

THE HOUSE OF ROMANOV

The 21st of February, 1613, was an extraordinary day in the history of Russia. On the morning of that day a great crowd of people of every rank and station assembled in the Red Square of Moscow to hear the spokesman for the national council which had long been deliberating over the choice of a ruler for the disturbed country. Presently a great noble and two or three of the spiritual members of the council appeared. "Whom," they asked, "will you have for czar?" The question was hardly finished when a great shout went up: "Michael Theodorovitch! (Michael, the son of Theodore!) Let him be the czar-god-sudar of the realm of Muscovy and the whole state of Russia!"

In that fashion the house of Romanov came to the imperial throne. The event suggests the time when warriors elected their chiefs and tossed them up on their shields.

Yet that remarkable scene was no more remarkable than the situation that had caused it. Fifteen years earlier the Czar Theodore had died,—in the words of the sentimental chronicler, "The last flower of the land of Russia had withered away."—and the line of Rurik, which had ruled the land for seven centuries, came to an end. The immediate result was a decade and a half of such anarchy as even the present condition of that unhappy country scarcely equals. Four usurpers successively claimed the throne; the land swarmed with robber bands; and for the last three years of that "period of troubles" there was no ruler at all. The Swedes and the Poles took advantage of the situation to extend their borders at the expense of Russia. Sweden occupied the ancient city of Novgorod; Poland occupied Smolensk, and a Polish force actually burned the greater part of the capital of Moscow and entrenched itself in what remained of the Kremlin. The chief leaders of the people were a Novgorod butcher named Minin, certain clergy of the Troitsk monastery, and the Cossacks under the command of Prince Trubetskoi. It was the Cossacks that finally caused the Poles to surrender.

After that event a national council of nobles and clergy gathered and deliberated and sent messengers throughout Russia to learn the opinion of the people regarding a ruler. Finally the council chose Michael Romanov as czar, and the Moscow crowd confirmed their choice. There were two peculiarities about the choice. First, the newly chosen czar was an unknown boy of sixteen years; and, second, no one knew where he was; it was not, in fact, until after a month's search that he was found in a monastery under the guardianship of his mother. Neither of them was willing to accept the honor thus thrust upon him, and for six hours the emissaries of the Council pleaded, and they won their point only when they declared that, "if he persisted in his refusal, they would hold him responsible to God for the utter destruction of Muscovy." Thus invoked in the name of religion and of patriotism, he finally agreed to go to Moscow and take up his undesired crown. In that way the house of Romanov began.

The Romanovs were an ancient family whose early history is involved in obscurity, though tradition ascribes the origin of the house to Prussia—not the German Prussia of modern times, but the old Slavic Prussia. For centuries the family, like other princely or noble families, had lived on its estates. More recently it had risen to eminence; the first of the seven wives of Ivan the Terrible, the founder of Muscovite greatness, was a Romanov, and his ablest general was Michael's grandfather. Michael's father, the Archbishop Philaret, was a national hero and might have become czar had he not been a churchman. One of Michael's chief claims to the throne was that he was a nephew of the late Czar Theodore. Moreover, the Romanovs had been conspicuous for their virtues as well as for their ability; and the people demanded a Romanov for czar as much on the strength of the reputation of the house as on its eminence.

But it was a terrible task that was thus thrust upon the young czar. As he rode to Moscow he saw on every hand the ravages of the Tartars and the Cossacks, who had robbed and murdered even within the gates of the capital. His subjects were the most backward of any people who called themselves European, and most Western nations did not recognize them as Europeans at all. The power of the crown was by no means well established or even well defined; for the struggle over the succession had shaken it, and, moreover, the influence of the great nobles, the princes and the church authorities limited the activities of a sovereign. What we know to-day as Russia indeed did not exist then. Seven

hundred years earlier, when the Norsemen were busy in Western Europe, founding dukedoms and principalities like that of Normandy under Rollo, their neighbors, the Swedes, had invaded the lands to the southeast of them and there had established states, of which Novgorod was the most important. Thereafter various cities—Pskov, Kiev, Smolensk, and Moscow among others—sprang up as the capitals of petty states that were chiefly concerned with wars with one another. Finally in the thirteenth century the Mongols or Tartars, swept across the steppe region on the south and, establishing there the power of their "great horde," destroyed the city of Kiev and laid its rivals under tribute. For two hundred years and longer they dominated the Russian states till at the close of the fifteenth century Ivan the Terrible raised his duchy of Moscow, or Muscovy, to such power as to defy the Tartars and conquer Novgorod, Tver and Vyatka. He married the niece of the last of the Byzantine emperors and converted his people to Greek Christianity. And so at about the time of the discovery of America he established the state that we have come to call Russia.

Enemies surrounded Russia. On the West the warlike Lithuanians and the Poles, with whom they were united during the sixteenth century, strove to enlarge their borders at the expense of Russia. On the north in the same period Sweden, which was growing in power under the house of Vasa, aspired to press forward from its possession of Finland and make the Baltic Sea a Swedish lake. On the south the remnants of the Tartar power, the khanate of the Crimea and of Astrakhan limited its boundaries. And still beyond the Tartars the oncoming hordes of the Turks threatened all of Eastern Europe. Thus Muscovy, even before the death of Theodore and the "Period of Troubles," when it seemed that it would fall before its enemies, and in spite of its advance during the sixteenth century, was hard put to it to maintain its independence.

In the same way in which the house of Hapsburg had provided unity and a measure of peace and government for the Germans, the house of Romanov, succeeding the house of Rurik, rendered the same service to the Slavs. But the problem was far different from the problem that had confronted the German rulers. The Romanovs had succeeded to a strange and perilous inheritance—a huge, unformed stretch of territory composed of different states and peoples and for the most part inhabited by peasants who lived in their village communities, or mirs, and held their land in common according to a custom that had vanished in Western Europe centuries before. Above the peasants, and holding them in a state of serfdom that in many cases was little better than slavery was a numerous proud, rich, ignorant nobility of princely and boyar families, who were little acquainted with European civilization as we know it and little inclined to recognize any obligation to the state. To defend the country against its warlike neighbors and to mould out its diverse elements a powerful, centralized European state was a task from which any man might have shrunk.

The Cossacks Submits.

To it Michael and his son Alexis set themselves during the seventeenth century; and while America was being settled, while the Thirty Years' War was being fought in Germany and the Civil War was going on in England, while Richelieu and Louis XIV. were building up the absolute monarchy of the Bourbons in France, those early Romanovs were laying the foundations of the power of their house and of modern Russia. Michael contributed chiefly by establishing the authority of the crown and bringing order out of chaos; he devoted the thirty years of his reign to restoring Muscovy to something like an organized state. Alexis continued and extended the activities of his father. He had the laws codified and the text of the Scriptures revised—an act that gave church and state sounder basis for their work. He reorganized the administration. From the Poles he reconquered the district known as Little Russia; he recovered Smolensk and Kiev; and he accepted the submission of the Cossacks to the authority of the crown.

Having the Cossacks under the crown was important in many ways, for they were of great value in the growth of Russia; they were the outposts of the empire. When the Tartar power had begun to wane, the sturdy, hard-fighting Cossacks had pushed southward to settle along the river Don. They were virtually freemen and elected their own leaders or hetmans; they waged almost continual war and gradually won

more and more territory. Toward the end of the sixteenth century one of them, Yermak, led a band of his "free companions" to the headwaters of the Volga to secure land there for their employers, the great trading house of Stroganov. Thence Yermak pushed forward into Siberia and began the Russian advance into Asia, which coincided with the rule of the Romanovs. But the Cossacks were unruly people; they waged war no less with the Poles and even with the Russians than with the Tartars and the Turks. Even after they had accepted the suzerainty of the czar they rebelled or joined his enemies from time to time during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries until they finally accepted the situation and in the nineteenth century became one of the greatest sources of strength to the monarchy.

But Russia under Alexis was scarcely yet a European power. An English ambassador describes the court of Alexis as presenting a scene not to be matched in any Western power; it was more like the court of one of the great monarchs of Asia. The czar sat on his throne of "massy silver" and wore his crown "quite covered with precious stones" over a cap of black sable; his sceptre, his collar and his "vest" glittered with jewels; and his chief nobles were clothed from head to foot in white ermine. The two hundred boyars who sat about the hall were dressed in cloth of gold or silver or in velvet that blazed with jewels. It all seemed Oriental rather than European.

It was only with the accession of Alexis's son Peter in the year 1689 that the Europeanizing of Russia began. He is the greatest of the Romanovs, and no character in modern European history is more extraordinary. When he had been czar for eight years and had somewhat restored order in the kingdom, which had been greatly disturbed after his father's death, he set out on his travels—the strangest journey that any prince ever undertook of his own motion. He went first to Holland, where, under the name of Peter Mikhailov, he worked in the shipyards of Saardam. Thence he went to England, where he labored again in the shipyards. From England he proceeded to Vienna in his proper character of czar; and he was about to go to Venice when the news of the revolt of the Streltzi, or household guard, called him home.

Returning to Russia, accompanied by various men, chiefly English and Dutch sailors, shipwrights, soldiers and engineers, he began to put into effect the lessons that he had learned. He reorganized the army after the fashion of the West; he abolished the so-called patriarchate, or headship of the church, because it was too independent of the crown; he compelled the nobles to enter the service of the state and based nobility on that service. He even turned his attentions to the lesser customs of his people. He forced men to cut their beards or else pay a fine to the government; he forbade the wearing of the long Oriental caftan, or cloak, and forced his nobles to adopt the dress and even the wig, or peruke, that were then fashionable in Western Europe. He established "assemblies" or receptions, where men and women mingled in society as elsewhere in Europe; in Russia they had been kept separate after the Eastern fashion.

Naturally in all of his reforms the conservative nobility, who were convinced that Russia was the greatest and most advanced country in the world, opposed him; and at the same time he was obliged to contend with his enemies abroad, especially Poland and Sweden. Sweden in particular, under the lead of her romantic hero king, the fifteen-year-old Charles XII, began a long and bloody struggle to prevent Russia from extending its power toward the Baltic, which Peter the Great had made the goal of his ambition. But the Swedes were not successful; Peter,

who was first defeated, finally fought his way to the sea and founded there a new capital, St. Petersburg—"an eye," as he said, "to look out over Europe." He subdued the Cossacks; he captured Baku and gave his country an outlet on the Caspian Sea; and when he died at the age of fifty-three years, he had set Russia on the way that it was to follow from his day to our own.

Catherine II.

But the path toward European customs and empire was long and hard. Peter the Great had no capable successors of his own blood. To the throne came first his wife Catherine, then his grandson, the twelve-year-old Peter II., then his niece Anna, then her great-nephew Ivan VI., then Peter's daughter Elizabeth and then her nephew and adopted heir, Peter, Duke of Holstein; and all came within about the same length of time as Peter the Great's rule had covered. But none of them was a ruler of great character or ability. For the most part favorites governed them; the will of the sovereign determined the succession, and revolution not without suspicion of murder often altered it. Russia seemed little more than an Oriental despotism governed, like Turkey, by palace intrigues.

Nevertheless, in spite of incompetent rulers, the impetus toward expansion and Europeanization was not lost. Russian influence was established in the declining kingdom of Poland; Russian armies took part in the Seven Years' War and defeated Frederick the Great of Prussia; and for the first time in history Russian troops were seen along the Rhine. Russian troops captured the port of Azov on the Black Sea, and Russian power pushed across Siberia. And the country, misgoverned and still backward and overrun by foreign adventurers, advanced in many ways—in the growth of cities and of commerce, in literature and with the founding of the first Russian universities even in education.

Things came to a head in the reign of Catherine II., the wife of Peter III. That great though bad empress was not a Romanov by blood. She was a princess of the little German house of Anhalt-Zerbst, but she identified herself thoroughly with her adopted country, and her reign is one of the great periods of its history. During her reign the partition of Poland gave Russia the greater part of Lithuania-Poland and brought it to the borders of Prussia; and two wars against the Turks and their allies the Tartars incorporated the Crimea into the empire and annexed the northern shores of the Black Sea from Azov to the Dniester River. Moreover, Catherine encouraged west-European influence in every way that she could; she brought French philosophers to the Russian court and, by favoring Western culture and customs, so carried on the work of Peter the Great.

Her son Paul, who became czar during the French Revolution, succeeded her on the throne. For that great movement of course Catherine had had no sympathy. But, though she had taken advantage of it to push forward the third and last partition of Poland, she had not come into conflict with the French. Paul, however, was drawn into the war. The Russian armies appeared in

Italy and Switzerland; and with that circumstance it may be said that Russia finally emerged as a European power. Disgusted with his allies, England and Austria, Paul contemplated making an alliance with the French, but before he could carry out his plans he was assassinated, and his son Alexander I. came to the throne.

At his accession the character of the Romanovs and of their policy changed with the altered position of their country. The early heroes of the house, Michael, Alexis and especially Peter the Great, with all their enlightened characteristics had in many ways seemed more Asiatic than European, but during the eighteenth century the family had become rather more German than Russian and was wholly Europeanized. During the nineteenth century that combination of east and west largely influenced the house. First Alexander II., Alexander III., and finally Nicholas II. to a degree rare among absolute sovereigns devoted themselves to the business of government and to the good of their country as they saw it.

Alexander I., who first allied himself with Napoleon and who later became, through Napoleon's Russian expedition, the principal cause of his fall, was a liberal at the beginning of his reign. In 1815, when Russia received Finland and the greater part of Poland as its share in the settlement of Europe, the czar made Poland a constitutional monarchy under his own rule with his brother Constantine as viceroy. But two great forces that affected the Romanov fortunes were at work in Europe in 1815. The first was the spirit of nationality, the second was the spirit of democracy; and each influenced Russia. The Poles were dissatisfied with Russian rule; the liberal elements in Russia were dissatisfied with autocracy; both conspired and plotted revolution. And Alexander, who was under the influence of the great conservative Austrian statesman Metternich, stood

out as the champion of absolutism.

At his death in 1825 the liberal Russian officers attempted a revolution and urged their soldiers to proclaim Constantine and a constitution, which the soldiers did, believing that the "constitutia" or constitution was Constantine's wife. But Constantine declined the throne, the revolt was suppressed and his brother Nicholas I. came to the throne prepared to repress all liberal movements and to revive Russian nationality. The Polish Revolution of 1830-32 was put down, and Poland was incorporated into the empire. Nicholas's plan to divide the Turkish possessions among the powers of Europe led to the Crimean War, and Russian corruption and incompetence as revealed in that struggle, it is said, led directly to his death.

His son Alexander II. took up the task of reforming the condition of the peasants and by abolishing serfdom and distributing lands among the former serfs—an act that he accomplished at the same time as the American Civil War—he laid the foundations for modern Russia. But those reforms were not enough for

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