

On Lenin, Lice, Peasants and Freedom: Arthur Ransome on the Russian Revolution

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Some of the best materials on the Russian Revolution remain those works written at the time, especially those that capture the mood in a way that all-knowing historians pretend to do afterwards. Arthur Ransome's two little books, *Russia in 1919* and *The Crisis in Russia*, are great examples. He lived in Petrograd from 1903, so experienced much of it directly. He had access to the inner circles of Bolshevik leadership, attending meetings of the executive committee, interviewing the likes of Lenin, Zinoviev, Sverdlov and so on, and he was part of worker meetings and experienced every day life during the best and worst times.

Translator, folklorist, journalist, Ransome is listed in a *Who's Who* at the time as a lover of 'walking, smoking, fairy tales'. Even more: 'It is, perhaps, his intimacy with the last named that enables him to distinguish between myth and fact and that makes his activity as an observer and recorder so valuable in a day of bewilderment and betrayal'.

A few snippets:

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 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 in these dark days of discomfort, disillusion, pestilence, starvation and unwanted war (*Russia in 1919*, p. vi-vii, in the midst of the 'civil' war, which included 160,000 troops from a dozen countries invading the USSR).

On the train to Moscow:

At last I tried to sleep, but the atmosphere of the carriage, of smoke, babies, stale clothes, and the peculiar smell of the Russian peasantry which no one who has known it can forget, made sleep impossible. But I travelled fairly comfortably, resolutely shutting my ears to the talk ... and shifting from one bone to the another as each ached in turn from contact with the plank on which I lay (*Russia in 1919*, p. 10).

A discussion with Lenin:

More than ever, Lenin struck me as a happy man. Walking home from the Kremlin, I tried to think of any other man of his calibre who had a similar joyous temperament. I could think of none. This little, bald-headed, wrinkled man, who tilts his chair this way and that, laughing over one thing or another, ready at any minute to give serious advice to any who interrupt him to ask for it, advice so well reasoned that it is to his followers far more compelling than any command, every one of his wrinkles is a wrinkle of laughter, not of worry. I think the reason must be that he is the first great leader who utterly discounts the value of his own

personality. He is quite without personal ambition. More than that, he believes, as a Marxist, in the movement of the masses which, with or without him, would still move. His whole faith is in the elemental forces that move people, his faith in himself is merely his belief that he justly estimates the direction of those forces. He does not believe that any man could make or stop the revolution which he thinks is inevitable. If the Russian revolution fails, according to him, it fails only temporarily, and because of forces beyond any man's control. He is consequently free with a freedom no other great man has ever had. It is not so much what he says that inspires confidence in him. It is this sensible freedom, this obvious detachment. With his philosophy he cannot for a moment believe that one man's mistake might ruin it all. He is, for himself at any rate, the exponent, not the cause, of the events that will be for ever linked with his name (Russia in 1919, p. 56).

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Precautions against typhus:

The car seemed very clean, but, as an additional precaution, we began by rubbing turpentine on our necks and wrists and ankles for the discouragement of lice, now generally known as 'Semashki' from the name of Semashko, the Commissar of Public Health, who wages unceasing war for their destruction as the carriers of typhus germs. I rubbed the turpentine so energetically in to my neck that it burnt like a collar of fire, and for a long time I was unable to get to sleep (The Crisis in Russia, p. 26).

Trade unions:

When I was in Moscow in the spring of this year the Russian Trades Unions received a telegram from the Trades Union Congress at Amsterdam, a telegram which admirably illustrated the impossibility of separating judgement of the present position of the Unions from judgements of the Russian revolution as a whole. It encouraged the Unions 'in their struggle' and promised support in that struggle. The Communists immediately asked 'What struggle? Against the capitalist system in Russia which does not exist? Or against capitalist systems outside Russia?' (The Crisis in Russia, p. 36).