



The Fall of the Dynasties: The Collapse of the Old Order: 1905-1922

Edmond Taylor

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“Popular history of the finest sort . . . an excellent book worthy to rank with Barbara Tuchman’s The Guns of August and Alan Moorehead’s Gallipoli.” —The New York Times

On June 28, 1914, in the dusty Balkan town of Sarajevo, an assassin fired two shots. In the next five minutes, as the stout middle-aged Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Habsburg, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, and his wife bled to death, a dynasty—and with it, a whole way of life—began to topple.

In the ages before World War I, four dynasties—the Habsburg, Hohenzollern, Ottoman, and Romanov—dominated much of civilization. Outwardly different, they were at bottom somewhat alike: opulent, grandiose, suffocating in tradition, ostentatiously gilded on the surface and rotting at the core. Worse still, they were tragically out of step with the forces shaping the modern world.

The Fall of the Dynasties covers the period from 1905 to 1922, when these four ruling houses crumbled and fell, destroying old alliances and obliterating old boundaries. World War I was precipitated by their decay and their splintered baroque rubble proved to be a treacherous base for the new nations that emerged from the war. “All convulsions of the last half-century,” Taylor writes, “stem back to Sarajevo: the two World Wars, the Bolshevik revolution, the rise and fall of Hitler, and the ongoing turmoil in the Middle East. Millions upon millions of deaths can be traced to one or another of these upheavals; all of us who survive have been scarred at least emotionally by them.”

In this classic volume, Taylor traces the origins of the dynasties whose collapse brought the old order crashing down and the events leading to their astonishingly swift downfall.

The Fall of the Dynasties: The Collapse of the Old Order: 1905-1922 Details

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Joshua says

The last quarter of the book was painful. The Fall of the Dynasties by Edmond Taylor was first published in 1963. Taylor wrote to an audience that had lived through World War II, and so many of his observations are focused on how the events of World War I would lead to World War II and the Cold War. Taylor focuses on the ends of the Romanov (Russia), Hapsburg (Austria-Hungary), Hohenzollern (Germany) Dynasties and the Ottoman Empire. It felt uneven, with the Romanov and Hohenzollern Dynasties getting lion's share of the book. Taylor focuses most of the book on the decades leading up to the war. The intricacies of the various courts and their social/cultural and economic stresses that lead to their demise are presented clearly, but Taylor becomes preachy about how every event leads up to Communism or Hitler's rise to power became tiresome to me. I have read other author's who present more nuanced connections to World War I and World War II and so Taylor's simple explanations are not engaging. Taylor also seems fascinated with Victorian sexual norms so there is considerable time spent on the harems of the Ottoman Empire, and how that shaped the court system of the Ottoman Empire, and Rasputin's sexual conquests among the court of the Czar. In the end, it's a decent explanation, but much better books have been written since 1963 about these events.

GEORGE MARQUES says

This book is over 50 years old but it is not dated at all. Although new and amazing scholarship has been developed since its publication, it can still be safely read as a great introduction as any to the causes of the I World War and the downfall of the European dynasties. I believe it could be read before two amazing books about the period, "The Sleepwalkers", by Christopher Clark, on the causes of the I WW; and "A People's Tragedy", by Orlando Figes, on the Russian Revolution. The three books together make you understand why the first decades of the 20th Century would have such deep consequences for the history of humankind.

Jessica Roberts says

Everything you ever wanted to know

...about the fall of dynastic autocracy in Europe. The Book deals with the personalities as well as the events before, during and after WWI. Written in the 1960s, it's a decent read (despite the author's clumsy style of segues.) It's certainly more comprehensive in the people coverage than any book about WWI I have read.

Mark Singer says

This is an old-fashioned top-down history about the fall of the ruling dynasties of the Austro-Hungarian (Hapsburg), German (Hohenzollern), Russian (Romanov), and Ottoman Empires from the years just before, during, and after World War One. Edmond Taylor, a long-time foreign correspondent, tells the story from a journalists viewpoint, and is not afraid to give his opinion on the characters and events. I would recommend this to anyone interested in the period, and who enjoys a quick read.

Jen says

Omigod, did this book take a long time to get through. I have never longed more for an extensive bibliographic essay to take up the last 100+ pages. By page 300, I had read too much to quit, yet had 200 more pages to go. It was disheartening to say the least.

Evenings went like this:

"I should finish this book...or...OR...I could stare at dresses on a fashion blog for three hours."

"I should finish this book...or...OR...I could look up the history of these tiaras they mention in passing."

Part of the problem is the author sometimes wrote such awkward sentences that I had to rewrite them in my head before I could continue. Also, he would make references to people and events in passing and I would fall into the Wikipedia wormhole--albeit willingly. Also, wow, this guy was into the details, and not the fun ones. It was like reading an entire book of extraneous details that vaguely glanced over the big picture. Plus, he liked to go back in forth in time. I found myself asking "so when was this guy put before a firing squad" and "who is the Emperor of Austria right now?"

There is plenty of good information in this book, and I think I will read further into WWI history and find myself thinking "ooh, I remember that"--and for that it earns a third store. It's like broccoli that wasn't cooked to your liking. You'll get the nutrition, but you know it could taste so much better.

Thomas says

A high-level history of the WWI era. Very well done, and the perfect example of what i find so wonderful about history: one can tell the story of an entire planet, or the story of a single event, or even the story of a single human, in the same number of words... as for the stories that are told in this book that can EASILY be a book on their own:

- the assassination of Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo
- Europe, and its social order, on the eve of WWI
- Russia on the eve of WWI
- Austria-Hungary on the eve of WWI
- Ottoman Empire on the eve of WWI
- The Balkans
- Kaiser Wilhelm II
- Rasputin
- Lenin and the rise of the Bolsheviks

it is safe to say that EVERYTHING that has happened in the world in the last 90 years can be traced back to the events and decisions of a small group of characters in Europe.... a fascinating read.

Betsy says

Parts of this book are excellent, particularly the opening chapters on each of the four dynasties. Later on the book tends to drag. The author has the unfortunate habit of a rather "cutesy" intro to several topics, hinting that he just thought the reader might like to know this.

The information on the Hohenzollerns and the Habsburgs is the most entertaining, while the self-inflicted calamity of the Russian Revolution on Russia and the Tsar is tragic. The blindness of the "autocrat" and his wife makes one cringe, even though Russia's efforts were important to the Allied success in the war.

The fourth dynasty discussed is that of the Ottomans (Osmanlis). In light of what has happened in the Middle East since 1918, the break up of that Empire has had dramatic consequences.

Antonio Nunez says

This is a great story of the long-term trends that led to war, revolution and the dissolution of the great empires that ruled most of Europe for centuries: Russia, Austria-Hungary, the Ottomans and Germany (a latecomer but the most powerful of all). Multinational empires had their good points. They kept reasonable order in regions where different peoples lived side by side. They also had had bad points. They were extremely hierarchical and dysfunctional. This was less the case in Germany where the dysfunctional one was the Kaiser William II rather than the system itself. The book shows in considerable detail how it was that, through secret diplomacy, conspiracy, ineptitude and corruption, it became almost unavoidable there would be a European war involving all major powers, and that said war would destroy dynasties and empires that seemed impervious to decay. Long term trends were abetted by the ineptitude of all sovereigns (particularly the Romanovs) and their immediate circles. There was also bad luck, much of it. Had the murder of Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo not taken place during the summer season, it might have been possible to preserve peace or at least to confine war to a limited territory, although odds would still have pointed to an eventual cataclysm.

As it was, the rotting structures of empires just burst at the seams when subject to terrible pressures. When it came, the end was at times farcical (as in Germany or Turkey), tragic (as in Russia) or just sad (as in Austria). It is worth reading this book just to remember how Turkey was born in war against foreign invaders to prevent the partition of the country. At this writing it is worth remembering that Turkey is frail, that Turks are a warrior nation and that instability there is a great risk for the people's living there and for the world as a whole.

I give the book 4 stars in spite of being very readable and well informed, because I was offended by the author's assertion that there is no need to feel any pity for any Romanov, because the dynasty brought Nemesis upon itself and because many other families were also destroyed by Revolution and civil war. What rubbish. While this may be true about Nicholas and Alexandra, how can it be the case for the imperial children? Admitting that Alexis could eventually become a pretender to the throne, the same cannot be said of his poor sisters. And the fact that thousands or millions of unnamed families were destroyed or hurt at this time does not stop one from feeling pity for the Romanovs, whose faces and voices we know. In fact, many of us feel pity for Charles I of England and for Louis XVI and their families even though to a large extent they were to blame for their downfalls. In fact, I was rather annoyed by the author's often smarmy tone of superiority when commenting on the shortcomings of many historic figures, although I accepted it because the enormity of the calamity that befell Europe in 1914-1922 (and afterwards) must be someone's fault. Must this stop us from feeling sympathy for poor emperor Charles and his wife Zita? I think not.

Elinor says

Phenomenal- one of the best books I've read, but you have to like history. It provides an incredibly useful (and fascinating) foundation for understanding the causes leading up to World War I. The author very clearly demonstrates how much the war was a turning point for several of the world's major empires, and how life was irreversibly changed forever. The book is slightly outdated in some very minor respects, but otherwise the author is extremely lucid and compelling.

Richard says

This book is very detailed with facts and figures but never forgets the human element that shapes history. Taylor often takes a narrative style in the book and focuses on the personal motives and schemes of influential individuals. You really understand the desperation of the leaders of Europe's powers as they trudge, unwillingly, into the Great War.

As another reviewer mentioned, the book is a bit outdated now but still has pages full of useful information. A basic understanding of the time period is certainly useful before reading but not necessary because it is so enthralling you will just continue reading.

An understanding of WWI requires an understanding of the events leading up to it and this book provides that.

Stacey says

The actual factual detail was impressive but occasionally out of date. This is a 55 year old book. It's going to happen. Scholarship (and attitudes) have changed. The sexist view given of any female involved was irritating. His use of "womanly" and "feminine" as pejoratives was offensive. But there is so much interesting detail, without the modern tendency to add what the author deems people must have been thinking. He quotes letters and diaries and later published work of observers. It gets a bit bogged down t times but remains interesting on the whole. Except for the endless referring back to his own time. His constant references to Khrushchev and 'current times' were jarring. He mentions several times that "our grandfathers would have seen" or "would have understood this to be". My grandfather was born in 1928. He would not have seen or understood. It really kept messing with the flow.

It's really an excellent work of scholarship for it's time & with some updating would be an excellent work now as well.

Henry Sturcke says

I was a bit put-off by the author's penchant for snappy write-offs of each character. But he does convey the chaos of chance and incompetence that consistently moved Europe in the worst possible direction. Very much written with the benefit of hindsight. Now superceded by Christopher Clark's *Sleepwalkers*.

Alan Vanneman says

This is an excellent book, giving a "human" view of the ruling houses of Europe just prior to World War I, even including the Turkish sultan, who so often gets left out of things. The way this book is marketed encourages readers to believe that it's a recent publication. In fact, Edmund Taylor was born in 1908, and experienced the aftermath of World War I as a young man, so that he writes almost with nostalgia about an age that he didn't quite experience--though he grew up in Missouri, and not in a palace. But the nostalgia is generally clear-eyed. However much Taylor regrets the chaos that followed World War I, he is honest enough to hold the "Dynasties" accountable for their fate.

Rex Fuller says

Before World War I, the Habsburgs, the Hohenzollerns, Ottomans, and Romanovs ruled the Austro-Hungarian, German, Turk, and Russian empires respectively just as they had for centuries. Due mainly to their own ineptitude in failing to avoid it, the War ended their dynasties.

Taylor describes exactly how it all happened in lucid, often acerbic, English that saves what might otherwise have been too long of a slog.

Garnette says

Why did World War I start? The Ottoman Empire was falling apart, on its last legs. The Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Russian Empire eagerly anticipated gobbling up the bits and pieces, not realizing that their empires too were rotting from within. The newly unified Germans longed to expand. Ethnic minorities, long held under the thumbs of distant emperors, dreamed of independence. It's a complicated story' each region has its own unique characteristics. Taylor tackles it all, telling a long, complex story systematically. I learned a lot. But it was long. I'm glad I read it and I'm glad it's over.
