

Herbert George Wells

Russia in the
Shadows

Articles

Russia in the Shadows is the title of the book by H. G. Wells published early in 1921, which includes a series of articles. Wells first visited Russia in January 1914. This is a vivid account of his return to post-revolutionary St Petersburg, now called Petrograd, a ruined city with a near-starving population. Wells was a first-class reporter, and he had the advantage of staying with his friend, Maxim Gorky, who arranged Wells's meeting with Lenin at the Kremlin.

Russia in the Shadows: Articles
by H. G. Wells

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I PETERSBURG IN COLLAPSE

In January 1914 I visited Petersburg and Moscow for a couple of weeks; in September 1920 I was asked to repeat this visit by Mr. Kamenev, of the Russian Trade Delegation in London. I snatched at this suggestion, and went to Russia at the end of September with my son, who speaks a little Russian. We spent a fortnight and a day in Russia, passing most of our time in Petersburg, where we went about freely by ourselves, and were shown nearly everything we asked to see. We visited Moscow, and I had a long conversation with Mr. Lenin, which I shall relate. In Petersburg I did not stay at the Hotel International, to which foreign visitors are usually sent, but with my old friend, Maxim Gorky. The guide and interpreter assigned to assist us was a lady I had met in Russia in 1914, the niece of a former Russian Ambassador to London. She was educated at Newnham, she has been imprisoned five times by the Bolshevist Government, she is not allowed to leave Petersburg because of an attempt to cross the frontier to her children in Esthonia, and she was, therefore, the last person likely to lend herself to any attempt to hoodwink me. I mention this because on every hand at home and in Russia I had been told that the most elaborate camouflage of realities would go on, and that I should be kept in blinkers throughout my visit.

As a matter of fact, the harsh and terrible realities of the situation in Russia cannot be camouflaged. In the case of special delegations, perhaps, a certain distracting tumult of receptions, bands, and speeches may be possible, and may be attempted. But it is hardly possible to dress up two large cities for the benefit of two stray visitors, wandering observantly often in different directions. Naturally, when one demands to see a school or a prison one is not shown the worst. Any country would in the circumstances show the best it had, and Soviet Russia is no exception. One can allow for that.

Our dominant impression of things Russian is an impression of a vast irreparable breakdown. The great monarchy that was here in 1914, the administrative, social, financial, and commercial systems connected with it have, under the strains of six years of incessant

war, fallen down and smashed utterly. Never in all history has there been so great a débâcle before. The fact of the Revolution is, to our minds, altogether dwarfed by the fact of this downfall. By its own inherent rottenness and by the thrusts and strains of aggressive imperialism the Russian part of the old civilised world that existed before 1914 fell, and is now gone. The peasant, who was the base of the old pyramid, remains upon the land, living very much as he has always lived. Everything else is broken down, or is breaking down. Amid this vast disorganisation an emergency Government, supported by a disciplined party of perhaps 150,000 adherents—the Communist Party—has taken control. It has—at the price of much shooting—suppressed brigandage, established a sort of order and security in the exhausted towns, and set up a crude rationing system.

It is, I would say at once, the only possible Government in Russia at the present time. It is the only idea, it supplies the only solidarity, left in Russia. But it is a secondary fact. The dominant fact for the Western reader, the threatening and disconcerting fact, is that a social and economic system very like our own and intimately connected with our own has crashed.

Nowhere in all Russia is the fact of that crash so completely evident as it is in Petersburg. Petersburg was the artificial creation of Peter the Great; his bronze statue in the little garden near the Admiralty still prances amid the ebbing life of the city. Its palaces are still and empty, or strangely refurnished with the typewriters and tables and plank partitions of a new Administration which is engaged chiefly in a strenuous struggle against famine and the foreign invader. Its streets were streets of busy shops. In 1914 I loafed agreeably in the Petersburg streets—buying little articles and watching the abundant traffic. All these shops have ceased. There are perhaps half a dozen shops still open in Petersburg. There is a Government crockery shop where I bought a plate or so as a souvenir, for seven or eight hundred roubles each, and there are a few flower shops. It is a wonderful fact, I think, that in this city, in which most of the shrinking population is already nearly starving, and hardly any one possesses a second suit of clothes or more than a single change of worn and patched linen, flowers can be and are still bought and sold. For five thousand roubles, which is about six and eightpence at the

current rate of exchange, one can get a very pleasing bunch of big chrysanthemums.

I do not know if the words “all the shops have ceased” convey any picture to the Western reader of what a street looks like in Russia. It is not like Bond Street or Piccadilly on a Sunday, with the blinds neatly drawn down in a decorous sleep, and ready to wake up and begin again on Monday. The shops have an utterly wretched and abandoned look; paint is peeling off, windows are cracked, some are broken and boarded up, some still display a few fly-blown relics of stock in the window, some have their windows covered with notices; the windows are growing dim, the fixtures have gathered two years’ dust. They are dead shops. They will never open again.

All the great bazaar-like markets are closed, too, in Petersburg now, in the desperate struggle to keep a public control of necessities and prevent the profiteer driving up the last vestiges of food to incredible prices. And this cessation of shops makes walking about the streets seem a silly sort of thing to do. Nobody “walks about” any more. One realises that a modern city is really nothing but long alleys of shops and restaurants and the like. Shut them up, and the meaning of a street has disappeared. People hurry past—a thin traffic compared with my memories of 1914. The electric street cars are still running and busy—until six o’clock. They are the only means of locomotion for ordinary people remaining in town—the last legacy of capitalist enterprise. They became free while we were in Petersburg. Previously there had been a charge of two or three roubles—the hundredth part of the price of an egg. Freeing them made little difference in their extreme congestion during the homegoing hours. Every one scrambles on the tramcar. If there is no room inside you cluster outside. In the busy hours festoons of people hang outside by any handhold; people are frequently pushed off, and accidents are frequent. We saw a crowd collected round a child cut in half by a tramcar, and two people in the little circle in which we moved in Petersburg had broken their legs in tramway accidents.

The roads along which these tramcars run are in a frightful condition. They have not been repaired for three or four years; they are full of holes like shell-holes, often two or three feet deep. Frost

has eaten out great cavities, drains have collapsed, and people have torn up the wood pavement for fires. Only once did we see any attempt to repair the streets in Petrograd. In a side street some mysterious agency had collected a load of wood blocks and two barrels of tar. Most of our longer journeys about the town were done in official motor-cars—left over from the former times. A drive is an affair of tremendous swerves and concussions. These surviving motor-cars are running now on kerosene. They disengage clouds of pale blue smoke, and start up with a noise like a machine-gun battle. Every wooden house was demolished for firing last winter, and such masonry as there was in those houses remains in ruinous gaps, between the houses of stone.

Every one is shabby; every one seems to be carrying bundles in both Petersburg and Moscow. To walk into some side street in the twilight and see nothing but ill-clad figures, all hurrying, all carrying loads, gives one an impression as though the entire population was setting out in flight. That impression is not altogether misleading. The Bolshevik statistics I have seen are perfectly frank and honest in the matter. The population of Petersburg has fallen from 1,200,000 (before 1919) to a little over 700,000, and it is still falling. Many people have returned to peasant life in the country, many have gone abroad, but hardship has taken an enormous toll of this city. The death-rate in Petersburg is over 81 per 1,000; formerly it was high among European cities at 22. The birth-rate of the underfed and profoundly depressed population is about 15. It was formerly about 30.

These bundles that every one carries are partly the rations of food that are doled out by the Soviet organisation, partly they are the material and results of illicit trade. The Russian population has always been a trading and bargaining population. Even in 1914 there were but few shops in Petersburg whose prices were really fixed prices. Tariffs were abominated; in Moscow taking a droshky meant always a haggle, ten kopecks at a time. Confronted with a shortage of nearly every commodity, a shortage caused partly by the war strain,—for Russia has been at war continuously now for six years—partly by the general collapse of social organisation, and partly by the blockade, and with a currency in complete disorder, the only

possible way to save the towns from a chaos of cornering, profiteering, starvation, and at last a mere savage fight for the remnants of food and common necessities, was some sort of collective control and rationing.

The Soviet Government rations on principle, but any Government in Russia now would have to ration. If the war in the West had lasted up to the present time London would be rationing too—food, clothing, and housing. But in Russia this has to be done on a basis of uncontrollable peasant production, with a population temperamentally indisciplined and self-indulgent. The struggle is necessarily a bitter one. The detected profiteer, the genuine profiteer who profiteers on any considerable scale, gets short shrift; he is shot. Quite ordinary trading may be punished severely. All trading is called “speculation,” and is now illegal. But a queer street-corner trading in food and so forth is winked at in Petersburg, and quite openly practised in Moscow, because only by permitting this can the peasants be induced to bring in food.

There is also much underground trade between buyers and sellers who know each other. Every one who can supplements his public rations in this way. And every railway station at which one stops is an open market. We would find a crowd of peasants at every stopping-place waiting to sell milk, eggs, apples, bread, and so forth. The passengers clamber down and accumulate bundles. An egg or an apple costs 300 roubles.

The peasants look well fed, and I doubt if they are very much worse off than they were in 1914. Probably they are better off. They have more land than they had, and they have got rid of their landlords. They will not help in any attempt to overthrow the Soviet Government because they are convinced that while it endures this state of things will continue. This does not prevent their resisting whenever they can the attempts of the Red Guards to collect food at regulation prices. Insufficient forces of Red Guards may be attacked and massacred. Such incidents are magnified in the London Press as peasant insurrections against the Bolsheviks. They are nothing of the sort. It is just the peasants making themselves comfortable under the existing régime.

But every class above the peasants—including the official class—is now in a state of extreme privation. The credit and industrial system that produced commodities has broken down, and so far the attempts to replace it by some other form of production have been ineffective. So that nowhere are there any new things. About the only things that seem to be fairly well supplied are tea, cigarettes, and matches. Matches are more abundant in Russia than they were in England in 1917, and the Soviet State match is quite a good match. But such things as collars, ties, shoelaces, sheets and blankets, spoons and forks, all the haberdashery and crockery of life, are unattainable. There is no replacing a broken cup or glass except by a sedulous search and illegal trading. From Petersburg to Moscow we were given a sleeping car de luxe, but there were no water-bottles, glasses, or, indeed, any loose fittings. They have all gone. Most of the men one meets strike one at first as being carelessly shaven, and at first we were inclined to regard that as a sign of a general apathy, but we understood better how things were when a friend mentioned to my son quite casually that he had been using one safety razor blade for nearly a year.

Drugs and any medicines are equally unattainable. There is nothing to take for a cold or a headache; no packing off to bed with a hot-water bottle. Small ailments develop very easily therefore into serious trouble. Nearly everybody we met struck us as being uncomfortable and a little out of health. A buoyant, healthy person is very rare in this atmosphere of discomforts and petty deficiencies.

If any one falls into a real illness the outlook is grim. My son paid a visit to the big Obuchovskaya Hospital, and he tells me things were very miserable there indeed. There was an appalling lack of every sort of material, and half the beds were not in use through the sheer impossibility of dealing with more patients if they came in. Strengthening and stimulating food is out of the question unless the patient's family can by some miracle procure it outside and send it in. Operations are performed only on one day in the week, Dr. Federoff told me, when the necessary preparations can be made. On other days they are impossible, and the patient must wait.

Hardly any one in Petersburg has much more than a change of raiment, and in a great city in which there remains no means of communication but a few overcrowded tramcars,[1] old, leaky, and ill-fitting boots are the only footwear. At times one sees astonishing makeshifts by way of costume. The master of a school to which we paid a surprise visit struck me as unusually dapper. He was wearing a dinner suit with a blue serge waistcoat. Several of the distinguished scientific and literary men I met had no collars and wore neck-wraps. Gorky possesses only the one suit of clothes he wears.

[1] I saw one passenger steamboat on the Neva crowded with passengers. Usually the river was quite deserted except for a rare Government tug or a solitary boatman picking up drift timber.

At a gathering of literary people in Petersburg, Mr. Amphiteatroff, the well-known writer, addressed a long and bitter speech to me. He suffered from the usual delusion that I was blind and stupid and being hoodwinked. He was for taking off the respectable-looking coats of all the company present in order that I might see for myself the rags and tatters and pitiful expedients beneath. It was a painful and, so far as I was concerned, an unnecessary speech, but I quote it here to emphasise this effect of general destitution. And this underclad town population in this dismantled and ruinous city is, in spite of all the furtive trading that goes on, appallingly underfed. With the best will in the world the Soviet Government is unable to produce a sufficient ration to sustain a healthy life. We went to a district kitchen and saw the normal food distribution going on. The place seemed to us fairly clean and fairly well run, but that does not compensate for a lack of material. The lowest grade ration consisted of a basinful of thin skilly and about the same quantity of stewed apple compote. People have bread cards and wait in queues for bread, but for three days the Petersburg bakeries stopped for lack of flour. The bread varies greatly in quality; some was good coarse brown bread, and some I found damp, clay-like, and uneatable.

I do not know how far these disconnected details will suffice to give the Western reader an idea of what ordinary life in Petersburg is at the present time. Moscow, they say, is more overcrowded and

shorter of fuel than Petersburg, but superficially it looked far less grim than Petersburg. We saw these things in October, in a particularly fine and warm October. We saw them in sunshine in a setting of ruddy and golden foliage. But one day there came a chill, and the yellow leaves went whirling before a drive of snowflakes. It was the first breath of the coming winter. Every one shivered and looked out of the double windows—already sealed up—and talked to us of the previous year. Then the glow of October returned.

It was still glorious sunshine when we left Russia. But when I think of that coming winter my heart sinks. The Soviet Government in the commune of the north has made extraordinary efforts to prepare for the time of need. There are piles of wood along the quays, along the middle of the main streets, in the courtyards, and in every place where wood can be piled. Last year many people had to live in rooms below the freezing point; the water-pipes froze up, the sanitary machinery ceased to work. The reader must imagine the consequences. People huddled together in the ill-lit rooms, and kept themselves alive with tea and talk. Presently some Russian novelist will tell us all that this has meant to heart and mind in Russia. This year it may not be quite so bad as that. The food situation also, they say, is better, but this I very much doubt. The railways are now in an extreme state of deterioration; the wood-stoked engines are wearing out; the bolts start and the rails shift as the trains rumble along at a maximum of twenty-five miles per hour. Even were the railways more efficient, Wrangel has got hold of the southern food supplies. Soon the cold rain will be falling upon these 700,000 souls still left in Petersburg, and then the snow. The long nights extend and the daylight dwindles.

And this spectacle of misery and ebbing energy is, you will say, the result of Bolshevik rule! I do not believe it is. I will deal with the Bolshevik Government when I have painted the general scenery of our problem. But let me say here that this desolate Russia is not a system that has been attacked and destroyed by something vigorous and malignant. It is an unsound system that has worked itself out and fallen down. It was not communism which built up these great, impossible cities, but capitalism. It was not communism that plunged this huge, creaking, bankrupt empire into six years of