

“The Curse of Otranto: Horace Walpole and the Fall of the Russian Family”

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The Castle of Otranto (1764) is the first gothic novel and establishes the genre's now familiar conventions: mysteries, hints of the supernatural, unexplained happenings, hidden passages, malevolent monks, hints of transgressions such as incest, a stolen birthright, family secrets, and, perhaps most importantly, a family's curse and subsequent decline. Calling the new novel 'gothic', he implied its medieval barbaric origins. But, as later gothic works appeared using the trope of the family in decline, the barbarism of the past became the horror of the present. In Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839), perhaps the most famous "fall of the house" narrative, Roderick and his sister Madeline are contemporary characters, but this does not save them from their family's curse, incest, hidden passages, hints of the supernatural or, eventually, the cataclysmic destruction of their family home and their own unnatural deaths.

The "fall of the house" trope, stemming from Walpole's gothic project, proved attractive to late nineteenth-century Russian writers, just as it had to earlier French, German and British writers. The backwardness and barbarism of the past, the hidden transgressions of the present, and the mysterious curse with its fatalistic connotations resonated with ideas prevalent in Russian society in the late imperial period, especially as society negotiated its shifts in the wake of Alexander II's Great Reforms. Looking at gothic elements in one particular Russian novel, Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin's *The Family Golovlev* (1875-1880), this paper will examine the connection between a house's

physical decay and its family's doomed downward spiral. As this paper argues, the Golovlevs' curse becomes Russia's curse. The feeling of inevitable doom and approaching cataclysm, the mystery of moral transgressions committed but never confessed, stagnation, decline, and decay over generations—these promoted a cultural climate in Russia, a gothic mindset, that eventually led to a much larger “fall of the house.”