

Wells on Lenin and Bolsheviks

RUSSIA IN THE SHADOWS

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On October 6, 1920, Herbert G. Wells, who had come to Russia by Maxim Gorky's invitation, met with Lenin. He described his impressions in his essay "Russia in the Shadows", from which we will quote below.

About Bolsheviks:

"...From end to end of Russia, and in the Russian-speaking community throughout the world, there existed only one sort of people who had common general ideas upon which to work, a common faith and a common will, and that was the Communist party. While all the rest of Russia was either apathetic like the peasantry or garrulously at sixes and sevens or given over to violence or fear, the Communists believed and were prepared to act. Numerically they were and are a very small part of the Russian population. At the present time not one per cent. of the people in Russia are Communists; the organized party certainly does not number more than 600,000 and has probably not much more than 150,000 active members. Nevertheless, because it was in those terrible days the only organization which gave men a common idea of action, common formulæ, and mutual confidence, it was able to seize and retain control of the smashed empire. It was and it is the only sort of administrative solidarity possible in Russia. These ambiguous adventurers who have been and are afflicting Russia, with the support of the Western Powers, Deniken, Kolchak, Wrangel and the like, stand for no guiding principle and offer no security of any sort upon which men's confidence can crystallize. They are essentially brigands.

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The Communist party, however, one may criticize it, does embody an idea and can be relied upon to stand by its idea. So far it is a thing morally higher than anything that has yet come against it. It at once secured the passive support of the peasant mass by permitting them to take land from the estates and by making peace with Germany.

It restored order — after a frightful lot of shooting — in the great towns. For a time everybody found carrying arms without authority was shot. This action was clumsy and bloody but effective. To retain its power this Communist Government organized Extraordinary Commissions, with practically unlimited powers, and crushed out all opposition by a Red Terror...

Apart from individual atrocities it did on the whole kill for a reason and to an end. Its bloodshed was not like the silly aimless butcheries of the Deniken régime, which would not even recognize, I was told, the Bolshevik Red Cross. And today the Bolshevik Government sits, I believe, in Moscow as securely established as any Government in Europe, and the streets of the Russian towns are as safe as any streets in Europe..."

About Lenin:

"...My chief purpose in going from Petersburg to Moscow was to see and talk to Lenin. I was very curious to see him, and I was disposed to be hostile to him. I encountered a personality entirely different from anything I had expected to meet.

...We got to Lenin at last and found him, a little figure at a great desk in a well-lit room that looked out upon palatial spaces. I thought his desk was rather in a litter. I sat down on a chair at a corner of the desk, and the little man — his feet scarcely touch the ground as he sits on the edge of his chair — twisted round to talk to me, putting his arms round and over a pile of papers. He spoke excellent English <...> Meanwhile the American got to work with his camera, and unobtrusively but persistently exposed plates. The talk, however, was too interesting for that to be an annoyance. One forgot about that clicking and shifting about quite soon.

I had come expecting to struggle with a doctrinaire Marxist. I found nothing of the sort. I had been told that Lenin lectured people; he certainly did not do so on this occasion. <...> Lenin has a pleasant, quick-changing, brownish face, with a lively smile and a habit (due perhaps to some defect in focusing) of screwing up one eye as he pauses in his talk; he is not very like the photographs you see of him because he is one of those people whose change of expression is more important than their features; he gesticulated a little with his hands over the heaped papers as he talked, and he talked quickly, very keen on his subject, without any posing or pretenses or reservations, as a good type of scientific man will talk.

...Lenin, on the other hand, whose frankness must at times leave his disciples breathless, has recently stripped off the last pretense that the Russian revolution is anything more than the inauguration of an age of limitless experiment. "Those who are engaged in the formidable task of overcoming capitalism," he has recently written, "must be prepared to try method after method until they find the one which answers their purpose best."

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...For Lenin, who like a good orthodox Marxist denounces all "Utopians", has succumbed at last to a Utopia, the Utopia of the electricians. He is throwing all his weight into a scheme for the development of great power stations in Russia to serve whole provinces with light, with transport, and industrial power. Two experimental districts he said had already been electrified. Can one imagine a more courageous project in a vast flat land of forests and illiterate peasants, with no water power, with no technical skill available, and with trade and industry at the last gasp?

Projects for such an electrification are in process of development in Holland and they have been discussed in England, and in those densely-populated and industrially highly-developed centres one can imagine them as successful, economical, and altogether beneficial. But their application to Russia is an altogether greater strain upon the constructive imagination. I cannot see anything of the sort happening in this dark crystal of Russia, but this little man at the Kremlin can; he sees the decaying railways replaced by a new electric transport, sees new roadways spreading throughout the land, sees a new and happier Communist industrialism arising again. While I talked to him he almost persuaded me to share his vision.

Lenin asked me what I had seen of the educational work afoot. I praised some of the things I had seen. He nodded and smiled with pleasure. He has an unshaken confidence in his work.

"But these are only sketches and beginnings", I said.

"Come back and see what we have done in Russia in ten years' time", he answered.

In him I realized that Communism could after all, in spite of Marx, be enormously creative. After the tiresome class-war fanatics I had been encountering among the Communists, men of formulæ as sterile as flints, after numerous experiences of the trained and empty conceit of the common Marxist devotee, this amazing little man, with his frank admission of the immensity and complication of the project of Communism and his simple concentration upon its realization, was very refreshing.

He at least has a vision of a world changed over and planned and built afresh.”

Arriving in the Soviet Union for the second time in 1934, Wells was convinced that Lenin’s electrification plan had been fulfilled. Many kilometers of railroads had been restored, built, and electrified.

After his final visit to Russia, Wells wrote in “Experiment in Autobiography”:

“I look over my fourteen-year-old book and revive my memories and size him up against the other personalities I have known, in key positions I begin to realize what an outstanding and important figure he is in history. I grudge subscribing to the “great man” conception of human affairs, but if we are going to talk at all of greatness among our species, then I must admit that Lenin at least was a very great man.”

Original article