

They Thought They Had a Corpse

THE GRAVEDIGGERS OF FRANCE.
By Pertinax. New York: Doubleday
Doran & Co. 1944. 612 pp. \$6.

Reviewed by JOHN S. BADEAU

IT is too early to expect a definitive history tracing and evaluating the events that were responsible for the French disaster of 1940. Not until the records of the Allied High Command are opened can we know the full story of the military debacle and only in the light of France's effort in reconstructing her life after liberation will it be possible to judge how deeply the decay of the pre-war years ate into the soul of the nation.

Yet no future history will record or appraise the bewildering catastrophe of France without leaning heavily on the amazing account given by Pertinax in his "Gravediggers of France." Here is a work so broad in its scope, so penetrating in its analysis, and, above all, so authoritative in its authorship that no one is qualified to express a serious opinion on the collapse of France who has not read and digested it thoroughly.

Pertinax himself calls his work "a provisional synthesis." Here a long series of events is welded to the strong convictions of a great patriot and the observations of a highly trained political commentator. For thirty years Pertinax has been among the most balanced, informed, and penetrating recorders of French affairs, and what he writes now is the precipitation of that experience around the central tragedy of our day. If the result is not quite objective history, it is something equally valuable—the witness of a man who sees the moral issues in political life and never hesitates to label clearly what he sees.

In method the book is also a synthesis. It returns again and again to the same events, presenting them from the changing facets of the personalities involved. Believing that men make history, Pertinax has built his work around the four major figures most responsible for, and symbolizing most fully, the forces that destroyed France. Around these—Gamelin, Daladier, Reynaud, and Pétain—are grouped the lesser men with all their petty but deadly intrigue. The author's hope that by this device "our mishaps have been grasped at focal points" is abundantly fulfilled; like the figures in Bunyan's allegories, these men cast into sharp relief the ignorance, perverted leadership, and political self-seeking that combined to write France's capitulation to Hitler.

Readers will find a fascinating gallery of portraits—all drawn with a merciless pencil. If there are any illusions left about Pétain, they will disappear in the light of Pertinax's accusing delineation. What more damning indictment could be made than that "even Laval would never have emerged had it not been for the Marshal's collusion and senility."

What is of supreme importance, however, to get from this book, is a clearer understanding of the factors that led to the French collapse. Popularly, we have said that "France fell," using both the tone and implication with which we speak of a "fallen" woman. Moral decay and political loose living so weakened the fibre of the nation that when the whirlwind came there was no living heart of oak to stand firm against the storm. To this moralistic interpretation, a few voices have cried protest. D. W. Brogan insists that France "did not fall" at all. She was defeated on the battlefield. "The defeat of France," he wrote, in *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, "was, given the nature of modern war, a certainty—a certainty concealed from us because we did not understand the nature of modern war." To know where the truth lies between these explanations is of urgent importance if we are not only to write accurate history but also to take to ourselves the lessons it teaches.

What does Pertinax say happened to France? Foremost, was the fact of military defeat, based upon insufficient preparation and outmoded methods of warfare. The nemesis of France's military might was the emergence of a new strategy of war, a strategy in which "much more men and matériel were needed for resistance than for attack." That France should have adopted defensive tactics is not surprising; did not Verdun demonstrate what a firmly entrenched army could do? Gamelin was an able general, but France had envisioned the prospect of military invasion for so long that he felt "he had foreseen everything, calculated everything, fitted all the pieces together, and that there was nothing left for him to do.

Behind the failure to grasp the new strategy lay France's inability to prepare herself to meet invasion when it did occur. Here one of the inherent weaknesses of a democracy appears; it will simply not believe that war is imminent until the storm is broken and it cannot be regimented into total mobilization until disaster presents no alternative. Facing the series of dismal failures to provide adequate equip-



Pertinax

—News pictures

ment, Pertinax sums up by saying "in the quantity and quality of our machines, in spare parts, in accessories and even in the training of our pilots, our failure was dismal."

But that dismal failure was only possible because of the men who led—or misled—France, the "gravediggers." Here ignorance, incapacity for action, and blindness to the facts of European politics played their role. Daladier saw well enough what was needed but was too small a man to carry out the task. "His shoulders," writes Pertinax, "were not strong enough to bear the burden. Only a man of gigantic power of intellect and capacity for action could have carried the lead, and Daladier was of meaner stature." Reynaud had once had the penetration to make sound judgments and choose able lieutenants, but he had become a victim to his own intellectual acumen, the "reasoner who overdoes it," making up his mind too easily on the spur of the occasion. When there was added to this weakness the pernicious and wheedling influence of his mistress, he became a leader hopelessly unprepared for the heroic role to which he was called.

It was men such as this that paved merely ignorant, they were vicious, ready to sacrifice their Allies and the democratic pattern of France for the sake of maintaining themselves and their class in power.

What then is the answer to France's disaster? No simple formula will suffice, least of all that of the moralistic "fall" of France. Yet, out of the tangled narrative that Pertinax has told with such skill, this reviewer finds three warnings. An intelligent foreign policy backed by adequate armed force is the first line of democracy's defense; there is no substitute for ability and intelligence in national character is still the foundation of all human affairs.

Bottisian Bouts

BOTTS IN WAR, BOTTS IN PEACE.

By William Hazlitt Upson. New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1944. 327 pp. \$2.

Reviewed by THOMAS SUGRUE

"AS I have often pointed out in the past, I am not a believer in the foolish military system of literal obedience," wrote Alexander Botts in 1940, "but rather in that higher type of discipline wherein a subordinate obeys, not the order which has actually been given by a superior, but rather the order which that superior would have given if he had known what he was talking about." Remembering this it is fairly safe to credit any occasional spurts of chaos among our armed forces these days to one Captain Botts, who is supposed to be assigned to the Army but is apt to turn up with the Navy, the Alaskan highway construction corps, or on an uncharted island in the Southwest Pacific, peddling cuckoo clocks to the natives.

This latest collection of Bottsian bouts with fate contains the adventures of Alexander as they have been related since 1933 in occasional issues of *The Saturday Evening Post*, a magazine published in Philadelphia and widely distributed. In 1933 the depression was comfortably settled throughout the country and Botts was selling the products of the Earthworm Tractor Company for barter. One year later the depression, according to Botts himself, was over, and Gilbert Henderson, sales manager, had to be elected president of the company, so he would go to Washington and wrestle with the New Deal. Botts was made sales manager.

Botts and Henderson are gently satirical personifications of American business in two typical and opposing aspects. Gilbert, his name squeezed by consonants, his mind cluttered with rules and regulations, operates on broad and proved principles, getting what business his sweeping theories encounter, content to miss the rest. Alexander, his name exploding with vowels like an atom hit by a gamma ray, strikes like a hurricane, levelling selected objects, leaving the rest intact. The Earthworm Tractor Company, recipient of the results of both systems, prospers and grows. William Hazlitt Upson and the Philadelphia magazine are probably doing all right too.

There are fifteen stories in this collection, each a perfect example of the Botts-Henderson technique of eventual triumph through complete disagreement. Lovers of Botts will receive the book with purrs of contentment.

SEPTEMBER 30, 1944

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