



## Former People: The Final Days of the Russian Aristocracy

By Douglas Smith



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**The riveting and harrowing story of the Russian nobility caught in the upheaval of the Revolution**

**Winner of the Pushkin House Russian Book Prize**

**Named a Best Book of the Year by *The Kansas City Star* and *Salon***

Epic in scope, precise in detail, and heartbreaking in its human drama, *Former People* is the first book to recount the history of the aristocracy caught up in the maelstrom of the Bolshevik Revolution and the creation of Stalin's Russia. It is the story of how a centuries-old elite, famous for its glittering wealth, its service to the tsar and empire, and its promotion of the arts and culture, was dispossessed and destroyed along with the rest of old Russia. Chronicling the fate of two great aristocratic families—the Sheremetevs and the Golitsyns—it reveals how even in the darkest depths of the terror, daily life went on.

Told with sensitivity and nuance by acclaimed historian Douglas Smith, *Former People* is the dramatic portrait of two of Russia's most powerful aristocratic families and a sweeping account of their homeland in violent transition.

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## **Former People: The Final Days of the Russian Aristocracy By Douglas Smith Bibliography**

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### Editorial Review

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It is a daunting task to elicit sentiments of nostalgia or even regret for the demise of a social class that owed its elite status to birth rather than merit. Smith, a historian and former analyst of Russian affairs for the State Department, succeeds admirably in this wide-ranging and often moving account of the fate of the Russian nobility, from the Bolshevik Revolution to the Stalinist era. His narrative moves seamlessly from a general survey of the nobility to the deeply personal and tragic story of two noble families, the Sheremetevs and the Golitsyns. Smith portrays the nobility as a class as being surprisingly diverse, encompassing non-Russians, religious minorities, and relatively impoverished families. He demolishes the facile caricature of the idle, decadent abuser of peasants, since many nobles had admirable records of service to the state in the military and in government bureaucracy. This is a superbly written and emotionally wrenching ode to a class doomed by the flow of history. --Jay Freeman

Review

“Stunning and brilliantly narrated.” ?Rosemary Sullivan, *The Wall Street Journal*

“Engrossing...With richly detailed event and anecdote.” ?Liesl Schillinger, *The New York Times*

“An engaging and absorbing book.” ?Jennifer Siegel, *The Wall Street Journal*

“Although many of the aristocrats thought the end of their caste ‘obvious and unavoidable,’ few foresaw the destruction of a way of life. Smith’s engaging and at times heartbreaking account is an essential record of that loss.” ?*The New Yorker*

“Smith has written a remarkable, deeply affecting book.” ?*The Dallas Morning News*

“With urgency and precision, [Smith] chronicles the fate of the nobility from the dawn of the revolution...He is invested in their (former) cause, and narrates the events of their lives with passion...*Former People* is a thorough, extensively sourced history, and also something of a spiritual restitution.” ?Yelena Akhtiorskaya, *The New Republic*

“*Former People* is ultimately an incredibly readable, vivid, emotional human story of survival, accommodation, and reconciliation.” ?Sean Guillory, *New Books Network*

“A remarkable, deeply affecting book.” ?David Walton, *GuideLive*

“Smith examines the much-neglected ‘fate of the nobility in the decades following the Russian Revolution,’ when they were sometimes given the Orwellian title ‘former people.’ The author of several books on Russia (*The Pearl; Working the Rough Stone*), Smith focuses on three generations of two families: the Sheremetsevs of St. Petersburg and the Golitsyns of Moscow. He begins by showing their extravagant wealth before the revolution; in the late 19th century, Count Dmitri Sheremetsev owned 1.9 million acres worked by 300,000 serfs. From the 1917 Bolshevik revolution until Stalin’s death in 1953, these families and others suffered, at best, severe persecution and impoverishment; at worst, murder by mobs or the secret police, or a slow death in the gulag. In his sprawling but well-paced narrative, Smith tells many memorable stories, including one of Vladimir Golitsyn’s son-in-law, who hid the fact that he’d been sentenced to death from his wife, who’d been

allowed a three-day visit. Smith also provides fascinating background information, such as the Bolsheviks' jaundiced view of 'decadent' Western culture. Maxim Gorky said the foxtrot, popular among nobles during the 1920s and early '30s, 'fostered moral degeneracy and led inexorably to homosexuality.' This is an anecdotally rich, highly informative look at decimated, uprooted former upper-class Russians." ?*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

"When the Bolshevik Revolution came in 1917, the new order began transforming aristocrats into paupers, exiles and corpses—a transformation that consumed decades. Smith, a former U.S. diplomat and authority on the Soviets and author of several previous works (*The Pearl: A Tale of Forbidden Love in Catherine the Great's Russia*, 2008, etc.), takes a different approach to revolutionary history, focusing on the fallen class: Who were they? What had their lives been like? What happened to them? The author follows two aristocratic families (later, they intermarried), the Sheremetevs and the Golitsyns, showing the splendor in which they lived and then the squalor into which they declined. The author is deeply sympathetic to their fates. Although he states that the aristocracy had, of course, flourished on the servitude of others, he tells such wrenching, emotional stories about his characters that it's easy to forget who once wore the silken slippers. Smith's research is remarkably thorough in its range and detail, so much so that readers may feel overwhelmed by such powerful surges of suffering. Searches, arrests, firings, confiscations of property, internal exile, imprisonments, tortures, executions, desecration of graves—these and other grim experiences Smith chronicles in his compelling narrative. He mentions significant historical events, but his intent is to show how these events affected his characters. He portrays with brutal clarity the truth of Orwell's *Animal Farm*: A new aristocracy—a political one—emerged to enjoy the benefits of living on the labor of others.

Sobering stories about the politics of power—its loss, its gain—and the deep human suffering that inevitably results." ?*Kirkus* (starred review)

"Sobering stories about the politics of power—its loss, its gain—and the deep human suffering that inevitably results." ?*Kirkus* (starred review)

"Absolutely gripping, brilliantly researched, with a cast of flamboyant Russian princesses and princes from the two greatest noble dynasties and brutal Soviet commissars, *The Former People* is an important history book—but it's really the heartbreaking human story of the splendors and death of the Russian aristocracy and the survival of its members as individuals." ?*Simon Sebag Montefiore, author of Jerusalem and Catherine the Great and Potemkin*

"Douglas Smith's *Former People* is a passionate and vivid story of the destruction of an entire class—the Russian aristocracy—during the Bolshevik Revolution. What the Communists began with the nobility, they were to continue with writers, poets, artists, peasants, and workers. Smith restores the dignity, pathos, and endurance of a vanished and fabled elite." ?*Michael Ignatieff, author of The Russian Album; professor, Munk School, University of Toronto.*

"*Former People* provides a fascinating window onto a lost generation. Filled with intimate detail, drama, and pathos, this is a book as much about renewal and reinvention as about the end of an era." ?*Amanda Foreman, author of Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire and A World on Fire: an Epic History of Two Nations Divided*

#### About the Author

**Douglas Smith** is an award-winning historian and translator and the author of three previous books on Russia: *The Pearl, Love and Conquest*, and *Working the Rough Stone*. Before becoming a historian, he worked for the U. S. State Department in the Soviet Union and as a Russian affairs analyst for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty in Munich. He lives in Seattle with his wife and two children.

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