Feels to Be Poor.'" And it wasn't just poverty that more than a few formerly rich Russians would get to know.

We're talking about people who "had never carried cash or written checks" thanks to minions who had handled everything. Suddenly they were required to keep track of much less money that they were hopeless at preserving. As Ernest Hemingway described these newly dispossessed Russians, "They are drifting along in Paris in a childish sort of hopefulness that things will somehow be all right." Hemingway added that "No one knows just how they live except by selling off jewels and gold ornaments and family heirlooms that they brought with them to France…" As mentioned before, the market of the 1920s and 1930s for rare baubles was flooded.

Which meant that these former pictures of thoughtless extravagance "would have to endure the humiliation of finding a job for the first time in their till now privileged lives." All of which explains a regal Admiral Posokhov working in a garage and cleaning cars after midnight. The descent was staggering.

In 1920s Paris and its outskirts titled Russians, former generals and the like could be found working in the filth of factories that were still the norm inside and outside cities. Elegant and titled females were capitalizing on the one marketable skill most had learned in their sheltered upbringing: sewing.

The best job for wellborn, but impoverished Russian men was that of taxi driver. It offered autonomy for one thing, and for it providing independence of action away from the monotony of factories, Rappaport relays that soon enough Russian taxi drivers were the '"aristocrats of the émigré work force."' Tourists in particular hoped to get increasingly legendary Russian taxi drivers simply because they were in no way typical. Again, these were people who had once

lived in palaces. Though brought low in theory, they had that certain something. And they had stories to tell.

So numerous were Russian taxi drivers in Paris that no less than two unions were created to represent these laboring oddities. The General Union of Russian Drivers even had a headquarters that provided for its members "a library, canteen, hairdresser, gym, and pharmacy selling discounted medicines." No doubt these men had fallen a long way, surely union amenities didn't measure up to what they had once known, but it was hard not to be lifted by the improved circumstances of individuals who, in many instances had never known work. It also will perhaps force a rethink of private-sector unions. They're often demonized, they're arguably no longer necessary given the intense competition for human capital, but it seems they once served a reasonable purpose.

As for the dispossessed Russian aristocrats not so lucky to drive for a living, Rappaport's writing about the work inside factories should be required reading for U.S. politicians on both sides who so foolishly promise to "bring back factory jobs." As Rappaport describes it, "Everywhere you went in Billancourt, there was no escaping the perpetual, distant hum of machinery; the long wail of the factory sirens punctuating the stages in the working day, the 'smell of machine oil wafting through the streets,' along with the dust and pollution." There's a reason those familiar with factory work don't have the romantic view of factory jobs that politicians do. Politicians have naturally never done this kind of work, hence their dopey promises. Their promises, if achievable, would bring back misery. In rich countries the nature of "work" is always changing. Only in poor countries is work generational. Rest assured those factories long ago departed Billancourt. It's nearly always crippling to revive the past.

To which some will ask what about the Russian "monarchists" trying to bring back the old Russia? It's not an easy question mainly because your reviewer has no reasonable knowledge of the Russia before the Bolsheviks. While there's no doubt that Lenin, Stalin and beyond brought ruin and murder to Russia, there's little knowledge of what came before. Which is why *After the Romanovs* will certainly not be the last book of Rappaport's that I'll read.

As for the past, Russia's deposed aristocracy certainly *did* have designs on invading their beloved county in order to re-install the monarchy. There were surely many barriers to this, including perhaps the obvious one involving the "practicalities of exactly how the Russian people would be encouraged to rise up against their Soviet oppressors." What to do? More problematic, there was never a uniform movement working to revive the Russia of old. There were *movements*. And as Rappaport puts it, the dissension "was a breeding ground for leaks and a facilitator of infiltration, which [the Soviets] were now busy achieving across the Russian diaspora." In other words, the Soviets knew more about the doings of their various enemies than the disparate enemies did.

There were presumed heirs to the Russian throne, but seemingly none with the gravitas to lead an invasion that would depose the Soviets. And then on January 26, 1930, General Alexander Kupetov was kidnapped in Paris. He died in transport to the Soviet Union where he would face trial. With his death seemed to die any hope or pretense of reviving the old. Which meant that the

White Russians had to give up a country that they dearly loved. And love Russia they did. A Russian musician Alexander Vertinsky arguably put it best:

"All the palm trees, all the sunrises, all the sunsets of the world, all the exoticism of distant lands, everything that I saw, all that I admired, I would give up for a single, cloudy, rainy, tearful day in my homeland."

Reading the above line unearthed by Rappaport, I found myself wondering what she perhaps thought of Count Alexander Ilyich Rostov, the character in Amor Towles's excellent *A Gentlemen In Moscow* (my review here). Rostov was in love with Russia too despite its many demerits. It raises a question now: is the Russia that was once beloved still there? Or was it perpetually deformed by communism and its aftermath? Certainly it seemed to be ruined for those who left. Much as they loved their country, they chose "Freedom without Russia" over "Russia without freedom."

Read Rappaport's excellent book to develop a better sense of why they did what they did, and what became of the people who helped shape the Russia of old. What a story.