

1921

Polemical Notes
H. G. Wells about Soviet Russia

H. G. Wells, *Rossiia vo mgle* [Russia in the Shadows], translated from the English with a foreword by Prince N. S. Trubetskoy, Russian-Bulgarian Publishing House, 1921, 96 pages.

I.

IN THE FALL OF 1920, H. G. Wells visited Soviet Russia, and upon returning to England shared with his readers the impressions which he brought back from this trip by publishing the book *Russia in the Shadows*. Wells's book caused a storm of indignation in Russian White-Guard emigré circles. In Burtsev's "Obshchee delo" [Common Cause], Ivan Bunin published long and malicious articles; similar articles appeared in "Rul'" [The Helm] and a number of other foreign White newspapers. One could say that no other book about the Bolsheviks has aroused such a commotion abroad as Wells's book about Russia. This is completely understandable.

Wells recounts: "we [Wells and his son—A.V.] went about freely by ourselves, and were shown nearly everything we asked to see.... 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 Bolshevik Government"

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(1–2/15–16).¹

Wells was warned while abroad that the Bolsheviks would carefully arrange everything that he would see. And there was no shortage of such warnings in Petrograd either. “At a gathering of literary people in Petersburg,” Wells relates, “Mr. Amphiteatoff, 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 ... an unnecessary speech” (12/31). In another passage Wells notes: “the harsh and terrible realities of the situation in Russia cannot be camouflaged” (16).

Wells devotes the better half of his book to a description of this “harsh and terrible situation.”

“Our dominant impression of things Russian is an impression of a vast irreparable breakdown.”

“Petersburg in Collapse”—that is the title of one of the chapters in the book by the English writer. Wells tells about empty stores, closed markets, abandoned streets, tramway traffic cut back to a minimum, hunger, the difficult position of the intelligentsia and people of science, the disruption of transport, extreme shortages of items of prime necessity suffered by all classes of the population, executions and the severity of the extraordinary commissions (the secret police), starvation-level grain rations, cold, and so forth.

“Ruin: that is the primary Russian fact at the present time” (31/64). “If it goes on for a year or so more the process of collapse will be complete. Nothing will be left of Russia but a country of peasants; the towns will be practically deserted and in ruins, the railways will be rusting in disuse. With the railways will go the last vestiges of any federal government” (92/172).

However, Wells is not inclined to think that this is only a Russian national phenomenon. In Russia, that which already exists in England and a number of other countries has reached “monstrous proportions.” “For all I know, Western Europe may be still drifting even now towards a parallel crash.... War, self-indulgence, and unproductive speculation may still be wasting more than the Western world is producing; in which case our own crash ... is merely a

1. The first page number refers to the Russian edition; the second to: H. G. Wells, *Russia in the Shadows* (New York: George H. Doran, 1921).

question of time” (32/65–66).

At the end of our present commentary we will return to the question of the destruction of “civilization,” but now let us see how Wells explains the Russian devastation in his book. The Russian catastrophe, in Wells’s opinion, was prepared by the world war and the intellectual insufficiency of the ruling and moneyed classes. “Through this fevered and confused country went the representatives of Britain and France, blind to the quality of the immense and tragic disaster about them, intent only upon the war, badgering the Russians to keep on fighting and make a fresh offensive against Germany.” Meanwhile, Wells notes the following fact: “But when the Germans made a strong thrust towards Petersburg through the Baltic provinces and by sea, the British Admiralty, either through sheer cowardice or through Royalist intrigues, failed to give any effectual help to Russia. Upon this matter the evidence of the late Lord Fisher is plain” (36/75).

Later on, the Russian devastation was fed and sustained by the blockade and intervention of the Allies.

“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 exhausting war. It was European imperialism. Nor is it communism that has pestered this suffering and perhaps dying Russia with a series of subsidised raids, invasions, and insurrections, and inflicted upon it an atrocious blockade. The vindictive French creditor, the journalistic British oaf, are far more responsible for these deathbed miseries than any communist” (14/37).

Let the reader not think that Wells is a communist or a sympathizer. By no means. The Bolsheviki are first of all Marxists, and towards Marx Wells harbors no ... “hypocritical deference.” “I have always regarded him as a Bore of the extremest sort” (40/81). “In Russia I must confess my passive objection to Marx has changed to a very active hostility” (41/83). All arguments “about the proletariat and bourgeoisie” seem to Wells to be ridiculous; they are all “unreal fictions.”

It must be said that Wells finds it extremely simple to dispose of the theory of class struggle. “Apply this to a works foreman who is being taken in a train by an engine-driver to see how the house he is having built for him by a building society is getting on. To which of these immiscibles does he belong, employer or employed? The stuff is sheer nonsense” (41/82–83).

Not long ago in England there was a major strike of coal miners. It could hardly be said that this gigantic collision occurred between two “unreal fictions,” as the “bourgeoisie and proletariat” appear to be to our respected English writer. But this is beside the point. For us it is important to stress that Wells is in any case more than distant from communism. Wells regards Russian communists as extremely naive people. They naively believe in the impending socialist paradise on earth, and that pretty soon the proletariat in the West will take power into its own hands. Do we really have to demonstrate that in presenting such arguments Wells stands before us as a typical English bourgeois philistine? We, of course, are not so naive. We communists know very well that we live in a capitalist encirclement, and that because of this encirclement and the enormous domination of the small peasant holdings in our country which have fallen into poverty, and because of the collapse of industry, Soviet power must make concessions to free trade, which means the propagation of capitalism. We have foreseen the dangers which flow from this, but we also know that as long as all this occurs under the control of the socialist state, such capitalism is not so horrifying for the workers. We also know that proletarian revolution is not made to order and we do not believe in the “impending paradise” on the earth.

The popular English writer is mistaken in ascribing to us a naiveté from which he himself suffers most of all. All the more valuable, however, are his comments on Soviet power and the communists, for they come from a man who is hostile to communism.

Apart from its naiveté, Wells considers the Soviet regime to be the most inexperienced to have ever existed. “This Bolshevik Government is at once the most temerarious and the least experienced governing body in the world. In some directions its incompetence is amazing. In most its ignorance is profound. Of the diabolical cunning of ‘capitalism’ and of the subtleties of reaction it is ridiculously suspicious, and sometimes it takes fright and is cruel” (40/88–89). Curious indeed is Wells’s reaction to the Petrograd Soviet, one session of which he attended. In Wells’s opinion, this was simply a meeting of a lot of people. “Compared with the British Parliament it has about as much organisation, structure and working efficiency as a big bagful of miscellaneous wheels might have beside an old-fashioned and inaccurate but still going clock” (75/142).

Given all that, Wells feels that the Bolshevik government is the only one

capable of saving Russia from collapse.

“The Bolshevik Government is inexperienced and incapable to an extreme degree; it has had phases of violence and cruelty; but it is on the whole honest. And it includes a few individuals of real creative imagination and power, who may with opportunity, if their hands are strengthened, achieve great reconstructions. The Bolshevik Government seems on the whole to be trying to act up to its professions, which are still held by most of its supporters with a quite religious passion. Given generous help, it may succeed in establishing a new social order in Russia of a civilised type with which the rest of the world will be able to deal. It will probably be a mitigated Communism, with a large-scale handling of transport, industry, and (later) agriculture” (93/174–175). Wells knows that in Russia there is hunger and cold, but “in Vienna the overthrow is just as bad; and there too such men of science as the late Professor Margules starve to death. If London had had to endure four more years of war, much the same sort of thing would be happening in London” (93/105).

The Bolsheviks are the only body of people with a common faith and a common spirit. But one thing has helped them enormously, and that is their training in Communist ideas. The Bolsheviks strengthened their position in the country, restored order, stopped the plundering, created a mighty Russian army, and gave the land to the peasants. Wells also considers that the introduction of the ration system is an absolutely correct measure. “Even if we suppose the Bolsheviks overthrown and any other Government in their place, it matters not what, that Government would have to go on with the rationing the Bolsheviks have organised” (57/110).

As for the other parties and classes, Wells’s assessment of them is unfavorable. “The great mass of the Russian population is an entirely illiterate peasantry, grossly materialistic and politically indifferent.” The other classes present a confused mixture of people, not bound together by any common ideas or any common will... “The Russian refugees in England are politically contemptible.... They deserve nothing better than a Tsar, and they are incapable even of deciding which Tsar they desire” (—/106–108).

In any case, the Bolsheviks are not at all like those described in the “crazier section of the British Press” (—/79). There is nothing secret in their ideas, goals and methods. All that the Bolsheviks write about can be found in the London newspaper, *Plebs*, or in the *New York Liberator*. The Bolsheviks are straightforward in speaking about their ideas and try to act in accordance

with them.

“I find myself obliged to treat them as fairly straightforward people. I do not agree with either their views or their methods” (39/80). Such are Wells’s views of the Bolsheviks and the Soviet regime.

II.

As we already noted above, the Russian White emigré press met Wells’s books, as they say, at the point of a bayonet. N. S. Trubetskoy, who supplied the Russian edition with his foreword, declared: “This book must be recognized as harmful.” Trubetskoy finds that the entire book is permeated with “unbounded contempt both for the Russian soul and for Russia as a nation. Moreover, Wells very much wants to trade, and so he approaches the Russian problem from the standpoint of the English merchant. The Bolsheviks are bold and energetic people. England will be able to extract much that is to her advantage from Russia under Bolshevik rule; she must be helped in extracting from this stretch of land as many natural resources as possible, which Western Europe needs so badly.” Such is the fundamental tone of the articles, comments and feuilletons written by other White authors who address Wells’s book in one way or another.

All this is absolutely untrue. Wells has no contempt for Russia as a nation. To note the peasants’ lack of culture by no means signifies to despise our nation. Many of today’s foreign patriots, and in particular Ivan Bunin, who fell upon Wells with great fervor, have produced a number of stories and novels which leave far behind Wells’s passing comments on the illiteracy and political sluggishness of our peasantry. All the more so one should not assume that genuine Russia can be reduced to the princely, semiprincely, landowning and intelligentsia emigration to which, indeed, Wells referred rather irreverently. Wells evidently understands rather well the difference between the malicious emigrant scum and other cadres of the Russian intelligentsia. In telling of his visit to the House of Science, Wells speaks with surprise that no one spoke to him about deprivation, although want could be seen everywhere. “What they were all keen about was the possibility of getting scientific publications; they value knowledge more than bread” (23/51).

Even more untrue are the reproaches that Wells approached the Russian problem from the standpoint of the interests of the simple English merchant.

This is truly a lie. Wells insists on restoring trade and diplomatic relations with Western Europe. That is true. But why? Because he foresees the death of “civilization” in general, not only in Russia, but throughout the world, if a certain *modus vivendi* is not established between world capital and Soviet Russia. It is in these comments by Wells that the main interest of the book lies. To reduce them to mercantile interests means either to understand nothing about the book, or to deliberately conceal the most fundamental aspect of our lives today, which upsets all the classes in the entire world.

The major and talented English writer, Wells—very distant from the “unreal fictions” of communism, standing with both feet on the soil of modern capitalist civilization and, despite all reservations and criticism, loving and valuing this civilization—came to Soviet Russia. Here he saw dead cities, hunger, cold, and devastated transport. He proved to be sufficiently intelligent and honest to correctly assess the shameful and terrible role played in this destruction by the “French creditor” and the “English journalistic oaf,” that is, by this very same modern-day “civilization,” with its “old-fashioned and inaccurate but still going clock.” He also saw and noted that this catastrophe is not an exclusively Russian phenomenon. For he knew and knows that war, speculation and universal discord are by no means diminishing, but increasing, and the “crazier section of the English Press” is continuing to do its work of destruction, bloody chaos and violence. And beyond the Russian poverty, cold and devastation he saw the even more ominous visage of the impending worldwide impoverishment and catastrophe. He looked at semidemolished Petrograd and thought that the same would happen to London and Paris if the capitalist madness did not stop. These were the thoughts that came into his head as he contemplated the closed stores, cold homes and empty streets of Petrograd. “Western Europe may still be drifting even now towards a parallel crash.... The shops of Regent Street will follow the shops of the Nevsky Prospect, and Mr. Galsworthy and Mr. Bennett will have to do what they can to salvage the art treasures of Mayfair” (32/65–66).

In Russia Wells didn’t find any social forces besides the Bolsheviks who would be capable of dealing with the catastrophe. But he had still not lost faith in the power of the English and American bourgeoisie. This is the source of Wells’s eclecticism. Wells proposes that the Bolshevik government should be recognized and given aid. “The only alternative to such a helpful intervention in Bolshevik Russia is,” he writes “the final collapse of all that remains

of modern civilisation throughout what was formerly the Russian empire. It is highly improbable that the collapse will be limited to its boundaries. Both eastward and westward other great regions may, one after another, tumble into the big hole in civilisation thus created. Possibly all modern civilisation may tumble in.”

“These propositions do not refer to any hypothetical future; they are an attempt to state the outline facts and possibilities of what is going on—and going on with great rapidity—in Russia and in the world generally now, as they present themselves to my mind. This in general terms is the frame of circumstance in which I would have the sketches of Russia that have preceded this set and read. So it is I interpret the writing on the Eastern wall of Europe” (96/178–179).

As is obvious from the material cited, Wells’s conceptions have nothing in common with either contempt for the Slavic soul or with narrow trade deals. Our White Guard polemicists lose all sense of measure as soon as they refer to the Bolsheviks, and they become absolutely beside themselves as soon as someone tries to leave the circle of “considerations” that the Bolsheviks are agents of Wilhelm, and so forth. Wells has written many wonderful, so-called “fantastic” novels. He very much loves to peer into the future. Evidently, as a result of his peculiar literary activity over many years, Wells has developed strong mental skills and habits. In the present he catches glimpses of the future. With these skills he approached the Russian problem. On the Eastern wall of Europe he read the warning: “Mene, Tekel, Peres” for bourgeois civilization.² The way out, in his opinion, consists in a peculiar symbiosis between Bolshevism and Communism, and Western European capitalism. The result of such a symbiosis in Russia will be “mitigated Communism, with a large-scale handling of transport, industry, and (later) agriculture.” Bolshevism will refrain from extremes, but the bourgeois states on their part will also refrain from the extremes of capitalism. “[Both sides will react on each other. The Western states] will probably become more collectivist in [their] methods, and, on the other hand, the rigours of extreme Communism in Russia will probably be greatly tempered through [their] influence” (95/177–178).

In view of what has been said, Wells proposes to conduct trade relations

2. In the Bible, the writing on the wall which Daniel interpreted for King Belshazzar; cf. Daniel 5:27. Trans.

with Soviet Russia through the intermediary of national and even international trusts.

The Russian White Guardists who have written about Wells assiduously avoided and remained silent about everything that Wells said about the ominous threats to civilization. But it is precisely on those thoughts in Wells's book that one must pause and focus one's attention.

We communists also assume that capitalism in its latest imperialist formation threatens all civilization and all human culture with destruction. The examples of recent wars and of the inhuman tormenting of revolutionary Russia and conquered Germany, Austria and Turkey are for all to see. The foundations of culture are threatened with destruction. If a new social class doesn't replace the bourgeoisie, all the achievements of the human mind and hands will tumble into the abyss along with capitalism. But we are confident that this will not happen, for such a new social class does exist: it is the class of proletarians. Wells doesn't acknowledge the class struggle. In one place in his book he notes ironically that in England there are, at the very least, 200 different classes. Given such views, of course, nothing remains but to hope for the peculiar collaboration between capitalism and communism. In this question we differ with Wells. Such collaboration, such mutual diffusion, does not and cannot exist. The experience of the last war, the experience of the Allies' war against Soviet Russia, the presence of grandiose class battles in Western Europe, and the specter of new and perhaps more grandiose military "conflicts" than previous ones—all this provides no basis for sharing Wells's optimism.

Perhaps another reader will object: What is today's situation leading to when, on the one hand, Soviet Russia has repulsed the attacks of world capital on innumerable fronts, and, on the other hand, is forced to give concessions to foreign capital, i.e., to sponsor state capitalism, and to allow freedom of trade within certain limits; in other words, to also allow capitalism? Isn't this living together, or a peculiar form of diffusion, especially since there is talk about recognition of Soviet Russia by a number of bourgeois states, that is, about concessions on their part?

Soviet Russia lives in capitalist encirclement. She has been forced to make deals with world capital. World capital has also been forced to make deals with hated communism. This is true. But this mutual compulsion has materialized only because neither side, as of yet, has sufficient forces for a decisive and conclusive victory, and for this reason it is not the kind of living

together which Wells is hoping for. Two camps, two mortal enemies stand facing each other fully armed as before, following each step of the opposing side. And they try to use their “living together” for the victory of one side over the other. The English capitalist assumes that he will be able to demoralize Russia by “peaceful” means, and then later resort to more decisive methods of liquidation. On its part, communism intends to use the “breathing space” for a new mobilization of the material and spiritual forces of Soviet Russia and of the workers of all countries for the final confrontation with the old world. Here there are only strategical maneuvers, flanking movements, but no peaceful growing over of capitalism into communism or vice versa.³ Communist society can be constructed only on the basis of the achievements of technology, science and art of the past, including capitalist society above all. In this sense we are also for “civilization,” and we also fear its destruction. But this is not at all what Wells is thinking about.

The thoughts and opinions presented by Wells in his book about Russia are highly characteristic of a very large layer of the best representatives of the society that is exiting from the scene. This is what always happens when the old world gives way to the new. People surface who are linked with their own past through upbringing, everyday life, habits and tastes. But they are bold, intelligent and honest enough to renounce the animal fear of this new world. They see in time that the old is disintegrating and decomposing, and that the new represents the future of mankind. These are Sauls who are turning into Pauls.

Some of them have already arrived in Damascus, others are on their way. We do not care to prophesy with regard to Wells; this is a boring and fruitless exercise. But we must say: visions of the new world passed through Wells’s mind while he was in Russia.... Wells still believes that “through a vast sustained educational campaign the existing Capitalist system could be civilised into a Collectivist world system” (87/162), but due to what he has just witnessed he also knows that “the only possible Government that can stave off such a final collapse of Russia now is the present Bolshevik Government” (92/173). He also knows that communism can be a creative force. By the way, Wells declares in his book that for this awareness he is obliged to V. I. Lenin, with whom he had an hour and a half conversation.

His assessment of Lenin is quite interesting: “[Thanks to Lenin],” he writes,

3. Concerning “living together” and “collaboration,” see Comrade Lenin’s article: “On the Tax-in-Kind.”

“I realised that Communism could after all, in spite of Marx, be enormously creative.... This amazing little man, with his frank admission of the immensity and complication of the project of Communism ... was very refreshing. He at least has a vision of a world changed over and planned and built afresh” (86–87/161–162).

The question of the death of civilization and culture in an atmosphere of disintegrating capitalism troubles not only Wells but a whole number of other scholars, artists and “social activists” from the bourgeois camp. The best of them are already beginning to see and understand that without the triumph of communism mankind will become savage and degenerate. The Russian White Guardists who have written about Wells have shown once again that besides the slogan “loot and hang” they are in no position to understand anything else.

In conclusion it could be said: we communists can be satisfied with the results of Wells’s visit to Soviet Russia. Soviet Russia, despite all its devastation, has won over Wells. This is not a bad outcome.