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FALSE TSARS

Gyula Szvák

Translated from the Hungarian
by *Peter Daniel*

Foreword
by *Nicholas V. Riasanovsky*

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FOREWORD

Professor Gyula Szvák's *False Tsars* is a very interesting book. It is essentially a summary treatment of almost countless pretenders to the Russian throne who claimed to be the rightful sovereigns of the country and the people, from the sixteenth century and especially the Time of Troubles to the twentieth. (It stops just short of the false Alekseis and Anastasias of our time.) The author emphasizes three major "waves" of pretenders: the numerous false Dmitris during and after the Time of Troubles (claiming to be Ivan the Terrible's son Dmitri who had died in childhood), the false Peters in the second half of the eighteenth century (following the death of Catherine the Great's husband Peter III in the palace coup of 1762) and the false Constantines of the nineteenth century (trying to assume the identity of Nicholas I's older brother Constantine who had been centrally involved in the confusing issue of succession following the death of Alexander I in 1825). In addition, Professor Szvák discusses or at least mentions very many other false contenders, who used a variety of names and operated at different times. Moreover, the author even pays some attention to claimants who aspired to less than the throne, and, indeed, to the entire issue of impersonation in Russian history in general. The short book is extremely rich, and even a close student of Russian history will find much to learn from it.

As to methodology, the author relies on primary sources, on the historical literature on his subject in several languages, and also on common sense. That last recourse may not entirely encompass his

thoroughly fantastic material, but it is probably at least as useful as any other. Sometimes Professor Szvák gives more than one version of a particular episode. Always he tries to stay close to established facts. Thus he pays no attention to the opinion of the greatest historian of the Time of Troubles, Sergei Feodorovich Platonov, that the first False Dmitri was put forth by the boyars to destroy Boris Godunov, probably because that assertion, while it fits Platonov's brilliant social analysis, has no direct evidence to back it. Similarly, he neglects the view that the first False Dmitri believed himself to be the original Tsarevich Dmitri of Uglich. By contrast, we receive an abundance of attested facts. I was sad to discover that Marina Mniszech was not really a beauty.

In explicating and interpreting the phenomenon, or phenomena, of false tsars, Professor Szvák refers to a number of considerations and factors. Wisely he makes it clear that, broadly speaking, impostors operated in many countries throughout history, not only in Russia. Still, again wisely, he concentrates in considerable detail on the links between false claimants and tsardom. To be sure, the repeated readiness of the Russian people to rise in the name of the "true" tsar against the usurper on the throne resulted from the continuous poverty and oppression of the masses as well as the hope that the new and just ruler will improve their condition. Social uprisings became glaringly obvious in the Time of Troubles or in the great Pugachev rebellion of 1773–1774. Yet social protest in the name of the "true" tsar often seemed to follow a pattern of its own, and it needed a stimulus from above to become highly effective, such stimulus as the end of the dynasty leading into the Time of Troubles or the confusion over succession in 1825. While often utterly fantastic in their orientation and effort, the rebels in the name of the tsar still wanted to have a candidate of an appropriate age and with some physical markings indicating his tsarist identity. At the extreme, the presence of such a candidate, and occasionally even merely of his name, seemed to serve as a kind of formal seal to validate a rebellious movement, which in other ways defied all sense.

The events described in the book, both major and minor, throw much light on Russian economic, social, and even military history. Most intriguing, however, is the issue of tsardom itself and of its impact on the people. Without Kievan precedent, the emergence of tsar and tsardom marked the end of the appanage period and the appearance of Muscovy. The Mongols had no direct influence on it for they had very little in common with the Russians, never established their own dynasty in Russia, and were considered in Muscovy simply as divine punishment for Russian sins. Byzantium, of course, offered much more: Christianity came to Russia from Byzantium, and so did the title of *tsar* itself, originally Roman *caesar*, indeed in many ways Byzantium represented the religious, political, and cultural ideal for medieval Russians. But Muscovite tsars were not successors to Byzantine emperors. None of them ever made that claim; in fact, they rejected the offer of the Byzantine succession when it was urged upon them by others. As for the Russian masses, they had never been imbued with the Byzantine political theory. Some specialists wrote in general of the religious or quasi-religious nature of the Muscovite tsar and tsardom. But that approach can also create more problems than it solves. If one writes that the tsar was regarded in Muscovy as God or as the chief servant of God, one should realize that there is an immeasurable distance between the two identities. And the first is impossible in Christianity, in particular Orthodox Christianity. More appropriately one may conceivably refer to the emphasis in the Russian Church on the sacredness on this earth of everything associated with the divine. The tsar could share in that sacredness through the ritual of coronation, constant prayers for the tsar, the great deference accorded him in religious services and ceremonies, etc., etc.

Well, perhaps Professor Szvák will write his next book on the charismatic nature of tsar and tsardom in Russian history in general, not only as it applied to the fascinating deviant variant of “false” tsars.

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