

## Russia in the Shadows

*H.G.Wells*

April 24-26, 2018

Wells had visited Russia in 1914 before the War so when he returns in 1920 he has a frame of reference. His contention is that six years of war, those of the Great War and that of the ensuing Civil War, has completely devastated the country which is in ruins. The contrast between the wealth of the pre-war years and those of his visit is striking. Before Petersburg was a vibrant city with lots of shops, now almost all shops are gone, not temporarily as being merely boarded up waiting for better times, but gutted. What is the point of a city where no trade is being conducted, Wells asks, and answers none. The cities will have to be dismantled and abandoned.

It is not the fault of the Bolsheviks, the author repeatedly points out, the collapse of the Russian society is not a consequence of the Bolsheviks taking power, but rather the other way round, as a consequence of the collapse the Bolsheviks took power moving into the vacuum. At the time there is no alternative to the Bolsheviks, especially none of the white generals, such as Wrangel, can supply any feasible alternative. The Bolsheviks are doing the best of an almost impossible situation trying desperately to maintain some order in a totally chaotic society. The methods uses are often brutal and reprehensible, but they do at least work. By shooting profiteers and looters and others exploiting to their financial advantage a chaotic situation some central authority is taking form. Wells is not a communist, he finds Marx a bore hiding behind the fetish of a huge beard, and the emphasis on class-war ridiculous. Who is the proletariat, how can you classify people according to the rigid schemes of oppressors and the oppressed so categorically? Often individuals are both oppressed and acting as oppressors. How can you abolish trade without finding any alternatives? Surely there are among the Communists even zealots who would oppose the teaching of chemistry say, unless it is truly proletarian, Wells speculates. Something which reminds the modern reader of gender and race perspectives which are now, in all seriousness, imposed on factual subjects. Wells does not approve of the principles and methods of the young Communists, in fact he finds the Bolsheviks employing the crudest and most naive methods in trying to govern, yet he can very much identify with the spirit in which it is all being done. Wells is a Socialist and he calls himself a Collectivist and thus he is in general terms sympathetic to a collectivist approach based on cooperation and not riddled by wasteful capitalist competition, but he claims to keep a cool head.

While he disparages many of the people in power, he is deeply impressed by the likes of Lenin and Trotsky, the latter as a supreme organizer. People like them see further than their mostly mindless followers. Lenin is not a writer, his forceful personality and subtlety of thought does not come through in his published works; but he surely has ideas, and professes to a pragmatic approach, trying this and that out to see what actually works (the NEP would be instituted some time after the brief visit by Wells). Wells actually gets to meet Lenin himself and have a brief interview with him, after being filtered through the security installations of the Kremlin. This state of affairs is not very fortunate according

to the author as it tends to isolate Lenin from the people. The information he receives will invariably be distorted, as will his directives going the opposite way. We learn that Lenin speaks an excellent English (in addition to other Western tongues one surmises, in glaring contrast to Stalin who had never spent any time abroad) so the interview can be conducted directly without the intervention of an interpreter. Wells keeps asking Lenin about his visions of Socialism, what he really wants to do, while Lenin is persistently puzzled by the absence of a socialist revolution in the West. After all, according to Marxist dogma, the revolution would start in the developed industrial nations. But once again, as Wells points out, the Bolsheviks did not bring about a revolution they only moved into a power vacuum. In his autobiography Wells gives an interesting assessment of his meeting with Lenin, and one would hope and expect to get a fuller account in his book, but alas, the biography written fifteen years after the meeting gives a more thought out version based on sustained reflection, while the book only reports immediate impressions with no attempts at digestion. Which of course has the charms common to all so called eye-witness reports.

To Wells Russia is a primitive society consisting predominantly of illiterate peasants with only the crudest and basest instincts to guide them. In the past there was a thin crust of educated people who sustained the political power and the cultural varnish, now there is but a thin crust of Bolsheviks, maybe constituting only a pro mille of the population, that has any semblance of political power and responsibility. And culturally? Wells is very impressed. In this total economic chaos the theaters are very much open and active and people seem to have a craving for them. Maybe the only source of distraction in a tedious everyday struggle. Also the author has been very much impressed by the schools he has been able to visit, schools which in terms of equipment and curricula compare very favorably to what Britain has to offer<sup>1</sup>. The new regime seems intent upon educating the new upcoming generation thoroughly and do away with illiteracy.

It is a short book, more in the nature of a pamphlet combined with hurriedly jotted down diary notes. The message is clear. Do not meddle with the emerging Bolsheviks, leave them alone to work things out, and withdraw all support to the counter-revolutionary forces and instead give support to the regime. He thinks that the task of so doing is so large that only the Americans can be trusted to bring it through.

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<sup>1</sup> Wells is initially disconcerted when he visits a school where the only British author known was Wells himself and the pupils were able to list all his books by heart! However, at the next school no one had heard of him. It transpired later that the first visit had been masterminded by a Russian friend and official who had wanted to impress his guest, or simply to play a practical joke on him.