

HISTORY

Answer Hidden in Forbidden City

"The Siege at Peking," by Peter Fleming (Harper. 273 pp. \$4) recounts the horrendous events of the turn-of-the-century Boxer Rebellion, whose rumblings, says SR's reviewer, can still be heard. Amaury de Riencourt, a leading authority on the Far East, is the author of many books, including *"The Soul of China."*

By Amaury de Riencourt

A NUMBER of excellent travel books, mostly on Asia, had made Peter Fleming's name well known before the Second World War. Since then he has added to the considerable experience acquired during his extensive journeys an equally considerable knowledge of the historical background of the scenes of his earlier travels. In his new book, *"The Siege at Peking,"* he has produced a first-rate narrative of the famous Boxer Rebellion. This is not only an extremely exciting and well-written account of one of the strangest episodes of the momentous clash between China and the West in our times (there are still survivors of the famous siege scattered throughout the world); it is also an extremely timely and topical work.

In the first year of our century, Peking was still the capital of the most populated empire in the world. Its inner core, the Imperial City, kept alive the magnificent ceremonial of a civilization doomed to collapse a few years later; and from its innermost core, the Forbidden City, issued the dreaded decrees of the last effective Manchu ruler of China, the redoubtable Empress Dowager Tzū Hsi—"Old Buddha" to her cowed subjects. Peter Fleming describes briefly the background of the episode: the predatory European powers attempting to rape the old empire, the obnoxious behavior of most Westerners who resided in China, and the fierce antagonism of many Chinese toward the Christian missionaries.

About 1898 arose the latest of a number of secret societies which have played an important part in Chinese history for over 2,000 years. These, *"The Fists of Righteous Harmony,"* were soon nicknamed *"Boxers"* by the contemptuous, and then alarmed,

foreigners. The swift growth of the society in North China soon aroused the interest of the Empress Dowager, who no longer knew how to protect her disintegrating empire; its supernatural element fascinated her and made her believe that salvation could come from that quarter. A tacit alliance was soon established between the Boxers and the Manchu court.

And in the spring of 1900 matters came to a head. Christian missionaries and their flocks of Chinese converts were systematically murdered, while the Boxers operated with increasing boldness in northeast China, and, toward the end of June, the entire diplomatic colony and most foreigners who could find their way there, found themselves locked up and under siege in the Legation Quarter of Peking. As the Empress Dowager ironically phrased it, *"The foreigners are like fish in the stew-pan."*

PETER FLEMING'S work brings out in bold relief some of the salient features of the Boxer Rebellion which are worth remembering: the incredible blindness of the foreign diplomats and lack of foresight on the part of the long-term resident Western experts on China, who expected Chinese thinking to conform to the logical pattern of Western thought, and therefore failed to anticipate this totally illogical assault on diplomatic immunity; the traditional contempt of the Europeans for the unwarlike nature of the Chinese (which made them underestimate the aggressive power of Boxer fanaticism); the repellent attitude of presumably Christian diplomats who were callously indifferent to the fate of those Chinese converts to Christianity—those same converts whose devoted manpower eventually saved the legations and their inhabitants from total destruction; the almost unanimous refusal of the able-bodied ministers to take part in the military defense of the besieged legations; the iconoclastic fury of the Chinese troops who burned down the famous Hanlin Yuan, where the greatest treasures of Chinese scholarship and the oldest library in the world were irretrievably lost; the petty jealousies and quarrels which marred the relationship between most members of the International Relief



—Bettmann Archive.

Tzū-Hsi, Dowager Empress of China
—her erstwhile victims applauded.

Force, which eventually occupied Peking and freed the embattled foreigners; and, last but not least, the stoicism of the members of the Chinese official class who had led the outburst of cruel xenophobia and who took their punishment like men. The stylistic brilliance with which Peter Fleming describes the unfolding of this historical drama reaches its climax toward the end when he describes with appropriate humor the spectacular return of an unrepentant Empress Dowager to her Forbidden City, under the spontaneous applause of her erstwhile foreign victims!

No logical explanation of the insane Boxer Rebellion was ever uncovered, nor is it likely that any will ever be in terms of Western logic. Certainly the passionate xenophobia and hatred of foreigners, which went temporarily underground after the crushing of the Rebellion, kept on smoldering and burst out in new guise under Communism. A half century later, a metamorphosed Red China proved to be a far more effective antagonist of the West; but many vital elements that went into the build-up of Chinese Communism showed up plainly in the amazing events of the Boxer Rebellion.

Peking Puzzle

The mystery, unperceived for half a century, is likely to remain a mystery for ever. The pack can be reshuffled, the cards rearranged again and again; but the game of patience will never come out, for the ace of truth is missing. The historian can do no more than draw attention to the fact that, of all the extraordinary occurrences connected with the Siege, the most extraordinary was the occurrence of the Siege itself.

—From *"The Siege at Peking,"*
by Peter Fleming.

The People's Century

"The Age of Democratic Revolution," by R. R. Palmer (Princeton University Press. 534 pp. \$7.50), is a political history of Europe and America during the closing half of the eighteenth century. Professor emeritus of history at The City College of New York, J. Salwyn Schapiro is the author of *"The World in Crisis,"* *"Liberalism: Its Meaning and History,"* and many other books dealing with modern European history.

By J. Salwyn Schapiro

IN THIS book Professor R. R. Palmer of Princeton formulates a new synthesis of the history of Western Europe and of America during the last forty years of the eighteenth century. He develops the thesis that, in this critical period, the Western world was swept "by a single revolutionary movement, which manifested itself in different ways and with varying success in different countries, yet in all of them showed similar objectives and principles" that were fundamentally "democratic." The most famous upheavals in what he calls the Age of Democratic Revolution were the American and French Revolutions.

The established order, prior to this revolutionary era, was based on the system known as "aristocracy." A small minority, consisting of nobles and wealthy bourgeois assimilated to them, constituted a governing elite

that ruled the community through self-perpetuating bodies, local and national. In practice, though not in theory, this privileged group comprised a caste, as membership in it was largely hereditary. Entrenched in governing bodies, privileged classes, and established churches, the aristocracy was irremovable, hence not responsible, directly or indirectly, to the people whom they ruled. There is never lacking a plausible justification for any existing system, no matter how evil. It was then widely believed that a privileged class was a prerequisite to political liberty in that it checked the power of the king.

The aristocracy was maintained by the power of the state, whether it was an absolute monarchy as in France, a limited monarchy as in Britain, a shadow monarchy as in the Netherlands, or a republic as in Geneva. In Britain Parliament was indeed supreme, but it was then almost entirely controlled by the aristocracy, and therefore "did not represent anyone but itself."

The Democratic Revolution aimed to destroy this system of prescription and discrimination that excluded the great majority from any participation in government, whether on class or on religious grounds. In Palmer's view this revolutionary movement was primarily political in that its chief demand was for "the delegation of authority and the removability of officials," basically a conflict over the issue of the aristocratic versus the democratic form of community life.

He is careful to point out that "democracy" then did not mean universal suffrage, but a political order in which the right of franchise would be granted to elect representative bodies.

The American Revolution was the first uprising that threw down the gage of battle to aristocracy. Its deepest significance, according to the author, lay not in its being a war of independence, but in its being "the earliest successful assertion of the principle that public power must arise from those over whom it is exercised." What was original in the American Revolution were not the ideas of popular sovereignty, natural rights, and individual freedom, common coin in the eighteenth century, but the implementation of these ideas into a practical system of government through the device of a written constitution, drawn up by a special convention. Palmer regards the Constitution of the United States as a continuation and as an integral part of the American Revolution. He utterly rejects the view presented in Charles A. Beard's "Economic Interpretation of the Constitution," once widely accepted, that the propertied elements succeeded in imposing "a conservative constitution on a confused or apathetic people." What Palmer calls "the essential revolutionary idea of the American Revolution" was that "of the people as a constituent power, working through a special convention conceived as outside and prior to government, and creating, by its sovereign action, the organs of state to which it grants a delegated authority." This idea was later adopted by every country in the Western world where a democratic government was established.

The American Revolution played a great role in Europe. "It inspired the sense of a new era," and "set up America as a model for those seeking a better world" by inducing "a kind of spiritual flight" from the established aristocratic order. The book describes in great detail the spread of the revolt against aristocracy in various European countries up to the outbreak of the French Revolution, notably in Britain, France, Sweden, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Poland, and Hungary. The revolt took various forms: moderate in some, menacing in others, and violent in the Hapsburg domains. But all of them failed to establish a democratic order. Only in America had the Democratic Revolution become an accomplished fact.

Then, suddenly, was heard the thunderclap of the French Revolution. Like the American Revolution, according to Palmer, it too originated as a political upheaval, but its effects on the social order went far beyond



American Revolution—A Constitution.



—Bettmann Archive.

French Revolution—A Reign of Terror.