

They Tried to Topple the Tsar

The Fortress, by Robert Payne (Simon & Schuster. 448 pp. \$7.95), tells the story of the great Russian revolutionaries from the Decembrist uprising in 1825 to the Revolution of 1917. Max Nomad, once active in the revolutionary underground of Western and Eastern Europe, wrote "Rebels and Renegades" and "Dreamers, Dynamiters, and Demagogues."

By MAX NOMAD

THE RECORDING of historical events lends itself to a variety of techniques. The easiest and simplest of them is reporting the sensational details without referring to the class or group interests and without analyzing the motives propelling the leading personalities, or interpreting the ideas professed or the slogans launched by them. If the author using this technique is a gifted journalist, he will produce a book that appeals to a wide circle of readers.

A book of this kind is Robert Payne's *The Fortress*. It deals with the history of Russia's revolutionary movements from the military insurrection of December 1825 to the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks in November 1917. It is well written and contains an enormous wealth

of interesting information. Yet it seems that the author chose to abide by the advice given a young writer by a popular French playwright: "Never depart from superficiality." The very first chapter confirms this suspicion.

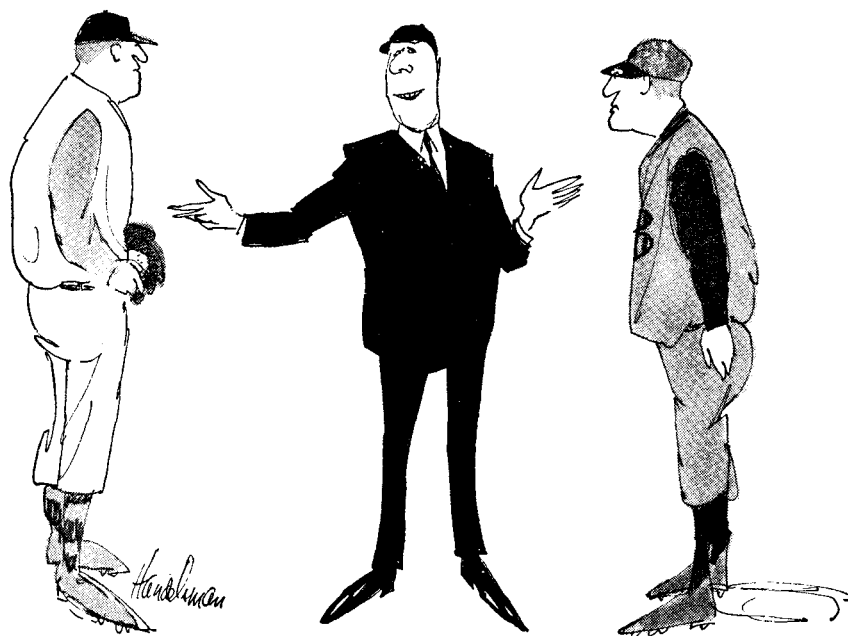
The title of the book refers to the Peter and Paul Fortress in St. Petersburg (now renamed Leningrad), which from 1713 until 1918 was the capital of Russia. Since its construction in the early years of the eighteenth century the Fortress (which the Bolsheviks converted into a museum) served as a place of detention for those dissenters and rebels whom the régime considered particularly dangerous. Ironically, one of the first prisoners held in that dreadful place was the son and presumptive successor of Peter the Great, the founder of St. Petersburg and of the Fortress adorning it. Aleksei—this was the name of the hapless prince—was a rebel of sorts and conspired to have his father dethroned. The book is full of the most gruesome details about the doomed prisoner's ordeal and the bestiality of his father, who had him tortured to death.

Yet one would look here in vain for the essential aspect of Aleksei's revolt. For it was not simply the case of a young man in a hurry and of a few malcontent aristocrats who supported him. Every serious historian knows that the tsare-

vitch was under the spiritual influence of the Orthodox Church hierarchy, which hated the tsar because of his, for that time, ultra-modern, ultra-"progressive," Western-inspired reforms. These reforms aimed at weakening the power of the Church and at curtailing the independence of the feudal lords—thus strengthening the foundations of the Empire and consolidating the absolute power of the tsar. There is no hint about this in Mr. Payne's book.

The next following chapter, entitled "The Decembrists," is a brilliant piece of historical reportage. It deals with the abortive military insurrection directed against the succession of Nicholas (later Nicholas I) to the throne of his childless brother, Alexander I. The revolt, which occurred on December 14, 1825, was ineptly staged by a number of liberal army officers, all belonging to the highest aristocracy. The reader is moved to the quick by the tragic fate of their leaders, five of whom were hanged. Yet for all his lavish details, the author fails to present the widely divergent ideas of the initiators of the movement that preceded the uprising. They were all for the abolition of serfdom; but some favored a constitutional monarchy with the vote restricted to the wealthy, while others, such as Paul Pestel, their outstanding personality, advocated a republic with eventual universal suffrage but with a military dictatorship during the transition period. It is understood that, aside from the progressive ideas of an enlightened élite, the driving motive behind the uprising was the realization that the country needed a thorough reorganization on the British or American model if it was to survive as a great power in the no longer feudal post-Napoleonic world. Was Mr. Payne afraid that the presentation of these aspects of the uprising might bore his readers?

Following the Decembrists, the next prominent victims of the Fortress were the members of what is called the Petrashevsky circle. This was a group of intellectuals that included the novelist Dostoevsky. In 1849 they were meeting in the apartment of Mikhail Petrashevsky, a clerk in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who was interested in the ideas of the French Socialist writer Charles Fourier. The members of the Petrashevsky circle had no revolutionary plans, even though at heart they were all enemies of the régime; but to the tsar these sentiments alone were tantamount to a capital crime. For he knew that they were shared by many educated members of the middle class, who were stirring under the impact of the events of 1848. As a result twenty men, including Dostoevsky, were condemned to death. After being subjected to an elaborate ceremony preparatory to execution, they were all "pardoned" at the very last



"Please see my predicament. Whichever way I decide, one of you is bound to take exception."

moment and their sentences commuted to penal servitude in Siberia. Petrashevsky, an eccentric but a man of character and strong convictions, died in Siberia in 1866, his hatred of tsarist tyranny unabated to the last; while Dostoevsky, his fellow-"conspirator," as it were, was to become one of the most abject apologists for the tsarist system. Mr. Payne tactfully prefers not to mention this blot on the escutcheon of one of the world's greatest writers.

Mr. Payne deals mercilessly with two of the most famous victims of the Fortress: Mikhail Bakunin and Sergey Nechayev. Bakunin achieved lasting fame as the founder of the now extinct anarchist movement, even though his anarchism was not exactly the simon-pure article; while his wayward disciple Nechayev, the super-Machiavellian "tiger cub" who would shrink from absolutely nothing, was to attain an unenviable immortality as the younger Verkhovensky in Dostoevsky's *The Possessed*.

TO be sure, Bakunin was a man of appalling contradictions and other failings. But, for all that, he was one of the greatest revolutionary heroes of the last century. It is generally believed that Richard Wagner, who knew Bakunin personally, had him in mind when he composed his *Siegfried*. Yet Mr. Payne presents him chiefly at his lowest by quoting extensively from his *Confession*, which he wrote under incredible duress in the Peter and Paul Fortress. Mr. Payne is obviously not at all interested in Bakunin's views, which in many respects proved prophetic, as when he predicted that Marx's "dictatorship of the proletariat" would in reality be a dictatorship of office-holders and engineers. The author is more interested in the fact that Bakunin was a "sponger"—forgetting that at the time many active revolutionists (including Marx) had to live off the bounty of their friends, and that there was nothing dishonorable about it.

On the other hand, Mr. Payne to a certain extent defends Bakunin's reputation by giving Nechayev all the undeserved "credit" for the authorship of the famous—or rather infamous—*Catechism of the Revolutionary*. For it is now definitely established that it was Bakunin who wrote that horrible document, apparently in a mood of super-Machiavellian, ultrarevolutionary excitement. Mr. Payne hints that there may have been a Verlaine-Rimbaud relationship (he does not use that expression) between the old hero and the "tiger cub." He apparently culled that "information" from E. H. Carr's gossipy *Romantic Exiles*, unaware that the author subsequently retracted the insinuation.

It is odd that, while devoting more
(Continued on page 62)

Kingcraft in the Middle Ages

Seven Medieval Kings, by Joseph Dahmus (Doubleday. 332 pp. \$5.95), contains short biographies of able and interesting men who profoundly influenced their times. Orville Prescott was formerly book critic for *The New York Times*.

By ORVILLE PRESCOTT

GIBBON's celebrated definition of history as "little more than the register of the crimes, follies, and misfortunes of mankind" is much too limited to apply to many kinds of history being written today. Nevertheless, I was reminded of it when reading *Seven Medieval Kings*, by Joseph Dahmus. This learned and enlightening book discusses a lot of matters not covered by Gibbon's disillusioned aphorism; but its pages are so full of slaughter, destruction, ferocity, and fanaticism that it does inspire a mood similar to his.

Presumably this was not Mr. Dahmus's intention. A professor of medieval history at Pennsylvania State University, he has chosen to write a survey of the nature and use of royal power during the Middle Ages in terms of the reigns of seven kings who lived from the sixth to the fifteenth centuries. All are greatly celebrated. One, however, seems an intruder: he is Harun al-Rashid, fifth caliph of the Abbassid dynasty in Baghdad. In time he is eligible for inclusion; but the word "medieval" is nearly always used in a geographical sense also and refers to Europe.

The other monarchs present are Justinian, the Eastern Roman emperor who built Santa Sophia, codified the laws, and waged a series of interminable wars; Charlemagne, conqueror, religious leader and reformer, and first Holy Roman emperor; Frederick II, "the wonder of the world," the most brilliant, learned, versatile, and enigmatic of monarchs, and one of the most cruel and tyrannical; Henry II, "England's greatest king"; Louis IX, who was a good man and a saint, and Louis XI, who was cruel, treacherous, vindictive, and devout in a naively superstitious way.

In writing about these men Mr. Dahmus has quoted copiously from contemporary chroniclers, has told many good stories, and has crowded his pages with masses of interesting information. He is particularly good at explaining complicated political, economic, social,



—Bettmann Archive.

Louis XI—"vindictive."

and religious matters briefly. So *Seven Medieval Kings* must be considered a thoroughly sound and capable work. But it is not a "popular" history, and readers who might mistake it for one will find it heavy going.

This is chiefly caused by an oscillation in Mr. Dahmus's method of writing. At his best he is bright, lively, and full of surprises. At his worst he sinks into laborious, textbook exposition. And his prose itself alternates between the pleasantly crisp and the awkward and clumsy. Some sentences seem almost like literal translations from German or Latin: "Possession of the kingdom he came no closer to achieving."

Seven Medieval Kings can be read as an introduction to the Middle Ages, as a book about kingship itself, and as a collection of short biographies of seven able and interesting men who profoundly influenced the history of their times and who themselves expressed typical attitudes of those times.

One useless map is included. Several good maps are badly needed.

LITERARY I. Q. ANSWERS

Column One should read: 7 (Browning: *Porphyria's Lover*), 10 (*Canterbury Tales*), 6, 9, 1 (Pope: *Rape of the Lock*), 3 (Poe: *To Helen*), 8 (Grimm), 4 (Tennyson: *Lady of Shalott*), 5 (Heine), 2 (Noyes: *Highwayman*).