

Ian Mitchell's Russia-related  
**BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS**

47 – *Baltic Story*  
(30 January 2020)

---

**THE BALTIC STORY:**  
**a Thousand-Year History of its**  
**Lands, Sea and Peoples**

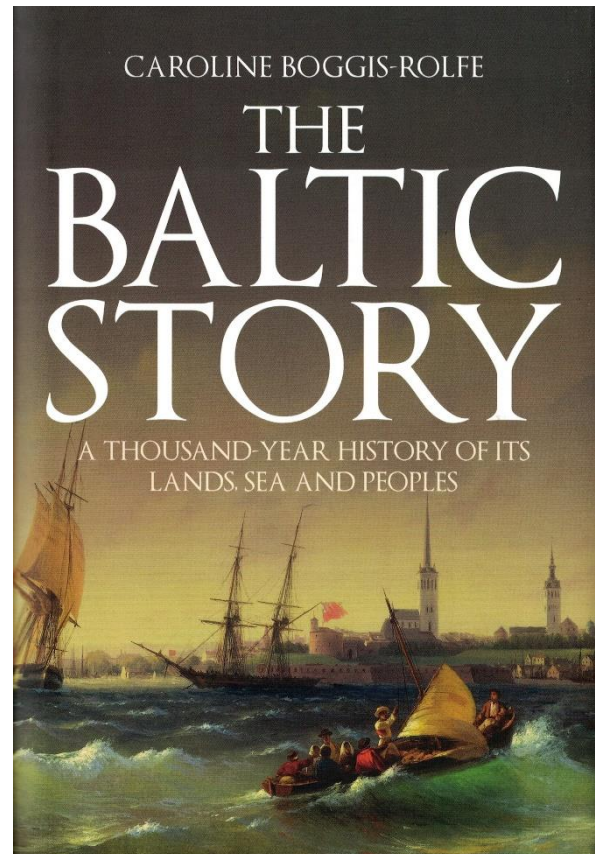
**Author:** Caroline Boggis-Rolfe

**Publisher:** [Amberley](#), 2019  
(available on *Amazon*, [click on cover image for link](#))

**Descriptor:** Long history of the Baltic countries, including Russia, stressing the interconnection of states and dynasties in the area

**RusRoL relevance:** *A rich repast of examples of both STATUS and CONTRACT and the way they interacted, often antagonistically; occasionally creatively. The Romanovs feature largely.*

---



“Even as we put aside the question of the artistic and practical heritage of past rulers... we should concede that people that are materially advantaged are no less deserving of our interest and understanding than everyone else. Besides sharing the same human qualities and failings, they, like the rest of mankind, were, or are, the victims of circumstance.” (p. 406)

**Reason to read:** Caroline Boggis-Rolfe has an intriguingly old-fashioned interest in the relationship of power to personality, which is entirely appropriate to her subject matter. In autocratic, or even strongly monarchical, regimes the personality of the ruler is reflected in the way the country is run. Likewise, the relationship of the sovereign to other sovereigns is often dictated, whether positively or negatively, by his or her family connections with other sovereigns. This is a book about high-end networking. It starts with four family trees, of which the first and longest is that of the **Romanovs**. The last is the interconnected web of royal relationships that started with Tsar Nicholas I and ended with the First World War. Many smaller ones are scattered through the text.

***Main talking points:***

1. Nobody liked the **Kaiser**. From the Danish point of view, this was partly because his father had seized Schleswig-Holstein in 1864. Many of Europe's royal families liked to holiday in Denmark,

where so many of the women came from. Alexander III married Princess Dagmar (later Maria Feodorovna), who was the sister of Edward VII's wife, Princess Alexandra. "For many years, the Danish get-togethers continued as an annual event, the Russian relations arriving with around 100 servants, various pets and quantities of luggage. On these occasions all political discussion was banned, the atmosphere was relaxed... For the benefit of the British relations, the common language spoken was English. Several of the children would form lifelong friendships. But their cousin, Prince Wilhelm of Prussia (later the Kaiser), would not be included in the party as most of the family did not like or trust him... Over the years, Wilhelm would look on the Danish gatherings with a mixture of mistrust and envy, torn between his suspicion that his relations were plotting against him, and a desire to be included. Having *actually invited himself to stay* in 1903, there was considerable relief when he finally left." (p. 364, emphasis added)

2. A typically off-centre but interesting observation concerns the different survival rates, in the upheavals during the twentieth century, of Catholic and Orthodox rulers on the one hand and of Protestant monarchs on the other. The Catholic rulers of Austria were deposed in 1918; those of Portugal in 1910 and 1919; even Spain tottered. The only exception was Belgium. Of the Orthodox dynasties, the Romanovs did not survive 1917, and the rulers of Yugoslavia fell in 1941. The Bulgarian royal family was sent packing in 1946; the Romanian one in 1947 and the Greek one in 1973. "However most of the Protestant monarchies were more fortunate, their ability to survive perhaps being explained by their earlier acceptance of change. Unlike some of their peers, the rulers of these states had long renounced the idea of their divinely ordained authority, acknowledging that theirs was a right largely dependent on the will of the people." The most conspicuous exception to the Protestant rule being Germany, whose monarchy collapsed in 1918 in part because it did *not* recognise the will of the German people. (p. 397) Once again, the difference between STATUS and CONTRACT in government is borne out by historical experience.
3. An important general point is that this book presents—unfashionable though it is to say so—a *woman's* view of its subject. To my mind, this is just as interesting as a man's view. Certainly, it is more interesting than the pedestrian ideas of those degenerated "personoids" who write undistinguished history from a sociological angle (i.e. a materialist one: people are components of statistics, not individual personalities). But there is another, far more interesting, world of thought which eludes those clouded souls. One example is a book which is quoted often in Ms Boggis-Rolfe's endnotes: [\*From Splendour to Revolution: the Romanov Women 1847-1928\*](#) by Julia Gelardi (2011). I had not heard of it before so quickly ordered a copy. It proved to be a fascinating account of an aspect of history that seems to me just as important as the many books about the "front of house" (i.e. male) members of the Russian royal family. I recommend that one too, though I shall not be reviewing it due to shortage of time.
4. Perhaps the most important aspect of the "real woman's" view of history is that it believes that personalities are more important than policies. This was the opposite of Tony Benn's approach, and that of all who believe in statistical politics, which usually includes ideas about proportional representation or the EU's pseudo-democracy. Ms Boggis-Rolfe states her own position clearly in the Introduction: "In my opinion, history is best understood by looking into the personalities

of the people responsible for so many of the events.” (p. 17) That view chimes with William Bullitt’s approach to Woodrow Wilson (see [review 40](#)). It has the added benefit of making stores much more interesting.

**Incidental interest:** The idea of feminine insight into the world of men is nicely illustrated by the story of **Queen Victoria’s** apprehensions about the world into which her grand-daughter, **Alexandra of Hesse**, was marrying. Her fiancé was soon to be crowned **Nicholas II**. The elderly Queen wrote “to her daughter, Vicky, declaring: ‘All my fears abt. her future marriage now show themselves so strongly & my blood runs cold when I think of her so young most likely placed on that vy. unsafe Throne, her dear life & above all her Husband’s constantly threatened.’” (p. 369) That was 24 years before Alexandra was murdered, along with her family and principle servants, in a tiny Siberian cellar by Bolshevik thugs who wanted to save the Revolution from the cancerous appeal of royal charisma. Feminine intuition of this sort is rarely given proper credit in narrative history, and *never* in sociological analysis.

**Style:** Correct but rather unexciting prose, though a fascinating choice of information on an unusual subject. The book lapses from time to time into a sort of *Country Life* style which does not do full justice to the interest of so many of the people described. For example (emphases added): of Catherine the Great and Prince Potemkin (last time they saw each other), “at the end of the evening the couple *sadly* parted” (p. 245); of the Tsar Liberator and Ekaterina Dolgoruky, his mistress and later wife, “Alexander was *besotted*” (p. 337); or of Alexander III and fiancée, who was known as “Minnie” at home, “The couple were soon *devoted* to each other... Sasha would remain *ever faithful* to his *adored* little ‘Minnie.’” (p. 362) And so on.

**Publishing quality:** Inelegant typesetting and page layout. Printed on cheap paper. Masses of typos. Wonderful plate section (and dust jacket), though—*Country Life* again?

**Author:** Ms Boggis-Rolfe is an independent scholar, which accounts for her enthusiasm for her subject, and also for her unconventional choice of topic. So much historical writing these days comes out of universities, and seems designed with student reading lists (i.e. sales) in mind, that it is a relief to read a book that is not couched in “hyper-dissertation language”, with ostentatiously cavilling footnotes on every page. Since universities are now all state-funded, this amounts the nationalisation of minds. That will, in time, prove to be as big a disaster for culture as the nationalisation of the “commanding heights of the economy” was for industry, technical creativity and the national standard of living. This book is different. It has its faults but at least it is individual and human. It was obviously written as a result of a genuine interest in the subject. That makes up for a lot.

**Link(s):** Caroline Boggis-Rolfe discusses her book very interestingly on the Russia and Eurasia podcast: <https://player.fm/series/new-books-in-russian-and-eurasian-studies-2421423/caroline-boggis-rolfe-the-baltic-story-a-thousand-year-history-of-its-lands-sea-and-peoples-amberley-2019>

**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](mailto:ian@ianmitchellonline.co.uk).

For other reviews in this series, see [Ian Mitchell’s Book Recommendations](#).