

Ian Mitchell's Russia-related
BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

48 – *The Russian Dagger*
(12 February 2020)

THE RUSSIAN DAGGER:
Cold War in the Days of the Czars

Author: Virginia Cowles

Publisher: Collins, 1969
(available on Amazon, [click on cover image for link](#))

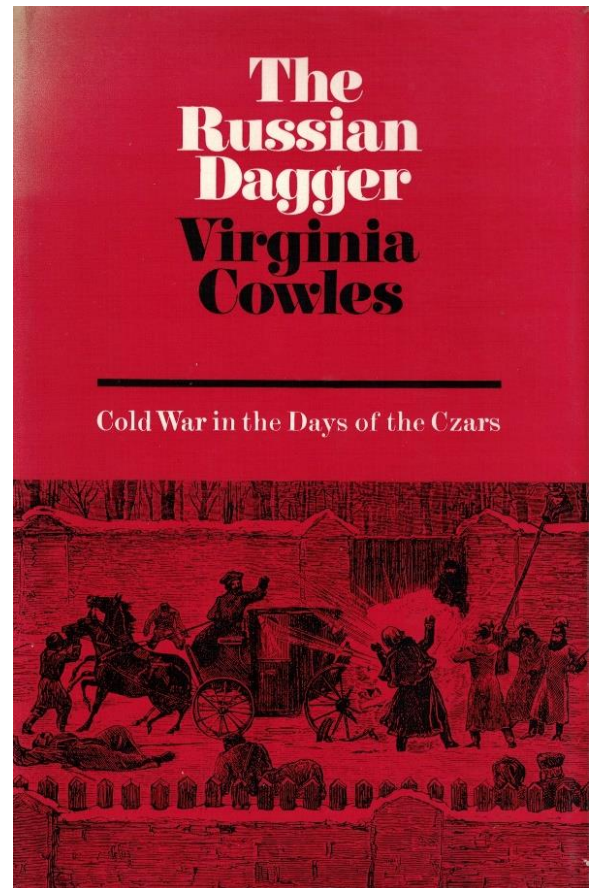
Descriptor: A woman's account of the struggle to avoid revolution after the emancipation of the serfs brought terrorism to Russia, which Russian officials then took to the Balkans, laying the gunpowder trail which was ignited in Sarajevo in July 1914.

RusRoL relevance: *Describes pure STATUS in Russia's Balkan diplomacy. It wanted to be "Protectress of all the Slavs". Every country selected by Russia to receive its "protection" had to be grateful, loyal, obedient and pliable. They were not in practice free to reject Russian benevolence without risking a violent response.*

"Ruling in the East means bribery... I can understand that it must be repugnant to an honest, upright character like yours to have to deal with Orientals."

Otto von Bismarck, referring to Bulgaria (p. 171)

Reason to read: A first-class account of the Russian royal family's response to the legacy of serfdom, and how it eventually led to the First World War. You could plausibly argue that one of the important, if indirect, causes of that War was the botched emancipation of the Russian serfs. When the dust failed to settle, St Petersburg devoted many of its diplomatic and military resources to increasing its control over the Balkans. The public excuse was **Panslavism**, a movement which was had little to do with helping Slavs, and more to do with helping Russia expand its influence in the Balkans, which in turn was connected with its desire to control the Straits. A clash with Austria was inevitable, since it also had substantial interests in south-east Europe. Other powers loomed in the background, and the breakdown in trust which caused the First World War was the result.



It is interesting to note just how comprehensively Panslavism has been rejected since then. With the exception of Belarus, where the President still likes to be photographed in a cheap shirt and “kepka” gathering potatoes in the autumn, most want to be pan-Europeans: Ukraine, Poland and Romania spring to mind. Blood and soil somehow seem so twentieth century—like STATUS generally. The Czechs and Slovaks lost the Kremlin plot as long ago as Spring 1968. Even Russians now prefer to source their potatoes in supermarkets. This book tells the story of the failed Panslavic experiment from the time of the **Crimean War** till the assassination of **Archduke Franz Ferdinand** in Sarajevo in July 1914.

The Crimean War probably killed Nicholas I; it certainly forced his son, **Alexander II**, to make drastic changes to the way the country was run. But he did not resist what he saw as inevitable. Indeed, on 19 February 1861—the day the Emancipation edict for the serfs came into effect—he said to his daughter, Marie, “This is the happiest day of my life!” (p. 45)

Unfortunately, due to Russia’s brutal history, the legacy of this well-intentioned measure proved to be violence, murder, war and, ultimately, revolution. That was despite the other changes Alexander II made and the fact that he was planning further constitutional reforms at the time he was himself murdered by terrorists, in 1881. His son, the uninspired, mouzhik-like giant, **Alexander III**, rolled back every reform he could, and prepared the way for an even more violent clash between a changing world and his weak, inflexible heir, **Nicholas II**—with results we all know. Panslavism was an alternative to the constitutionalism that Alexander II was working towards, if latterly with some reluctance. STATUS was supposed to be stronger than CONTRACT, at least as a unifying force within an increasingly disunited Empire.

The principle weapon in the Romanovs’ hands at home was their secret police; abroad it was their “meddling” diplomats, assisted by secret subversives. The former was intended to reinforce STATUS in Russia, while the latter tried to disrupt CONTRACT-ish government elsewhere. This book covers both themes, but concentrates on the activities of the latter in the Balkans—principally in Bulgaria and Serbia. Ms Cowles is the first author who has ever succeeded in making Bulgarian politics interesting to me, which is quite an achievement! By contrast, her long and necessarily involved account of Serbian affairs produced a feeling of disgust at the universal corruption, cruelty, cowardice and chicanery in that sad-sounding country. That, too, is an authorial achievement, as I am sure that is what Ms Cowles intended.

Main talking points:

1. Perhaps the most important point about Russia that is made in this book is the direct connection between the Great Reforms of the 1860s and the beginning of the terror campaign. International terrorism in its modern form was a by-product of apparent liberalism and actual authoritarianism. The immediate reason was **peasant disappointment with Alexander’s reform** of their status: “The peasants did not understand the responsibilities of ownership. They believed that the Tsar had made them a gift; now they were told that they had to pay their own taxes for the first time and, even worse, to make annual payments to redeem the land, far higher than their former rents. Although they were free men, their poverty had increased.... Riots broke out in many parts of the country; and peasants murdered landowners and officials alike. Hundreds of arrests were made and soon rejoicing had given way to sullen disappointment.” (p. 47)

2. The discontented peasantry could not have made much impact on the internal empire without disaffected students. Those were never hard to find. “Even more disturbing, and wholly unexpected, was the revolutionary trend that began to develop in the universities.” (p. 47) There were just eight of them with a total enrolment of about 5,000 (in a country of 70-80 million!). “Most of the students were the sons of petty bureaucrats and impoverished landowners. Many were desperately poor, living in wretched conditions with barely enough food to keep them alive.” (p. 48 – one thinks of Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*.) Riots started in autumn 1861, just a few months after the emancipation of the peasantry. The Moscow governor called in the army while the mob also attacked the students. The following year Turgenev published *Fathers and Sons*, which gave the world the new word “Nihilist”. Within five years—the first assassination attempt on Alexander II was in 1866—the Tsar had already begun to have doubts about whether the regime could manage the new situation. War in the Balkans against Turkey seemed one answer. That is when the story starts to get really complicated.
3. The Slavophiles of the 1840s had become the Panslavists of the 1860s and later. It was those who, eventually, created the conditions in which a clash between Austria and Russia over Russian meddling in the Balkans could escalate into world war. Alexander III and Nicholas II have a lot to answer for. **Their policy was to use terrorism abroad while suppressing it at home.** It appears never to have occurred to either of them that it might be hard to keep Russia separate from “abroad” indefinitely. They seemed to have had difficulty managing horizontal interactions between people, presumably because they thought in terms of purely vertical relationships between themselves and everyone else. That is always the weakness of STATUS. It is especially so in the increasingly CONTRACT-ish world today, though the Kremlin tries to conceal that fact by presidential bluster, new rockets, and control over the internet.

Thought(s) provoked: For all the complicated explanations beloved by state-employed historians about the so-called “origins” of the First World War, it is a book like this which really explains the *background* to those origins. The immediate causes are important and interesting, but the long-run, underlying situation from which the War’s origins could emerge was originally created by the Russian Empire partly for cynical diplomatic, and partly for mystical and/or semi-racist, reasons. That would be an ugly combination in any era. Austria’s petty greed added fuel to the fire, but that came much later, and was also far less ambitious. Germany, by contrast, was generally content to leave the Balkans alone. When it did get involved and was found out (as in the Liman von Sanders affair in Turkey – p. 285) it quickly backtracked and tried to keep the peace.

Even Britain pulled out of the area after the Crimean War, having bigger fish to fry elsewhere. The blame for the destruction of old Europe should be laid squarely at the door of the last three Romanovs, sadly including the only one who was, at least to begin with, largely well-intentioned. Rather unjustly, it was the weakling of the brood, Nicholas II, who carried the can for the whole debacle, along with his family and servants, all of who were entirely blameless except his weirdly malicious (possibly Aspergers-ish) wife, Alexandra.

Left Field: Another, excellent example of proper *woman's* history – as noted in [review 46](#). It is particularly appropriate as it is dealing with STATUS, the nuances of which seem to me more readily understood in the CONTRACTish West by women.

Surprising points:

1. In the Winter Palace, cows were kept in the *attic* in order to provide fresh milk for the staff. (p. 135) One wonders how they got up there. They can hardly have been expected to navigate narrow, twisting service stairs. Could it be they were marched up the famous Jordan Staircase (presumably with the carpets rolled up)? The mind boggles.
2. In 1909, the Crown Prince of Serbia, Djordge (a wild youth who had been educated in St Petersburg and was “almost more Russian than the Russians”), ruled himself out from succession by murdering his butler. “Apparently, Djordge had discovered the butler reading his mail, and he had delivered him a fatal blow by kicking him in the stomach.” (p. 270) When his brother ascended to the throne, “he put Djordge into solitary confinement and kept him there for twenty years.”
3. Perhaps the oddest fact adduced is that the Balkans were dealt with by an office in the St Petersburg bureaucracy which, for some reason, was called the “Asiatic Department”.

Style: Strong narrative sense, and also a series of insights into the moods and personalities of the story. It is much more readable than the trundling, fact-laden accounts of so many modern historians, most of whom write more for career advancement than to interest the reader. This book, by contrast, tells a gripping and important story in a colourful but informed way. It is old-fashioned in that it was designed to be read by that now disappearing sub-culture: the intelligent lay reader with enough time on his or her hands to satisfy idle curiosity.

Smile(s): After a failed assassination attempt on one of the few successful rulers in the Balkans, **Stefan Stambulov**, the long-time Prime Minister of Bulgaria, the intended victim commissioned a painting of the nearly fatal deed, which happened in the dead of night, in an unlit courtyard. Thus it “proved to be a difficult assignment. The result was an almost wholly black canvass, dotted with white specks. The large specks were the faces of Stambulov and Beltcheff [his Minister of Finance]; the small specks revolver flashes.” (p. 202) Might it have been a similar scene that Malevich was thinking about when he sketched out the design for “Black Square”?

Author: Virginia Cowles was an American journalist who gradually became an accomplished but, in spirit, still amateur historian. She had a very active life, going first to Spain to cover the civil war with Hemingway and others, then moving on to Europe in the run-up to 1939. In those years, she met both Churchill *and* Hitler. Afterwards, she married a British MP, and took to writing more general books, including three about Russia and one about the Kaiser.

I like her approach as she is not an academic. She does not even have what is today called in the varsity trade “a terminal degree” (i.e. PhD). Ms Cowles wrote to present a view. It is well-argued and

unconcealed. She wears her gun openly, if I may put it like that. She does not have the irritating academic conceit that she is disinterested, relying only on the ineluctable weight of the evidence she has unearthed to make her points. As any half-scholarly reader knows, evidence must be quoted selectively, otherwise all books about modern times, when records are prolific, would run to several million pages. Life is too short for that, so it is a relief to read the work of an author who does not pretend to be “scientific”. History *writing* is, really, an art form. (Research, of course, is another matter.)

In her younger days, as shown in the picture opposite, Ms Cowles was apt to wear hats in recording studios. I like that too.



Overall recommendation level: HIGH

About the reviewer: Ian Mitchell is the author of four books, including [*Isles of the West*](#) and [*The Justice Factory*](#). He is writing a comparative study of Russian and Western constitutional history to be called *Russia and the Rule of Law*—hence the “RusRoL Relevance” section at the top. He can be contacted at: ian@ianmitchellonline.co.uk.

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