

The
Crisis in Russia

ARTHUR RANSOME

THE CRISIS IN RUSSIA

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THE CRISIS IN RUSSIA

BY
ARTHUR RANSOME



LONDON: GEORGE ALLEN & UNWIN LTD.
RUSKIN HOUSE, 40 MUSEUM STREET, W.C. 1

First published in 1921

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TO
WILLIAM PETERS
OF ABERDEEN

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*** I am indebted to the Editor of the "Manchester Guardian" for permission to make use in some of the chapters of this book of material which has appeared in his paper.*

INTRODUCTION

THE characteristic of a revolutionary country is that change is a quicker process there than elsewhere. As the revolution recedes into the past the process of change slackens speed. Russia is no longer the dizzying kaleidoscope that it was in 1917. No longer does it change visibly from week to week as it changed in 1918. Already, to get a clear vision of the direction in which it is changing, it is necessary to visit it at intervals of six months, and quite useless to tap the political barometer several times a day as once upon a time one used to do. . . . But it is still changing very fast. My journal of "Six Weeks in Russia in 1919," while giving as I believe a fairly accurate picture of the state of affairs in February and March of 1919, pictures a very different stage in the development of the revolution from that which would be found by observers to-day.

The prolonged state of crisis in which the country has been kept by external war, while strengthening the ruling party by rallying even their enemies to their support, has had the other effects that a national crisis always has on the internal politics of a country. Methods of government which in normal times would no doubt be softened or disguised by ceremonial usage are used nakedly and justified by necessity.

We have seen the same thing in belligerent and non-revolutionary countries, and, for the impartial student, it has been interesting to observe that, when this test of crisis is applied, the actual governmental machine in every country looks very much like that in every other. They wave different flags to stimulate enthusiasm and to justify submission. But that is all. Under the stress of war, "constitutional safeguards" go by the board "for the public good," in Moscow as elsewhere. Under that stress it becomes clear that, in spite of its novel constitution, Russia is governed much as other countries are governed, the real directive power lying in the hands of a comparatively small body which is able by hook or crook to infect with its conscious will a population largely indifferent and inert. A visitor to Moscow to-day would find much of the constitutional machinery that was in full working order in the spring of 1919 now falling into rust and disrepair. He would not be able once a week or so to attend a meeting of the All-Russian Executive and hear discussions in this parliament of the questions of the day. No one tries to shirk the fact that the Executive Committee has fallen into desuetude, from which, when the stress slackens enough to permit ceremonial that has not an immediate agitational value, it may some day be revived. The bulk of its members have been at the front or here and there about the country wrestling with the economic problem, and their work is more useful than their chatter. Thus brutally is the thing stated. The continued stress has made the muscles, the actual works, of the revolution

more visible than formerly. The working of the machine is not only seen more clearly, but is also more frankly stated (perhaps simply because they too see it now more clearly), by the leaders themselves.

I want in this book to describe the working of the machine as I now see it. But it is not only the machine which is more nakedly visible than it was. The stress to which it is being subjected has also not so much changed its character as become easier of analysis. At least, I seem to myself to see it differently. In the earlier days it seemed quite simply the struggle between a revolutionary and non-revolutionary countries. I now think that that struggle is a foolish, unnecessary, lunatic incident which disguised from us the existence of a far more serious struggle, in which the revolutionary and non-revolutionary governments are fighting on the same side. They fight without co-operation, and throw insults and bullets at each other in the middle of the struggle, but they are fighting for the same thing. They are fighting the same enemy. Their quarrel with each other is for both parties merely a harassing accompaniment of the struggle to which all Europe is committed, for the salvage of what is left of European civilization.

The threat of a complete collapse of civilization is more imminent in Russia than elsewhere. But it is clear enough in Poland, it cannot be disregarded in Germany, there is no doubt of its existence in Italy, France is conscious of it ; it is only in England and America that this threat is not among the waking

nightmares of everybody. Unless the struggle, which has hitherto been going against us, takes a turn for the better, we shall presently be quite unable to ignore it ourselves.

I have tried to state the position in Russia to-day : on the one hand to describe the crisis itself, the threat which is forcing these people to an extreme of effort, and on the other hand to describe the organization that is facing that threat ; on the one hand to set down what are the main characteristics of the crisis, on the other hand to show how the comparatively small body of persons actually supplying the Russian people with its directives set about the stupendous task of moving that vast inert mass, not along the path of least resistance, but along a path which, while alike unpleasant and extremely difficult, does seem to them to promise some sort of eventual escape.

No book is entirely objective, so I do not in the least mind stating my own reason for writing this one (which has taken time that I should have liked to spend on other and very different things). Knowledge of this reason will permit the reader to make allowances for such bias as I have been unable to avoid, and so, by judicious reading, to make my book perhaps nearly as objective as I should myself wish it to be.

It has been said that when two armies face each other across a battle front and engage in mutual slaughter, they may be considered as a single army engaged in suicide. Now it seems to me that when countries, each one severally doing its best to arrest

its private economic ruin, do their utmost to accelerate the economic ruin of each other, we are witnessing something very like the suicide of civilization itself. There are people in both camps who believe that armed and economic conflict between revolutionary and non-revolutionary Europe, or if you like between Capitalism and Communism, is inevitable. These people, in both camps, are doing their best to make it inevitable. Sturdy pessimists, in Moscow no less than in London and Paris, they go so far as to say "the sooner the better," and by all means in their power try to precipitate a conflict. Now the main effort in Russia to-day, the struggle which absorbs the chief attention of all but the few Communist Churchills and Communist Millerands who, blind to all else, demand an immediate pitched battle over the prostrate body of civilization, is directed to finding a way for Russia herself out of the crisis, the severity of which can hardly be realized by people who have not visited the country again and again, and to bringing her as quickly as possible into a state in which she can export her raw materials and import the manufactured goods of which she stands in need. I believe that this struggle is ours as well as Russia's, though we, to whom the threat is less imminent, are less desperately engaged. Victory or defeat in this struggle in Russia, or anywhere else on the world's surface, is victory or defeat for every one. The purpose of my book is to make that clear. For, bearing that in mind, I cannot but think that every honest man, of whatever party, who cares more for humanity than for politics, must do his

utmost to postpone the conflict which a few extremists on each side of the barricades so fanatically desire. If that conflict is indeed inevitable, its consequences will be less devastating to a Europe cured of her wounds than to a Europe scarcely, even by the most hopeful, to be described as convalescent. But the conflict may not be inevitable after all. No man not purblind but sees that Communist Europe is changing no less than Capitalist Europe. If we succeed in postponing the struggle long enough, we may well succeed in postponing it until the warlike on both sides look in vain for the reasons of their antagonism.

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