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Witnesses of the Russian Revolution

Harvey Pitcher

About the Author

Harvey Pitcher studied at Oxford and Leningrad, and in 1963 started the Russian Department at St Andrews University. Since 1971 he has been a full-time writer. His first book to achieve widespread popularity, *When Miss Emmic was in Russia* (1977), was described by Paul Scott as ‘a study of the whole adventure’ of being an English governess before and during the Russian Revolution. This was followed by other books on the British and American communities in pre-Soviet Russia: *The Smiths of Moscow* (1984) and *Muir & Mirrielees*, about Russia’s first department store (1994). Harvey Pitcher is also a leading Chekhov scholar. He is the author of a standard work, *The Chekhov Play: A New Interpretation* (1973) and of *Chekhov’s Leading Lady* (1979), a portrait of Chekhov’s actress wife, Olga Knipper. With fellow translator Patrick Miles he introduced English readers to the delights of Chekhov’s early comic stories. Harvey Pitcher lives in Cromer on the north Norfolk coast.

WITNESSES OF THE RUSSI/ REVOLUTION

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Foreword to the Pimlico Edition

To anyone who first began to study Russia in the late 1950s the Revolution seemed an impenetrable event. Within the Soviet Union the historical record on 1917 was repeatedly being written. This happened not because fresh evidence had come to light or an enterprising historian had come up with a new theory. On the contrary, original documents were kept in 'special collections' accessible only to a few trusted scholars, and historians even more than most Soviet academics had to toe the party line. One historian has recalled how in 1972, when he and his colleagues at the Institute of History of the USSR wished to look more closely at the role of the peasantry in the Revolution, their discussion 'was terminated by some instructor in the Communist Party. He simply forbade it, saying, this is the right way of looking at the question and that's the wrong way . . .'[1] The party line on 1917 changed in response to political changes at the top. Trotsky was the first to be written out of the story; Stalin, it seemed, had been at Lenin's right hand all along; but later Stalin was discredited and the photographs were shown to be fakes. At each stage of reassessment the Revolution had to be re-set in concrete and presented as the inevitable product of the forces of historical necessity. The events themselves receded further and further into the distance, acquiring an almost mythical, legendary quality.

Looking back at those Cold War years, there seem to have been two kinds of book that one could read in English about the Russian Revolution. There were histories, full of essential facts and dates and footnotes, but devoid of atmosphere and difficult to follow; and there were individual stories,

short on precise information and almost certainly biased, but colourful and difficult to put down. The first was read with a sense of duty but little enthusiasm, the second with a mixture of pleasure and guilt. There was nothing at that time to compare with Orlando Figes' *A People's Tragedy* (1996), which in its author's words 'weaves between the private and the public spheres' and tries 'to emphasize the human aspects of its great events by listening to the voices of individual people';[2] but a book with that kind of emphasis could not be written until the Russian archives were opened up in the late 1980s.

First published in 1994, *Witnesses of the Russian Revolution* was intended to fill the gap between the formal history and the individual memoir by giving a consecutive account of the events of 1917, not in the way that a historian might, but using the words of eye-witnesses who saw history in the making. Its scope is more modest than that of *A People's Tragedy*, since the witnesses are not Russian, but British and American. They include diplomats, newspaper correspondents, the military, businessmen, even the occasional English governess. Some have acquired a romantic aura, like the young American radical, John Reed, author of *Ten Days That Shook the World*, who died of typhoid fever in Moscow in 1920 and is buried under the Kremlin wall, and who 'co-stars' with his wife Louise Bryant in the film *Reds*. Some are unexpected, like Arthur Ransome, better known in England today as the author of *Swallows and Amazons* than as the Petrograd correspondent in 1917 of the *Daily News*. Others well known in their time are now almost forgotten, like the Labour MP, Morgan Philips Price, and Harold Williams, a New Zealander married to a leading Russian politician and once described as 'the most brilliant foreign correspondent that our generation has known'.[3] Others were quite obscure, but still have a distinctive contribution to make.

As observers rather than participants, these Anglo-American witnesses had little influence on the course of events, but they are historically significant in that they helped to shape opinion about the Russian Revolution in their own countries. John Reed even inspired a generation of young Americans to join the Communist Party and go to live in the Soviet Union. The legacy of these witnesses lives on. As recently as 1995 Arthur Ransome's views on the Russian Revolution could spark a heated debate, for here is someone, seemingly with no political axe to grind, who gives a very positive account of Lenin's Russia and lends credibility to the still widely-held view that Lenin's Russia can be sharply differentiated from Stalin's Russia.[4]

Deciding when 'the Russian Revolution' starts and finishes is largely a matter of choice. Orlando Figes begins the story in 1891 and Richard Pipes (in the other monumental work in English on the Revolution) in 1899, but the origins of political dissent in Russia go back at least as far as the Decembrists in 1825. *Witnesses of the Russian Revolution* highlights the most critical, dramatic period: not the ten days of John Reed, but ten months from March 1917 to January 1918. (Since the book is based on Western sources, I use the Western calendar throughout: hence March Revolution and November Revolution.) The decision to break off in January 1918 can be justified on the grounds that the dissolution then by the Bolsheviks of the Constituent Assembly, although it cannot be regarded as an endpoint (in a sense that comes only in 1991), undoubtedly marked a critical turning-point in Russian history. A more practical reason for stopping then is that by the start of 1918 the Anglo-American witnesses had become so few in number that they no longer reflected a cross-section of opinion.

The first thing I wanted to know from these witnesses was what it felt like to be there, to hear about events as they were happening. Clearly, no one witness, however well-informed and energetic, however privileged his or her

vantage-point, could see more than a small part of what was going on; but by drawing on a pool of witnesses with different vantage-points, a much fuller picture could be obtained. They witnessed not one revolution but two – the overthrow of Tsarism in March and the Bolshevik seizure of power in November – and described them with an immediacy that later accounts never achieve. To discover so much vivid firsthand reporting, in great part unread since 1917, was very exciting.

Not that there can ever be one agreed way of looking at an event, for what you see matters less than how you see it. One witness sees a rabble of unkempt individuals making a nuisance of themselves in the streets; another sees a heroic popular demonstration; while a third is impressed most of all by the colour and spectacle, by the sight of blood-red flags palpitating in the wind. Different witnesses approach a scene with different expectations and preoccupations. The young American witnesses brought with them the expectation that an entirely new kind of human society was about to come into being, whereas most British witnesses were preoccupied not so much with the Revolution itself, as with its implications for the First World War. It seems odd now that in *The Times* of 19 March 1917 the headlines, 'The Tsar's Final Ordeal. Signing The Writ of Abdication. "I Cannot Part With My Boy"', should appear in a column headed 'Late War News'; it cannot have seemed odd at the time. 'Absorbed as we were in the war,' one British witness later wrote, 'we entirely failed to realize the importance of the Revolution for Russians.'[5]

Our witnesses are not then to be regarded as 'dispassionate observers'. They had their sympathies and prejudices. Already in 1917 they displayed a wide range of pro- and anti-Revolutionary sentiments, and here, too, I have attempted to build up a composite picture by drawing on a pool of witnesses with different views. Although they saw less than individual Russians of what was going on

behind the scenes, they do have one important advantage over Russian witnesses: they are not partisan. For a Russian in 1917 not to be partisan would have been impossible. Even though you might not be politically active yourself, you belonged to a particular social class that stood to lose (in some cases, to lose everything) or gain (a bright new future?) as a result of the Revolution. This was bound to colour, and almost certainly to distort, your view of events. Because they are standing further back, our witnesses are able to look at events more as a whole; at the end of the day it was not their problem. For this reason I find it easier to relate to them, to allow for their individual biases, and to make up my mind on that other question: not only what it felt like to be there, but how might one have reacted – how does one react now – to those momentous and challenging events?

That kind of question used to be very loaded. There was, after all, as much of a Cold War mentality in the West as in the Soviet Union. Ask someone what they thought of the Russian Revolution and you might as well be asking, what do you think of the Soviet Union, or more simply: are you a Communist sympathizer? Even to take an interest in the subject was regarded with some suspicion. A gulf divided those who were so anxious for the Soviet Union to succeed that they put a positive interpretation on everything to do with the Revolution, and those who regarded 1917 and its consequences as an unmitigated disaster. The arguments of the former were buttressed by the apparent permanence of the Soviet Union, by the fact that like it or not, the Revolution had been successful and endured. When in 1991 that permanence was shown to be illusory, it became possible to take a fresh and more dispassionate look at the Revolution.

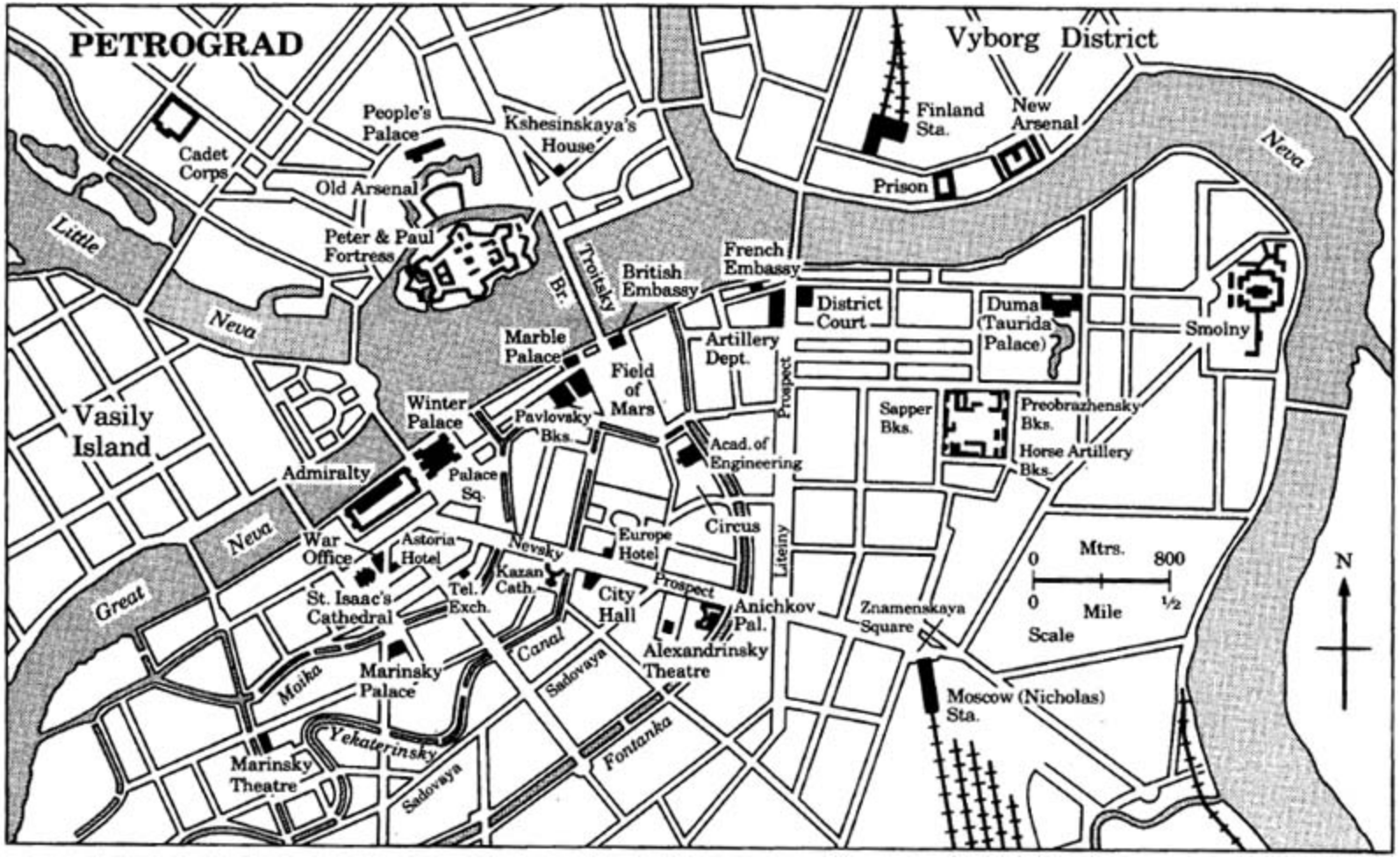
Going back to the original Anglo-American witnesses changed my view of the Revolution completely. I realized that it had become so heavily overlaid with historical

interpretation and political controversy that it was impossible to see what was actually there. I hope that by stripping away those extra layers, the colours of the original may show up again more clearly.

The text of the present edition is the same as that of 1994, but this Foreword has been revised and I have written a new Afterword in which I draw some conclusions about the two Russian revolutions, and try to relate 1917 to what is happening in Russia today.

Harvey Pitcher

Cromer, August 2000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Tel. Exch.
City Hall
Prospect
Anichkov Pal.
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Introducing the Witnesses

Sifting material for this book has brought home to me the sad fact that the human memory cannot be trusted. It is not so much that we forget, but that we select, rewrite the record to make our own actions and judgements appear in a more favourable light, and find it almost impossible to resist the temptation to be wise after the event (how many witnesses of the Russian Revolution claimed later to have been aware all along of Kerensky's limitations – but said nothing at the time!). Hence, the evidence of foreign correspondents always deserves attention, because they are usually writing within twenty-four hours of the event. On the other hand, their views may be coloured by the politics of the newspaper employing them, or their editor may say that he wants 'hard' news only. In books they can spread themselves more, but at the expense of immediacy and veracity. Diaries and letters written at the time likewise provide excellent evidence, but they may be too personal, or the writers too far from the centre of events to understand much of what is going on. Being close to the centre is the one advantage that an Ambassador enjoys, but in other respects his position restricts him. His advisers, if well-informed and prepared to go out into the streets, are likely to be better witnesses.

Of the forty witnesses whom I have drawn upon, eight may be regarded as major, and I shall describe here who they were and how they came to be in Russia, and comment briefly on the written records they left behind.

HAROLD WILLIAMS (1876–1928) was the son of a Nonconformist minister who emigrated to New Zealand in 1870. A precocious linguist, he stored languages in his brain

‘as a musician stores notes’, completed a doctoral thesis on the Ilocano language at Munich in 1903, and eventually knew more than fifty languages, over half of which he spoke fluently. But Russia attracted him no less than philology – as a young man he had been passionately interested in Tolstoy – and in September 1903 he wrote: ‘I feel that the liberation of Russia is the great cause I have to work for.’ It was at the home in Stuttgart of a leading Russian political exile, Peter Struve, that he met his future wife, Ariadna Tyrkova, another Russian dissident.

Williams worked in Russia as a journalist from December 1904 to March 1918, first for the *Manchester Guardian*, then the *Morning Post*, and finally the *Daily Chronicle*. In 1914 he published *Russia of the Russians*, a compendium of all aspects of Russian life. He was particularly well informed about internal Russian politics through his wife, a member of the Central Committee of the Kadet (Constitutional Democrat) party, founded in 1905. After his return to England in 1918, he began a book about the Russian Revolution which he never completed, while in her biography of him, *Cheerful Giver* (1935), his widow expressed the hope that his dispatches from that period might one day be published in book form; they never were.[1] Tall and scholarly in appearance, Williams inspired much affection among friends both Russian and British. He writes in a very relaxed personal style, so that his articles often read more like private musings on the state of Russia than newspaper reports.

If the name of Harold Williams is now almost forgotten, that of ARTHUR RANSOME (1884–1967) is still widely known as the author of such children’s classics as *Swallows and Amazons* (1930), in which very middle-class English children go sailing and fishing: a far cry from the world he moved in earlier, when he fell in love with Trotsky’s secretary and was labelled a ‘dangerous Red’. The son of a Leeds history professor, Ransome had published a variety of books when

he decided in the summer of 1913 to visit Russia: partly to escape from a stormy first marriage and partly to pursue an interest in Russian folklore, which led to his celebrated *Old Peter's Russian Tales* (1916). In October 1915, helped by his friend Harold Williams – 'a very quiet man, unselfish, extraordinarily kind'[2] – he became Petrograd correspondent for the Liberal *Daily News*.

Ransome had taught himself Russian and knew the city well, having compiled a guidebook that was never published because of the war. An American friend described him in 1917 as 'an Englishman of the six-footer, lounging sort, red-moustached and pipe-smoking'[3]; he was also very short-sighted. In spite of health problems, Ransome was a brave and tireless correspondent, who thought nothing of going for twenty-mile walks to gauge the political temperature of the city. Though previously uninterested in politics, he worked hard to understand the complex political situation in Russia. Reuters correspondent advised him early on to contract, e.g. write 'unwent' for 'did not go'. This saved his employers money but may not have been good for his prose, which even when 'disentangled', still seems unrelaxed. He is at his best describing some striking incident or sequence of events, with plenty of movement and vivid – often humorous – detail, in other words, telling stories, which he so much loved doing.

Ransome's friendship with Harold Williams did not survive the Revolution, whereas that with MORGAN PHILIPS PRICE (1885–1973) lasted many years. Unlike Ransome, Philips Price had politics in his blood, and from 1929 to 1959 he was to be a Labour MP. At Cambridge he studied science and took a Diploma in Agriculture, having inherited a 2000-acre estate when he was twenty-one. He first visited Russia in 1908, and in 1910 joined a scientific expedition which took him to remote parts of the Russian Empire. In 1914 he published *The Diplomatic History of the War*, 'aimed to show that each of the belligerent countries was partly responsible for the

disaster', and helped to found the Union of Democratic Control, 'a society for those who had not lost their heads'. Knowing Russia well and speaking the language, but deploring the trend to whitewash the tyrannical regime of Britain's wartime ally, he offered his services in 1914 as Russian correspondent to C.P Scott, editor of the *Manchester Guardian*.[4]

For most of 1917 Price was not reporting regularly, as Scott had another correspondent, David Soskice, of Russian emigrant stock, who became Kerensky's private secretary. Price concentrated on the activities of the Soviet, and on life outside Petrograd, which other correspondents had little time to cover. *My Reminiscences of the Russian Revolution* appeared in 1921. It is a long book, in which rather dry and tendentious passages of political analysis – Price had by that time been temporarily converted to Marxism – are interspersed with extremely vigorous first-hand reporting. Much use is made below of *Reminiscences*, in conjunction wherever possible with what Price wrote in 1917 itself.

About Robert Wilton, correspondent of *The Times*, there is little to say. He had been in Russia for fourteen years, but his contacts and sympathies were so much with the upper classes that the Revolution left him high and dry. E.H. Wilcox, correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph* (which throughout 1917 also printed Harold Williams' telegrams and provided excellent coverage of Russia), analyses events far more dispassionately, but in neither his articles nor his book does he write about his personal experiences.

The British Ambassador in Russia from 1910 to the beginning of January 1918 was Sir George Buchanan (1854–1924). 'I may in a certain sense be said to have been born into diplomacy,' he writes, 'for I was born at the Legation at Copenhagen, where my father was then Minister.'[5] He also looked like a diplomat, with his tall patrician appearance, monocle and silvery-grey hair. On his arrival in St Petersburg (renamed Petrograd in 1914), he must have felt that he was

about to add another worthy, if unspectacular, paragraph to a modestly successful career. In the event, this cautious and reserved career diplomat became a historically important and surprisingly controversial figure.

Buchanan listened to other people, and as the political situation in Russia worsened during the war, he realized that in Harold Williams he had a unique asset. With considerable misgivings he was persuaded by Williams in the autumn of 1916 to make the acquaintance of some of the more moderate liberal politicians: a move that paid off when these same men assumed power in March 1917.[6] With Kerensky, too, he later cultivated good relations. This did not mean that the conservative Buchanan had been converted into a socialist or even a mild liberal, but simply that pro-war forces must be sought wherever they could be found. 'If we can only keep them in line until the autumn,' he said soon after the March Revolution, 'perhaps some day they will be grateful to us at home.'[7]

My Mission to Russia and Other Diplomatic Memories was published in two handsome volumes in 1923. Buchanan spoke no Russian and conveys little of the hurly-burly of the streets (though he continued to take his daily walk along the English Quay even when in personal danger), but the passages from his diary are interesting, and more useful still are the extracts from his confidential reports, where he outlines the rapid changes in Russian politics in simple language that even the Foreign Office in London might be expected to understand. His humour is so quiet that it can pass unnoticed. By all those who worked under him he was greatly admired; by the Russian *émigrés*, however, he was later much reviled and more or less accused of starting the whole Russian Revolution.

MERIEL BUCHANAN (1886–1959) was Sir George and Lady Georgina's only child. Described in the *Lady's Pictorial* of 24 October 1914 as 'a fair type of a real English girl, pretty, quiet, moderately tall, with a splendid figure and possessing

delightful manners', she appeared nursing another future witness of the Revolution, her Siamese cat. The interviewer found it impossible to believe that Miss Buchanan was the author 'of one of the most popular of last year's books, *The White Witch*, she speaks so modestly of her great gift . . .'[8] Not surprisingly, the aspiring young writer saw in her Russian experiences a heaven-sent opportunity. *Petrograd the City of Trouble 1914–1918* came out in December 1918 and was quickly reprinted. It might have been sub-titled: *What I Saw of the Russian Revolution from the Windows of the British Embassy*, but the author makes a little go a long way, and the Embassy was not a bad vantage-point, especially during the 'July Days'. On the evidence of *Petrograd*, her literary gift was modest – too many stars shine dimly in tender skies – but from time to time she conveys atmosphere in a way that no other witness achieves. Unenthusiastic about the events of March, after November she parades her fastidious distaste for the 'unkempt, unwashed, unshaved, totally ignorant' new rulers of Russia.[9] *The Dissolution of an Empire* (1932), which incorporates large parts of *Petrograd*, is even more anti-Bolshevik.

Looking after the Ambassador's daughter was a duty that fell on various members of the Embassy staff, including MAJOR-GENERAL SIR ALFRED KNOX (1870–1964). An Ulsterman and Tory of private means, Knox had served in India and at the War Office before being appointed Military Attaché at Petrograd in 1911. As a liaison officer during the war, he exasperated the Russian officers assigned to protect him by making for the most dangerous parts of the front line and coolly munching his sandwiches in the midst of hails of bullets; but he earned the gratitude of the Russian Munitions Delegation whom he accompanied to London in December 1915: 'They said that I had fought their battle as if I had been a Russian myself'.[10] During 1917 his assistant in Petrograd was a twenty-one-year-old lieutenant from an

Anglo-Russian family, William Gerhardie, the future novelist. Gerhardie hero-worshipped Knox, whom he describes as ‘having the air and voice of a man engaged in winning the war while everybody else about him was obstructing him in his patriotic task’.[11] Knox worked very hard, had great personality and a ‘fine presence’. He spoke Russian fluently and ‘retained a freshness of mind, an eagerness to get in touch with every phase of Russian life, so that he was the real link with the country, the most authentic channel of information for the Ambassador’. Gerhardie liked the way in which Knox treated his Russian batman with the kind of respect that no Russian officer ever showed to a subordinate. He was also ‘full of fun’.[12]

With the Russian Army 1914–1917 appeared in two volumes in 1921. Of its 760 pages some 200 cover the period of the Revolution. The long extracts from Knox’s diary are more valuable than his later comments. In March 1917 he saw at once that Russia’s future contribution to the war was going to depend on her political future, and became as much a political as a military adviser to the Ambassador; and like Buchanan, he saw that he must not let his own political preferences affect his judgement. Knox has his prejudices (he is noticeably anti-Semitic), and his vision is restricted by his preoccupation with the war, but within those limits he is an excellent witness: well-informed, accurate, astute, and often very entertaining.

Two other well-known British witnesses, of whom only sparing use has been made, may be mentioned here. As British consul in Moscow, R.H. Bruce Lockhart spent little time in Petrograd in 1917, and *Memoirs of a British Agent* did not appear until 1932. Bernard Pares, already a Professor of Russian, knew more about the country than any other witness except Harold Williams, but *My Russian Memoirs* was likewise not published until 1931, and its author’s most vivid experiences – going on tour with a group of Russians calling themselves ‘The League of Personal

Example’ and making pro-war speeches – are somewhat remote from the Revolution itself.

Compared with the British witnesses, the main American witnesses laboured under several very obvious disadvantages. They did not arrive on the scene until the Revolution was well under way, they had comparatively little knowledge or experience of the country, and none of them had more than a smattering of the language. What they did have was immense energy and burning enthusiasm. To witness was not enough; they wanted to be part of the action. As reporters, they showed colossal nerve. It is hard to imagine any of the British correspondents barging into the Winter Palace where members of the Provisional Government were holed up on November 7, or stationing themselves prominently in the lobby to watch the departure of the discomfited ministers after their arrest by the Bolsheviks.

JOHN REED (1887–1920) came from a wealthy family in Portland and studied at Harvard, but had to earn his own living as a journalist when the money ran out. Jack was the rebel of the family. ‘Defiance was not a principle with him,’ writes his biographer, Granville Hicks, ‘it was an instinct.’ In New York he became aware of ‘the cruel inequality between rich people who had too many motor-cars and poor people who didn’t have enough to eat’. For supporting a workers’ strike, he landed himself briefly in jail. As a writer, Reed made his name with *Insurgent Mexico* (1914), based on his experiences as a war correspondent during the revolution; in Mexico, as in America, he identified ‘big business’ as the real enemy. In April 1917 his outspoken opposition to America’s entry into the European war – ‘a clash of traders’, he had earlier called it – made him many enemies. Exempted from military service on August 14 because he had had a kidney removed, he set sail three days later with his wife, Louise Bryant, for Russia, where reports of the

activities of the Soviet made them think that a new kind of human society was about to emerge.[13]

Ten Days That Shook the World, published in March 1919, deserves its reputation as the best firsthand account in English of the Bolshevik Revolution.[14] The book is well researched and documented: in addition to his own notebooks, Reed had amassed a large collection of newspapers, decrees and proclamations. Skilfully he evokes the time of day, what the weather is like, how the streets look. Most of all, though, Reed found a structure and style to match his unique subject. *Ten Days* is not long, and the concentration on a short time span gives the book great dramatic intensity. Once under way, the narrative fairly plunges ahead, helped by breathless dots and short sentences, often without verbs. Reed clearly sympathizes with the Bolsheviks, but *Ten Days* is not one-sided: dashing recklessly from one camp to the other, the author always gives a clear account of what the Bolsheviks' opponents are doing and saying, even though he disagrees with them.

How much *Ten Days* owes to the manner of its writing becomes obvious when one compares it with Louise Bryant's *Six Red Months in Russia* (1918) or *Through the Russian Revolution* (1923) by Albert Rhys Williams, a Congregational minister from Boston of Welsh extraction. Bryant does not have her husband's journalistic skills or sharp reporter's eyes, while Williams' book reads like a sermon pitched on too high a note. His most exciting experience – interceding on behalf of the besieged *yunkers* in the Petrograd Telephone Exchange on November 11 – is described much better by a fellow-participant, Bessie Beatty (1886–1947) in *The Red Heart of Russia* (1918). Beatty was a correspondent for the *San Francisco Bulletin*. Though very pro-Revolution, she was less committed to the Bolsheviks than Reed, and it is instructive to read her accounts alongside his.

Minor witnesses, who appear only occasionally or whose contribution is limited to a particular period, are introduced briefly on their first appearance in the text.

1

Red Monday

Events up to and including Monday, March 12

‘The March Revolution,’ writes Philips Price, ‘came like a thief in the night’. It was not that a revolution was unexpected. Far from it. ‘How often,’ he goes on, ‘had its possibility been discussed in Russia during the two and a half years that followed the outbreak of the Great War! Over samovars and tea-glasses officers and students had speculated whether it would come during the war or after peace. Working men had whispered of it in *traktirs* (tea-rooms) with bated breath. Soldiers had timidly broached the subject to each other in the trenches.’[1]

Western observers, too, had long been weighing up the possibility. ‘If there has ever been a Government that richly deserved a revolution,’ Colonel Knox wrote in a report on September 19, 1915, ‘it is the present one in Russia. If it escapes, it will only be because the members of the Duma [the lower chamber of the legislature] are too patriotic to agitate in this time of crisis.’ Corruption and mismanagement, he believed, had reached a point at which the mistrust of authority was penetrating all classes of society. He went to see Rodzianko, President of the Duma, to discuss the internal situation. ‘I spoke of the preventable sufferings of the people and of my astonishment at their patience under conditions that would have very soon driven me to break windows. He only laughed and said that I had a hot head.’[2]

In private audiences, Sir George Buchanan repeatedly warned the Emperor how dangerous the situation had become. The last of these meetings took place on January 12, 1917 at the Imperial Palace at Tsarskoe Selo, south of Petrograd. ‘On all previous occasions,’ Buchanan writes, ‘His Majesty had received me informally in his study, and, after asking me to sit down, had produced his cigarette case and asked me to smoke. I was, therefore, disagreeably surprised at being ushered this time into the audience chamber and at finding His Majesty awaiting me there, standing in the middle of the room.’ Buchanan’s heart sank, but when the conversation turned to the competence of those entrusted by the Emperor with the conduct of the war, he asked permission to speak with his ‘usual frankness’.

On the Emperor signifying his assent, I went on to say that there was now a barrier between him and his people, and that if Russia was still united as a nation it was in opposing his present policy. The people, who had rallied so splendidly round their Sovereign on the outbreak of war, had seen how hundreds of thousands of lives had been sacrificed on account of the lack of rifles and munitions; how, owing to the incompetence of the administration, there had been a severe food crisis, and – much to my surprise, the Emperor himself added, ‘a breakdown of the railways’. All that they wanted, I continued, was a Government that would carry on the war to a victorious finish. The Duma, I had reason to know, would be satisfied if His Majesty would but appoint as President of the Council [Prime Minister] a man in whom both he and the nation could have confidence, and would allow him to choose his own colleagues. The Emperor, while passing over this suggestion, referred by way of justification to certain changes which he had recently made in the Ministry. I therefore ventured to observe that His Majesty had of late changed his Ministers so often that Ambassadors

never knew whether the Ministers of today with whom they were treating would still be Ministers on the morrow.

‘Your Majesty, if I may be permitted to say so, has but one safe course open to you – namely, to break down the barrier that separates you from your people and to regain their confidence.’ Drawing himself up and looking hard at me, the Emperor [who was considerably shorter than Buchanan] asked: ‘Do you mean that I am to regain the confidence of my people or that they are to regain *my* confidence?’ ‘Both, sir,’ I replied, ‘for without such mutual confidence Russia will never win this war. Your Majesty was admirably inspired when you went to the Duma last February. Will you not go there again? Will you not speak to your people? Will you not tell them that your Majesty, who is the father of your people, wishes to work with them to win the war? You have, sir, but to lift your little finger, and they will once more kneel at your feet as I saw them kneel, after the outbreak of war, at Moscow.’. . .

I next called His Majesty’s attention to the attempts being made by the Germans, not only to create dissension between the Allies, but to estrange him from his people. Their agents, I said, were everywhere at work. They were pulling the strings, and were using as their unconscious tools those who were in the habit of advising His Majesty as to the choice of his Ministers. They indirectly influenced the Empress through those in her entourage, with the result that, instead of being loved, as she ought to be, Her Majesty was discredited and accused of working in German interests. The Emperor once more drew himself up and said: ‘I choose my Ministers myself, and do not allow anyone to influence my choice.’ ‘How, then,’ I ventured to ask, ‘does Your Majesty select them?’ ‘By making inquiries,’ His Majesty replied, ‘as to the qualifications of those whom I consider most suited to conduct the affairs of the different Ministries.’ ‘Your Majesty’s inquiries,’ I rejoined, ‘are not, I fear, always attended with success. There is, for example,