

MURDER MOST RUSSIAN

TRUE CRIME AND PUNISHMENT
IN LATE IMPERIAL RUSSIA

LOUISE McREYNOLDS

How a society defines crimes and prosecutes criminals illuminates its cultural values, social norms, and political expectations. In *Murder Most Russian*, Louise McReynolds draws on a fascinating series of murders and subsequent trials that took place in the wake of the 1864 legal reforms enacted by Tsar Alexander II. For the first time in Russian history, the accused were placed in the hands of juries of common citizens in courtrooms that were open to the press. Drawing on a wide array of sources, McReynolds reconstructs murders that gripped Russian society, from the case of Andrei Gilevich, who advertised for a personal secretary and beheaded the respondent as a way of perpetrating insurance fraud, to the beating death of Marianna Time at the hands of two young aristocrats who hoped to steal her diamond earrings.

As McReynolds shows, newspapers covered such trials extensively, transforming the courtroom into the most public site in Russia for deliberation about legality and justice. To understand the cultural and social consequences of murder in late imperial Russia, she analyzes the discussions that arose among the emergent professional criminologists, defense attorneys,

and expert forensic witnesses about what made a defendant's behavior "criminal." She also deftly connects real criminal trials to the burgeoning literary genre of crime fiction and fruitfully compares the Russian case to examples of crimes both from Western Europe and the United States in this period. *Murder Most Russian* will appeal not only to readers interested in Russian culture and true crime but also to historians who study criminology, urbanization, the role of the social sciences in forging the modern state, evolving notions of the self and the psyche, the instability of gender norms, and sensationalism in the modern media.



LOUISE McREYNOLDS is Professor of History at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She is the author of *Russia at Play: Leisure Activities at the End of the Tsarist Era*, also from Cornell, and *The News under Russia's Old Regime: The Development of a Mass-Circulation Press*.

“*Murder Most Russian* is a most compelling book. The narrative richness of detail, built on extensive research, combined with the author’s panache as a storyteller, will keep readers interested. Louise McReynolds walks observantly through a bloody terrain of murders and the worlds of those who judged murder—ranging from professional experts, to juries, to newspapers, to fictionalized murders in print and on stage and screen. McReynolds recognizes that murder stories are most valuable for what they reveal about the society in which they unfold.”

—**MARK D. STEINBERG**, University of Illinois, author of *Proletarian Imagination: Self, Modernity, and the Sacred in Russia and Petersburg, 1910–1925*

“*Murder Most Russian* is a marvelous book: erudite, entertaining, and always thought-provoking. Taking murder in its many and varied incarnations—from the evolving legal framework of jury trials and expert witnesses to the highly public world of ‘true crime’ and cinematic melodrama—Louise McReynolds casts new light onto the



history of legality and justice, gender, class, and subjectivity, celebrity and sensationalism, and the broader politics of autocracy. A particular strength is McReynolds’s assured comparative approach, teasing out both the common and the distinctive strands of Russian murder—and modernity.”

—**SUSAN MORRISSEY**, University College London, author of *Suicide and the Body Politic in Imperial Russia*