

WEEKS IN RUSSIA IN 1919

BY
RTHUR RANSOME



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

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First published in 1919

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INTRODUCTION

I AM well aware that there is material in this book which will be misused by fools both white and red. That is not my fault. My object has been narrowly limited. I have tried by means of a bald record of conversations and things seen, to provide material for those who wish to know what is being done and thought in Moscow at the present time, and demand something more to go upon than secondhand reports of wholly irrelevant atrocities committed by either one side or the other, and often by neither one side nor the other, but by irresponsible scoundrels who, in the natural turmoil of the greatest convulsion in the history of our civilization, escape temporarily here and there from any kind of control.

The book is in no sense of the word propaganda. For propaganda, for the defence or attack of the Communist position, is needed a knowledge of economics, both from the capitalist and socialist standpoints, to which I cannot pretend. Very many times during the revolution it has seemed to me a tragedy that no Englishmen properly equipped in this way was in Russia studying the gigantic experiment which, as a country, we are allowing to pass abused but not examined. I did my best. I got, I think I may say, as near as any foreigner who was not a Communist could get to what was going on. But I never lost the bitter feeling that the opportunities of study which I made for myself were wasted, because I could not hand them on to some other Englishman, whose education and training would have enabled him to make a better, a fuller use of them. Nor would it have been difficult for such a man to get the opportunities which were given to me when, by sheer persistence in enquiry, I had overcome the hostility which I at first encountered as the correspondent of a "bourgeois" newspaper. Such a man could be in Russia now, for the Communists do not regard war as we regard it. The Germans would hardly

INTRODUCTION

have allowed an Allied Commission to come to Berlin a year ago to investigate the nature and working of the Autocracy. The Russians, on the other hand, immediately agreed to the suggestion of the Berne Conference that they should admit a party of socialists, the majority of whom, as they well knew, had already expressed condemnation of them. Further, in agreeing to this, they added that they would as willingly admit a committee of enquiry sent by any of the "bourgeois" governments actually at war with them.

I am sure that there will be many in England who will understand much better than I the drudgery of the revolution which is in this book very imperfectly suggested. I repeat that it is not my fault that they must make do with the eyes and ears of an ignorant observer. No doubt I have not asked the questions they would have asked, and have thought interesting and novel much which they would have taken for granted.

The book has no particular form, other than that given it by a more or less accurate adherence to chronology in setting down things seen and heard. It is far too incomplete to allow me to call it a Journal. I think I could have made it twice as long without repetitions, and I am not at all sure that in choosing in a hurry between this and that I did not omit much which could with advantage be substituted for what is here set down. There is nothing here of my talk with the English soldier prisoners and nothing of my visit to the officers confined in the Butyrka Gaol. There is nothing of the plagues of typhus and influenza, or of the desperate situation of a people thus visited and unable to procure from abroad the simplest drugs which they cannot manufacture at home or even the anaesthetics necessary for their wounded on every frontier of their country. I forgot to describe the ballet which I saw a few days before leaving. I have said nothing of the talk I had

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with Eliava concerning the Russian plans for the future of Turkestan. I could think of a score of other omissions. Judging from what I have read since my return from Russia, I imagine people will find my book very poor in the matter of Terrors. There is nothing here of the Red Terror, or of any of the Terrors on the other side. But for its poverty in atrocities my book will be blamed only by fanatics, since they alone desire proofs of past Terrors as justification for new ones.

On reading my manuscript through, I find it quite surprisingly dull. The one thing that I should have liked to transmit through it seems somehow to have slipped away. I should have liked to explain what was the appeal of the revolution to men like Colonel Robins and myself, both of us men far removed in origin and upbringing from the revolutionary and socialist movements in our own countries. Of course no one who was able, as we were able, to watch the men of the revolution at close quarters could believe for a moment that they were the mere paid agents of the very power which more than all others represented the stronghold they had set out to destroy. We had the knowledge of the injustice being done to these men to urge us in their defence. But there was more in it than that. There was the feeling, from which we could never escape, of the creative effort of the revolution. There was the thing that distinguishes the creative from other artists, the living, vivifying expression of something hitherto hidden in the consciousness of humanity. If this book were to be an accurate record of my own impressions, all the drudgery, gossip, quarrels, arguments, events and experiences it contains would have to be set against a background of that extraordinary vitality which obstinately persists in Moscow even in these dark days of discomfort, disillusion, pestilence, starvation and unwanted war.

ARTHUR RANSOME.