

H. G. Wells: Interpreting the ‘Writing on the Eastern Wall of Europe’

H. G. Wells’ obituary in *The Times* stated that he was ‘never anything but successful as a writer, and at one time he was possibly the most widely read author in the world’:

Wherever there were visions of a new world in the making, wherever there were schemes for a more rational ordering of human affairs, there also was H. G. Wells [...] Novelist, fantasist, analyst of society, amateur of science, populariser of ideas, his profuse and astonishing literary career exhibits the constant and guiding passion of a single-minded personality.¹

And indeed, as one of the leading voices of his time, Wells was simultaneously applauded by both his admirers and his political critics, for decades remaining one of the biggest intellectual influences in the English-speaking world. Verbal parallels to his writings may be traced in the speeches of Winston Churchill, who was known to read everything that Wells published and to correspond with the writer, commenting on certain aspects of his political views. As Churchill remarked in his essay of 1931: ‘When I came upon *The Time Machine*, that marvellous philosophical romance [...] I shouted with joy. Then I read all his books.’²

- 1 ‘Obituary. Mr H. G. Wells’, *The Times*, 14 August 1946, p. 7.
His obituary in *The Times Literary Supplement* described him as an ‘educator’, who ‘spoke more clearly than any other man to the youth of the world’.
- 2 Winston Churchill, ‘H. G. Wells’, *Sunday Pictorial*, 23 August 1931, in Michael Wolff, ed., *The Collected Essays of Sir Winston Churchill*, 4 vols (London: Library of Imperial History, 1976), III, 50–4 (pp. 52–3).
On Churchill-Wells correspondence see Richard Toye, ‘The Great Educator of Unlike People: H. G. Wells and the Origins of the Welfare State’, in Roger E. Backhouse and

In the 1920s Wells was at the height of his social and literary fame. According to the survey conducted by *The Manchester Guardian*, he came second (losing only to Galsworthy) among the writers who were considered likely to be read in 100 years' time.³ He was a passionate believer in progressive politics and his success as a writer turned him into an international celebrity. His essays were widely read and his views made a strong impact on the minds of the generation of his contemporaries, as J. B. Priestley put it, 'Wells dominated the world in which I grew up.'⁴

Among prominent British writers of his time, H. G. Wells had perhaps the closest and the most animated contacts with pre- and post-revolutionary Russia. A friend of Maxim Gorky and Fedor Chaliapin, he made three trips to the country (in January 1914, September to October 1920 and in July 1934), two of which were marked by his conversations with such state figures as Lenin and Stalin.⁵

In 1914 Wells returned from Russia as a staunch Russophile, revealing his impressions of the country in a documentary 'Russia and England: A Study of Contrasts' (published by *Daily News*, 1 February 1914), and in the novel *Joan and Peter* (1918). During war-time Russia became one of

Tamotsu Nishizawa, eds, *No Wealth but Life: Welfare Economics and the Welfare State in Britain, 1880–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 161–88 (pp. 171–2).

At his death Churchill had a substantial collection of Wells' novels, although *Men like Gods* (1923), in which he was satirised as 'Rupert Catskill', was missing (Toye, p. 171).

3 'Novelists Who May Be Read in A. D. 2029', p. 16.

Patrick Parrinder affirms that at that time Wells' 'intellectual, political and literary impact was at its height. During this time, he himself could easily be regarded as a European rather than merely an English writer. He travelled widely, and gave public lectures in the major European capitals' (Patrick Parrinder, Introduction to *The Reception of H. G. Wells in Europe*, ed. Patrick Parrinder (London: Continuum, 2005), pp. 1–13 (p. 1)).

4 S. Winsten, ed., *G. B. S.* (London: Hutchinson, 1946), p. 50.

5 Matthew Taunton, 'Russia and the British Intellectuals. The Significance of *The Stalin-Wells Talk*', in Rebecca Beasley and Philip Ross Bullock, eds, *Russia in Britain, 1880–1940: From Melodrama to Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 209–24.

the main topics of his articles and journalistic essays. Wells' perspective on the subject, including the alliance against Germany and the anti-monarchy February revolution, was largely buoyed up by the British government's official line; and he started to be regarded as an established authority on the Russian theme. The beginning of the 1920s was marked by a high level of tension between the newly formed Soviet Russia and the Western powers; and the cultivation of a more 'informed' vision of the country was taken up by the liberal press, as well as by some experts and opinion formers, including Sir Donald Mackenzie Wallace, Maurice Baring, Harold Williams and Stephen Graham. It was not surprising that Wells also should become interested in the issues surrounding new Russia's image and was willing to make his contribution to this field.

Wells' personal perspective on Russia, as well as his reflections on the socio-political outcomes of the 1917 Russian Revolutions (both the February Revolution and the October uprising), formed a substantial part of his *The Outline of History* volume, a treatise on the development of human civilisation, first serialised in 1919.⁶ On 11 February 1920 Wells sent extracts of the monograph to Maxim Gorky, asking whether it would be appropriate to discuss the possibility of a Russian translation.⁷ Gorky turned out to be in favour of the idea, thus providing some context for Wells' prospective Moscow visit. The trip followed from September to October 1920: Wells spent a couple of weeks in Russia with his son Gip (who spoke a bit of Russian) at the invitation of Lev Kamenev, one of seven members of the first Bolshevik Politburo, founded in 1917 to manage the Revolution.

Russia in the Shadows, the literary outcome of Wells' 1920 stay in Russia, discussing the country's recovery from total social collapse, was published in a series of five articles in *The Sunday Express* (31 October–28 November 1920),

6 The illustrated version of the book appeared in twenty-four fortnightly instalments, starting 22 November 1919, and was published in book format in 1919/20.

7 Maxim Gorky, *Pis'ma*, ed. F. F. Kuznetsov, 24 vols (Moscow: Nauka, 1997), XIII, 209; Kornei Chukovsky, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii. Dnevnik 1901–1921*, ed. E. Chukovskaia (Moscow: Terra, 2013), XI, 541.

summarised later in book format.⁸ The work fell immediately under the spotlight of public attention: Wells' articles increased the circulation of the paper by 80,000 copies;⁹ and the extensive controversy surrounding the writer's viewpoint made a strong contribution to the re-configuration of the British outlook on the Russian myth.

Quite a few laid great expectations on Wells' account of his journey: the general reader was keen to get a trustworthy opinion from an authority in the field. The Russian anti-Bolshevik opposition was persuaded that the picture of extreme social chaos and economic deprivation would cure Wells of his socialist illusions, and his statement on the Russian question could then be used for their political manipulations. The majority, however, largely shared Churchill's conviction (Wells' affirmation would have been a nicety in this case) that the country was being devoured by the 'cancer' of communism, and as such was not in a position to join the rest of the civilised world.¹⁰

Like much of his writing, Wells' report went largely against the general trend of contemporary opinion. He returned from Russia believing that the Western world should accept the Revolution and should be prepared to come to terms with the new regime. While delineating a grim picture of the country's physical collapse, economic chaos and degradation, he argued that this was the result of the 'unintelligent foreign intervention', and 'the complete internal disorder' – the Civil War, rather than inept actions of the Bolshevik Politburo.¹¹ To add to the point, his disparagement of political boycotts was supported by a conviction that the Bolsheviks were the only reliable force which could pull the country out of the crisis – the backbone and the hope of 'a new, renascent Russia':

8 Chapter V 'The Petersburg Soviet' was added later, and featured only in the book format.

9 Quoted in Melitsa Krivokapich, *In Pursuit of the Ideal Society* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1994), p. 55.

10 'We see the Bolshevik cancer eating into the flesh of the wretched being; we see the monstrous growth swelling and thriving upon the emaciated body of its victim' (quoted in 'Churchill and Merejkovsky Reply to Wells', *Current Opinion* 70 (1921), p. 217).

11 H. G. Wells, *Russia in the Shadows* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1920), pp. 34–5.

I have also tried to get the facts of Bolshevik rule into what I believe is their proper proportions in the picture. The Bolsheviks, albeit numbering less than five percent of the population, have been able to seize and retain power in Russia because they were and are the only body of people in this vast spectacle of Russian ruin with a common faith and a common spirit. I disbelieve in their faith, I ridicule Marx, their prophet, but I understand and respect their spirit. They are – with all their faults – the only possible backbone now to a renascent Russia.¹²

It is essentially a limitless task to analyse the entire volume of public response to Wells' account. The papers printed countless letters on the topic, not to mention numerous reviews that appeared in periodicals and weekly journals. *New Statesman*, for instance, described Wells' report as that of a rigorous observer: 'There is nothing at all, we believe, that has been written about Soviet Russia during these three years of Bolshevism that is worthy of comparison with the analysis which Mr H. G. Wells has just published,' it wrote,

He had every qualification; the faculty of keen and curious observation, the sense of the value of big movements, the natural sympathy with anything that was recognisably a genuine human effort, and that profound yet tolerant disillusionment which comes of long association with the Socialist movement of Europe.¹³

The majority, however, saw the English writer as a 'hoodwinked'¹⁴ outsider, who assumed that a fifteen-day trip to Russia was long enough to see through the threat of Bolshevism. Among others, Henry Arthur Jones and Winston Churchill were the most unforgiving in their comments. Jones referred sarcastically to *Gulliver's Travels*, comparing Wells to those Laputan philosophers, who had to be brought down to earth by persistent slapping in the face with a blown bladder: 'Being impressed with your striking resemblance to the Laputan Philosophers I resolved that I would put aside less urgent business and constitute myself your flapper, in the Laputan sense.'¹⁵ As regards Churchill's opinion, although he had always been a great

12 Wells, *Russia in the Shadows*, p. 88.

13 'Russia As It Is', *New Statesman*, 11 December 1920, pp. 296–7 (p. 296).

14 'Mr Wells's Visit to Russia', *The Spectator*, 25 December 1920, pp. 854–5 (p. 854).

15 Quoted in Vincent Brome, *Six Studies in Quarrelling* (London: Cresset Press, 1958), p. 58.

enthusiast of Wells' writing, their positions could not be further apart on the question of Lenin's government and the new regime. Churchill was an outspoken anti-Bolshevik, firm in his belief that

There has never been any work more diabolical in the whole history of the world than that which the Bolsheviks have wrought in Russia. Consciously, deliberately, confidently, ruthlessly – honestly, if you will, in the sense that their wickedness has been the true expression of their nature – they have enforced their theory upon the Russian towns and cities; and these are going to die.¹⁶

He was very quick to disparage Wells' account, maintaining with a considerable degree of irony that in a very small period of time the author had managed to become an authoritative 'specialist in Russian affairs.'¹⁷

Unsurprisingly, the attitude of the Russian émigré circles, who, arguably, had even more grounds for accusing Wells of being superficially 'hoodwinked', was equally hostile. One of the first critical responses to his views – 'Russia in the eyes of an Englishman: naiveties of Mr Wells' – appeared in the pages of *The New Russia*¹⁸ (edited by Nikolai Miliukov, the former Minister of Foreign Affairs for the Provisional Government) as early as 21 October 1920, ten days before Wells' first article was published by *The Sunday Express*. It was then reinforced by a series of more detailed accounts, including 'The Narrow-mindedness of Mr Wells', 'Dilettantism of Mr Wells' or 'Mr Wells' Wrath', in which the titles speak for themselves.¹⁹

16 Quoted in 'Churchill and Merejkovsky Reply to Wells', p. 216.

17 Winston Churchill, 'Mr Wells and Bolshevism', *The Sunday Express*, 5 December 1920.

18 'Rossiia glazami anglichanina: naivnosti g-na Uellsa', *The New Russia* 38 (1920), p. 250. The report of Wells' talk in the Petersburg Soviet (7 October 1920) was published in *Pravda* (12 October 1920), in the *Daily Herald* (13 October 1920) and in the *New York Times* (14 and 16 October 1920). Wells' speech is quoted in Yurii Kovalev, 'G Uells v Peterburge i Petrograde', *Vtorzhenie v Persei*, ed. E. Brandis and V. Dmitrievskii (Leningra: Lenizdat, 1968), pp. 415–34 (p. 425).

19 'Uzost' vzgliadov g-na Uellsa' (*The New Russia* 40 (1920), p. 289, 309–11); 'Dilettantism g-na Uellsa' (*The New Russia* 42 (1920), p. 357); 'Gnev g-na Uellsa' (*The New Russia* 43 (1920), p. 394). Wells' articles provoked a long-term critical resonance in the émigré circles: N. S. Trubetskoi published a sarcastic foreword to his Russian translation

Among others, Wells' vision of Russia was severely criticised by Ivan Bunin, one of the most prominent émigré writers (to become a Nobel Prize laureate in 1936), who felt obliged to express his poignant indignation at the profound misconception which shaped the tone of Wells' report:

Dear fellow, we certainly shall not forget your claim that we are worthy exclusively of those scoundrels with whom you stayed for 15 days, and that our Wrangels are just nothing but raiders. I am writing these lines at the time of our greatest sufferings and the deepest dejection. But our sun shall rise – and there is nobody among us who would stop believing in that.²⁰

Almost immediately he was joined by Dmitrii Merezhkovsky, an illustrious Russian Silver Age author, condemning Wells' short-sightedness and appealing for a sensible reconsideration of his views:

And finally, Mr Wells, let me quote yourself. Do you know what Bolsheviks are? They are neither men nor beasts, not even devils, but your Martians. This is happening today, and not only in Russia, but throughout the world, this is precisely what you have so brilliantly predicted in *The War of the Worlds*. The Martians descended on Russia openly, but one feels already that they are proliferating everywhere from inside.

What is the most frightening regarding the Bolsheviks – is that they are creatures belonging to a different world; their bodies are not ours; their souls, not ours. They are strangers to us, us children of the earth, of all the strange transcendence of nature.

You know, Mr Wells, better than anyone. Do you know what the triumph of the Martians means? The loss not only of my country as well as yours, but of the whole planet. Would you therefore side with them against yourself?²¹

The publication of *Russia in the Shadows* also resulted in Wells losing some friends from his London Russophile circle. One of them was Harold

of *Russia in the Shadows* (N. S. Trubetskoi, Preface to G. D. Uells, *Rossia vo mgle* (Sofia: Rossiisko-bolgarskoe kn-vo, 1921), pp. iii–xvi).

20 Ivan Bunin, 'Some Words to the English Writer', *Obshchee delo* 132 (1920), p. 2 (translated by the authors).

21 Dmitrii Merezhkovsky, 'Pi's'mo Uellsu', *Svoboda-Varshava* 125 (1920); 'Lettre ouverte à Wells', *Révue hebdomadaire* 1 (1921), p. 132 (translated by the authors).

Williams – a leader writer (1921) and, from May 1922, an appointed foreign editor for *The Times*. Harold Williams and his wife Ariadna Tyrkova-Williams played a key role in hosting Wells during his 1914 Russian visit, when he stayed at the Tyrkovs' family estate in the Novgorod region. Mrs Tyrkova-Williams had no hesitation in confronting Wells publicly regarding his stance on the Russian question: 'Even H. G. Wells, with his sharp intelligence and restless imagination', she claimed,

had no intuition of what Communism is. He thought it merely a Russian affair. We argued with him. I am afraid my hot temper was to blame. I insisted that directly, or indirectly, Bolshevism would affect everyone, even his own children. He asserted that the Russian Revolution concerned nobody but Russia. Let the Russians manage their own affairs according to their own lights. He was absolutely sure that revolution or no revolution, his country house at Dunmow would always be full of roses and strawberries. He was partly right. People like H.G. Wells maintain their standard of comfort even in the midst of a world crisis. But what about the crowd of smaller men?²²

Harold Williams was equally dismayed by Wells' publication. And although he preferred to avoid challenging Wells publicly or in the press, the first draft of his talk at the Institute of International Affairs on 7 December 1920 (written, probably, under a certain degree of emotional tension) contains some distinctly negative references to Wells' opinions.²³ Frank Swinnerton, a mutual friend of both the Williamses and the Wellses, was quick to realise how deeply everybody was distressed by Wells' position. 'I can quite imagine that the Russian articles are worse than exasperating to you',²⁴ he wrote

- 22 Ariadna Tyrkova-Williams, *Cheerful Giver* (London: P. Davies, 1935), pp. 218–19. Tyrkova also played a significant role in instigating the Bunin-Wells polemics. Her visit to the Bunins in Paris is recorded in Vera Bunina's diaries on 14 November 1920 with a note: 'She is enflamed by the desire to fight', a week later (21 November) Bunina comments on retyping her husband's 'article against Wells' (Vera Muromtseva-Bunina, *Ustami Buninykh*, ed. Milita Grin (Moscow: Posev, 2005), II, p. 18).
- 23 These references were excluded from the final text of the talk. Ariadna Tyrkova-Williams Papers, Box 8; quoted in Irene Zohrab, 'From New Zealand to Russia to Britain: a comment on the work of Harold W. Williams and his relations with English writers', *New Zealand Slavonic Journal* 1 (1985), pp. 3–15 (p. 10).
- 24 Letter of 9 November 1920; Ariadna Tyrkova-Williams Papers, Box 12; quoted in Zohrab, p. 10.

in a private letter to Williams. In an attempt to moderate a considerable strain in relations and moral damage, he then tried to attribute everything to Wells' eccentricity and emotional affectation:

We know what originality H. G. has, and how impossible it is for him not to see things with a very eccentric *parti pris*. For anybody who knows a subject thoroughly he must be a cause of gnashing despair. Marvellous man.²⁵

Swinnerton's merely tactical remark on Wells' alleged tendency to see 'things with a *parti pris*', or, in other words, to be dominated by his mental schemes and preconceptions, happens to be highly pertinent and revealing. Swinnerton knew Wells well enough to understand that his trip to Russia served essentially as a lens through which the English author was refracting his own socialist models.

Not unlike his fellow Fabians, Sidney and Beatrice Webb, who formulated their tract on the outcomes of the socialist venture (*Soviet Communism. A New Civilisation?*²⁶) two weeks before their visit to the country in May 1932, Wells' image of Russia had been largely configured in his earlier writings. Owing to his scientific background and education, his mind-set was that of a modeller and a planner; and on his so-called 'field-trip' in 1920 he arrived already on the lookout for certain things he was expecting to see. It is sufficient to consider the Russian sections of *The Outline of History* volume (published just a year earlier), to realise that Wells' framework of references had already been defined and cemented, and that a fairly unaltered version of his tenets was mapped onto his commentaries on the Russian tour. The examples are manifold and concern, for instance, Wells' lauding of Bolshevik leaders as far-seeing and progressive statesmen, of whom he believed that

in all the evil they did, they were honest in intention and devoted in method. Manifestly they were attempting to work out an experiment of great value to mankind

25 Letter of 9 November 1920; Ariadna Tyrkova-Williams Papers, Box 12; quoted in Zohrab, p. 10.

26 In the second (1941) and third (1945) edition of the book, the question mark was removed from the title.

and should have been left in peace [...] But they were not left to themselves [...] They were universally boycotted, and the reactionary governments of France and Great Britain subsidized and assisted every sort of adventurer within and without Russia to assist them;²⁷

as well as his rather shocking justification of the Bolshevik terror: ‘There was a phase of Terroristic government’, he argues in *The Outline of History*, ‘Thousands of men were seized and shot, and it is doubtful if Moscow could have been restored to even a semblance of order without such violence.’²⁸ The same disconcerting remark reappears in *Russia in the Shadows*, when he says that ‘apart from individual atrocities it [the Red Terror] did on the whole kill for a reason and to an end.’²⁹ And although Wells claimed now and again that he was extremely alert not to be ‘dry-nursed’ by the hosts on his visit,³⁰ he could not help fitting facts into the framework set out in his mind. His perception of Russia was shaped some time before the 1920s, and it is in his earlier encounters with the country that one has to search for an explication or, more precisely, an understanding of the way in which his Russian impressions were moulded into a specific point of view.

As a prominent man of letters Wells was keenly aware of his popularity in Russia, where his novels were translated as early as the end of the 1890s.³¹ Even Lev Tolstoy (no admirer of Shakespeare or Milton) was moved enough by his fiction to ask through Aylmer Maude, their mutual friend, to send him a copy of Wells’ stories. Wells dutifully obliged, acknowledging the honour (in an accompanying letter of 21 November 1906):

I never sent you my books, because I assumed that you were inundated with a flow of volumes, supplied by every single debutant-writer of Europe and the US. Now I am

27 H. G. Wells, *The Outline of History* (London: Cassell, 1951), p. 1119.

28 Ibid. p. 1117.

29 Wells, *Russia in the Shadows*, p. 64; the similarities were pointed out in William Harrison, ‘H. G. Wells’s View of Russia’, *Scottish Slavonic Review* 7 (1986), pp. 49–68 (p. 57).

30 ‘Mr Wells’s Visit to Russia’, p. 854.

31 Gervert Dzhordzh Uells, *Bor’ba mirov*, trans. K. K. Tolstoy, *Novyi zhurnal inostranoi literatury*, pp. 6–9 (1898); Gervert Dzhordzh Uells, *Bor’ba mirov*, trans. Z. Zhuravskaya (St Petersburg: Izd. I. N. Skorokhodova, 1898).

sending you my story 'Love and Mr Lewisham'; a collection of sketches 'The Plattner story', the novel 'The War of the Worlds', and a volume of sociological reflections 'A Modern Utopia', which Mr Maude specifically advised me not to send you, because you are not a utopia fan. But, firstly, this one is quite dissimilar to all others; secondly it is better if you get to know me from the bad side straightaway. I very much hope that this 'hail' of books would not bore you to the slightest degree.³²

Regarding the influence of Russian literature on Wells' own writing, one can hardly make a strong case for any definitive impact, apart from mentioning a general encouragement 'to use the novel as a platform for a wide range of social, political and moral issues'.³³ As Wells put it in one of his letters in the mid-1920s: 'I have never written any articles on Russian authors. I've a great affection for things Russian & the Russian atmosphere.'³⁴ The latter was certainly the case; the former turns out to be not quite so, because in his early article 'The Novels of Mr George Gissing', published in 1897 in *The Contemporary Review*, Wells did make some perceptive comments on the writings of Turgenev, characteristically focusing on their social rather than aesthetic merits and seeing them as a prototype of a 'new structural conception' in literature, based on 'the grouping of characters and incidents, no longer about a lost will, a hidden murder, or a mislaid child, but about some social influence or some far-reaching movement of humanity'.³⁵ This new and broader 'conception of the novel construction', he claimed,

finds its most perfect expression in several of the works of Turgenev, in 'Smoke', and 'Virgin Soil', each displaying a group of typical individuals at the point of action of

32 H. G. Wells, letter to Lev Tolstoy, 21 November 1906, in Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, LXXVI (1956), pp. 251–2 (translated by the authors).

Tolstoy responded on 2 December: 'Dear Sir, I have received your letter and your books and thank you for both. I expect great pleasure in reading them. Yours truly Leo Tolstoy' (Ibid.).

33 Phelps, p. 146.

34 H. G. Wells, letter dated 1922–26, in H. G. Wells, *The Correspondence of H. G. Wells*, ed. David C. Smith (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1998), III, p. 167.

35 H. G. Wells, 'The Novels of Mr George Gissing', *Contemporary Review* 72 (1897), 193.

some great social force, the social force in question and not the 'hero' and 'heroine' being the real operative interest of the story.³⁶

In the same vein, drawing attention to the social aspects rather than its expressive sensitivity and colours, Wells defended Diaghilev's ballet *Les Noces*, which was disparaged by the majority of critics after its London premiere on 14 June 1926.³⁷ The ballet, in which Stravinsky showed his increasing propensity for stripped down, clear, and mechanistic sound (created by pianos and unpitched percussion), was based on the traditional Russian rituals of peasant wedding. As so often the critics were much slower to appreciate *Les Noces* than the public. It was quickly passed over, and for a long time its contribution to the development of modern ballet was largely overlooked.³⁸ Wells, who, in opposition to the majority, loved the ballet-cantata, was moved to write an open letter to the *Dancing Times* (perhaps not without Diaghilev's gentle nudge), which was later printed out and distributed at the performances as an attachment to theatre programmes. Wells cursorily praised the ballet's striking décor, choreography and setting, and placed his main emphasis on its valuable representation of the institution of marriage. 'I have been very much astonished at the reception of *Les Noces* by several of the leading London critics', he wrote,

Writing as an old-fashioned popular writer, not at all of the high-brow set, I ought to bear my witness on the other side [...] The ballet is a rendering in sound and vision of the peasant soul, in its gravity, in its deliberate and simple-minded intricacy in

36 Ibid. p. 193.

37 Hannen Swaffer, 'Les Noces filled my cup of bitterness to overflowing', *Daily Express*, 16 February 1926; 'If that was the way the Russian peasant got married [...] no wonder the things have happened as they have', *The Times*, 15 June 1926; 'Nothing but ugliness and aimless noise', *Daily News*, 15 June 1926.

38 Susan Jones, *Literature, Modernism, and Dance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 94, 118–19.

In its London premiere it was conducted by Eugene Goossens and the four pianists included Auric, Poulenc, Rieti and Dukelsky (Rieti thought it was an unsuccessful 'stunt' of Diaghilev's to employ four composers instead of four professional pianists, and Stravinsky was 'far from happy about it' (Richard Buckle, *Diaghilev* (New York: Atheneum, 1979), p. 471).

its subtly varied rhythms, in its deep undercurrents of excitement, that will astonish and delight every intelligent man or woman who goes to see it.³⁹

In her account of the interaction between literary modernism and dance in the 1920s, Susan Jones lists Wells as a dedicated literary patron of Diaghilev ballets (together with Richard Aldington, Rebecca West, John Middleton Murry, Katherine Mansfield, the Sitwells, T. S. Eliot and Aldous Huxley).⁴⁰ Wells' personal correspondence, however, shows that he was relatively unaffected by the pre-war unrelenting fascination with the Russian Ballets seasons, as well as with the all-embracing vogue for Russian fiction proliferating at the beginning of the century on the British literary scene. The first time Wells mentions reading Dostoevsky's *The Grand Inquisitor* is as late as October 1931, when the book was given to him as a present by Samuel Koteliansky: 'I have read *The Grand Inquisitor* with great pleasure and excitement. It is not my way of approaching these matters, but that makes it all the more interesting. The book was my nicest birthday present.'⁴¹

Concerning his appreciation of Tolstoy's writings, Wells, as it happens, was not an unreserved admirer of the Russian author. He had an extensive knowledge of Tolstoy's oeuvre, having read a substantial number of his works. 'I read about eighty works of yours – everything which one could get in English', he wrote in a letter to the patriarch of Russian prose, "War and Peace" and "Anna Karenina", in my view, are the greatest and the most comprehensive of those that I was fortunate to read.'⁴² In his *Experiment in Autobiography*, Wells showed more appreciation of *War and Peace*, as a novel where one may 'find a justification for the enhancement and animation of history by fictitious moods and scenes.'⁴³ In 1922 he joined the

39 H. G. Wells, letter to the editor, *Dancing Times*, June 1926, *The Correspondence of H. G. Wells*, III, p. 213.

40 Jones, p. 94.

41 Wells, letter to Samuel Koteliansky, 1 October 1931, *The Correspondence of H. G. Wells*, III, p. 377; for more on Samuel Koteliansky see Chapter 5 in this book.

42 Wells, letter to Lev Tolstoy, 21 November 1906, in Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, LXXVI, 251–2.

43 H. G. Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography* (London: Faber and Faber, 1934), II, p. 504.

group of British luminaries, including Shaw, Maugham, Jerome K. Jerome and Thomas Hardy, campaigning for a complete Tolstoy edition in English (an open letter by Shaw appeared 28 February 1922 in *The Times*). At the same time, his pithy preface to *Resurrection*, published in the Oxford centenary edition, aroused a furore in literary circles, such that Prince Dmitrii Mirsky, an eminent Russian literary historian and critic, described it as a ‘scandal’ to the whole profession of letters, against which every self-respecting author must protest.⁴⁴ While commending Tolstoy’s power of literary portrayal, Wells singled out the trial scene as particularly moving, but did not hesitate to add that ‘Mr Galsworthy could certainly have done the same thing quite as completely, and it is the best part of the book [...] The story has been bent to fit a situation and psychology has snapped in the process.’⁴⁵ He praised the Russian author’s stupendous power of observation, but commented on the ‘copious garrulousness’ of Tolstoy’s novels, which he compared with ‘the magic of a busy market-place observed through a window’. He insisted that there was ‘no depth of humour’ in any of his writings, ‘no laughter, and no creative fun, and directly the window is perceived not to be a window but a square of incoherently moving shapes, it matters less than nothing and grips not at all.’⁴⁶ Referring to his personal experience in voyaging round the country, he then claimed that the end of the book reminded him of a ‘bleak dawn in Petrograd’, when

All night the talk has gone on, very very clever talk going on and on and never getting anywhere [...] and a great weariness has come upon us all. We have related anecdotes interminably, and talked of sex and love and God and truth and sex and cruelty and politics and nationality and science and cruelty and sex, and every one is weary and chilly. Then some one with a good voice says ‘Listen to this’, and takes a New Testament and reads a few irrelevant texts. ‘Good’, says a fervent voice, ‘A new

44 ‘H.G. Wells berates Russian Writers in Preface to Tolstoi’, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 14 August 1929, p. 29.

45 H. G. Wells, Introduction to Leo Tolstoy, *Resurrection* (London: Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press, 1928), pp. vii–x (pp. viii–ix).

46 Ibid. pp. ix–x.

life has dawned for me. I see the truth. I see everything', And the gathering with a sigh of intellectual and moral satiety rises to disperse.⁴⁷

Wells was quite sceptical with regard to Tolstoy's religious doctrine (hence his comments on the weakness of the second and third books of *Resurrection* where Tolstoy's art as a writer was eclipsed by his preaching⁴⁸), neither would he relate to the ethics and aesthetics of the Russian author. The connection between the two can be most likely found in their understanding of the social objectives of art and culture, their anti-militarist and anti-imperialist perspective, as well as the pacifist ideas noticeable in Wells' later novels, which in some ways echo the motifs of Tolstoy's works.

The second point regarding Wells' literary pursuits, which is less direct but, perhaps, more important in terms of getting to the first sparks of his interest in the Russian question, concerns his relationship with Edward and Constance Garnett. In the late 1890s, the contacts with Edward Garnett brought Wells to their home in Surrey, to which frequent visitors were the exiled Russian anarchists, including Prince Peter Kropotkin, Sergei Stepniak and Felix Volkhovsky. They were all introduced to the Garnetts through Edward's sister Olive Garnett, who attended various Russian anarchist parties in London, and also hosted them in her Museum Street flat: 'Went out to buy cake, lemons etc. for tea', reads her diary entry of 24 February 1892, when the nihilist Volkhovsky was expected.⁴⁹ Volkhovsky became Constance Garnett's Russian tutor, when she took up translation work in the early 1890s (he provided considerable assistance in her first project of translating Ivan Goncharov's *A Common Story*). Later on Garnett learnt more Russian with his fellow revolutionary-nihilist Stepnyak-Kravchinsky, by whom she was encouraged to tackle Turgenev's writings. Ford Madox Ford, who lived nearby and was also a frequent guest at the Garnetts, provided vivid recollections of their vibrant cosmopolitan evenings: 'The

47 Ibid. p. x.

48 'Book II and Book III are as complete a failure to achieve any artistic resurrection from this descent as any one can well imagine' (Wells, Introduction to Lev Tolstoy's *Resurrection*, p. ix).

49 Rosemary Ashton, *Victorian Bloomsbury* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012) p. 154.

troglodytic cottage on Limpsfield Chart where I lived severely browbeaten by Garnetts and the Good generally, though usually of a Fabian or Advanced Russian variety.⁵⁰

Similar in this respect to other members of the Fabian group (Mr and Mrs Pease and Shaw), Wells was keenly aware of the activities of the Society of Friends of Russian Freedom (formed in 1892). In 1908 he even signed a petition to ensure justice for Nikolai Chaikovsky, who had been arrested upon his return to Tsarist Russia earlier in the year. The vast campaign was led by Stepniak: the petition was presented to the Tsar's Ambassador in London, endorsed by numerous signatures including those of Edward Elgar, Thomas Hardy, Henry James and H. G. Wells.⁵¹ These growing contacts with the so-called 'advanced Russian variety' came at the time when Wells' relationship with his own circle of the Fabians was on the rocks. These two aspects are not entirely unconnected, and it is worth looking into this in more detail.

Wells joined the Fabian Society in 1903, proposed for the membership by Shaw and Graham Wallas. His books, *The Discovery of the Future*, *Anticipations* and *Mankind in the Making* were favourably reviewed in *Fabian News* (consecutively in March, June and December of 1902), and his membership was very much anticipated. However, as soon as he joined the ranks of the Society, he found its work totally unsatisfactory and started campaigning for reforms. In Wells' opinion, the faults of the Society (summarised in his address to the group on 9 February 1906, and entitled unequivocally *Faults of the Fabian*), were comprehensive: 'It is small, it is shabbily poor, and it is collectively inactive. [...] it is remarkably unbusinesslike, inadaptable, and uninventive in its ways.'⁵² To give credit to Wells' enthusiasm and pro-active position, it did attract a considerable number of younger people to the Fabian movement, so that the membership

50 Ford Madox Ford, p. 18.

51 *Free Russia*, January–March 1908, Felix Volkhovsky Papers, Box 3:27, Hoover Institution Archives.

52 Margaret Cole, *The Story of Fabian Socialism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1961), p. 119.

grew from 730 in 1904 to 2,462 in 1909.⁵³ As Margaret Cole, one of the historians of the Fabian group, pointed out, Wells' views represented those of the younger generation of the circle, which was 'more literary in its tastes, more fundamentalist in its discussions, more anxious to *argue* about the philosophy of Socialism and formulation of policy "for the working class."⁵⁴

His ways of implementing his theories, however, were almost entirely unrealistic (not to say absurd);⁵⁵ and his radicalism was certainly unwelcome to the 'old guard'. Beatrice Webb, for instance, always valued Wells as a creative person, but referred to him as an 'ideological speculator'.⁵⁶ The battle began that was to last for over a year. Wells' limited capacity for putting his ideas across in public meeting, especially against Shaw's rhetorical virtuosity, often added to the problem. One of the greatest writers of the time, Wells happened to be a rather incompetent debater; when referring back to these years he admitted his own shortcomings: 'speaking haltingly on the verge of the inaudible, addressing my tie through a cascade of moustache that was no help at all.'⁵⁷ On a personal level, there were also quite a few in the Society who were actively concerned about Wells' reputation for sexual promiscuity and his alleged advocacy of free love. Having been exhausted by perpetual arguments and confrontation, in 1908 Wells presented his letter of resignation, indicating that he had 'lost any hope of the Fabian Society contributing effectively to the education of the movement'.⁵⁸ His relations with the core members were undoubtedly strained, finding a reflection in the pages of *The New Machiavelli* – the novel of 1911, which

53 Edward R. Pease, *The History of the Fabian Society* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Company, 1926), pp. 185–6.

54 Cole, p. 116.

55 Cole, p. 123.

56 Beatrice Webb, *Our Partnership* (London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1948), pp. 289–90.

57 Wells, p. 661.

58 *Fabian News*, October 1908; quoted in Cole, p. 123.

contained a caricatural portrayal of the Webbs as Oscar and Altiora Bailey – ‘two active self-centred people excessively devoted to the public service.’⁵⁹

Generally speaking, Wells shared Fabian socialist ideas of gradual reformism, advocating tenets of social justice and a welfare state model. He was also introduced to the Webbs’ theory of the enlightened administrative experts, highly competent in government management and political science. This theory then manifested itself in Wells’ order of the noble Samurai – an elite governing body, depicted in the novel *A Modern Utopia* (1905), who would take a major role in designing, guiding and operating a ‘kinetic and not static’ world state,⁶⁰ so as to solve ‘the problem of combining progress with political stability.’⁶¹ Given their progressive views, high moral standards and the emphasis on mass literacy and education, the Fabian group can certainly be regarded as a possible prototype for Wells’ depiction of the Samurai order. At the same time, bearing in mind his controversial relations and perpetual disagreement (on a smaller or larger scale) with the Fabian circle, it is not unlikely that it was the ‘advanced Russian variety’, who contributed to his vision of the leading intellectual core.⁶²

Having said this, it would not be wrong to contend that Wells’ 1906 encounter with Gorky made a noticeable contribution to his concept of enlightened governing experts. Translations of Gorky had been available in England since the beginning of the 1900s, exceeding in their popularity the readers’ rating of Chekhov’s stories.⁶³ Wells met Gorky on his visit to

- 59 H. G. Wells, *The New Machiavelli* (London: John Lane, 1911), p. 189. ‘Are the Baileys a libellous picture of the Webbs? That is quite right. I made a pretty recognisable picture of them’, wrote Wells in his letter to Frederick Macmillan, 26 September 1910 (*The Correspondence of H. G. Wells*, II, p. 286).
- 60 H. G. Wells, *A Modern Utopia* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1905), p. 5, 75.
- 61 *Ibid.* p. 271.
- 62 In his tract *The New Machiavelli* (after his break with the Fabian Society), Wells completely denied the Webbs’ influence on his notion of the ruling intellectual elite (Anne Fremantle, *This Little Band of Prophets. The Story of the Gentle Fabians* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1960), p. 147).
- 63 ‘By 1910 Gorky was much better known among the English public than Chekhov (the situation has since been reversed), and surveys of British (and French) magazines put him first in their list of Tolstoy’s younger successors, followed by Korolenko,

the USA in April 1906 at a dinner reception (11 April) hosted by Gaylord Wilshire, the editor of *Wilshire's Magazine*, which was advertised as 'the greatest socialist magazine in the world' with a circulation of 300,000 copies. Gorky came to the United States to conduct a fund raising effort for arms to equip Russian revolutionaries seeking to overturn the autocracy of the Tsar. In the interview given at the Wilshires' party, he blamed the anarchy in Russia on the policy of the tsarist clique; and when commenting on his reception in the States, remarked that he felt that he had come to a country of friends.⁶⁴ Ironically this 'company of friends' rapidly turned against him, when the American press and public discovered that the lady accompanying Gorky on the visit was, in fact, his long-term mistress, a Moscow Art Theatre actress Mariia Andreeva. A militant anti-Gorky campaign was launched by the media forces to the extent that he found himself thrown out of the hotel where he and Andreeva were staying. In American eyes he had now become a man with despicable morals, spreading subversion against America's ethos, respected values and fundamental concerns. One of the few strong statements in support of the Russian author was produced by Wells: 'I do not know what motive actuated a certain section of the American press to initiate the pelting of Maxim Gorky', he wrote,

A passion for moral purity may have prompted it but certainly no passion for moral purity ever before begot so brazen and abundant a torrent of lies In Boston, in Chicago it was the same. At the bare suggestion of Gorky's coming, the same outbreak occurred, the same display of imbecile, gross lying, the same absolute disregard of the tragic cause he had come to plead.⁶⁵

Potapenko and only then, in fourth position, by Chekhov' (*Anton Chekhov's Life and Thought*, p. 334). The same spectrum of interest was displayed by the German audience: according to *Das literarische Echo*, from October 1901 to May 1902 the German Press published twenty-four articles about Gorky; seventeen about Tolstoy; eight about Gogol and only two about Chekhov (S. Dinamov, 'M. Gorky i Zapad', *Krasnaia Nov'* 10–11 (1931), p. 225).

64 Tovah Yedlin, *Maxim Gorky. A Political Biography* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1999), p. 72.

65 *Times* (Buffalo), 15 April 1906, *Houston Chronicle*, 15 April 1906; quoted in Yedlin, p. 74.

From their first meeting, Wells perceived that Gorky was fulfilling his need for a kindred spirit. Both were devoted to progressive social improvement, both were advocating the idea of free love,⁶⁶ and at that time both were strongly affected by the theories of Nietzsche, particularly by those of the salvation of mankind by a superior type of intellectual elite – the Superman (*Übermensch*). The latter found its representation in Wells' voluntary order of the noble Samurai in *A Modern Utopia*.⁶⁷ Concerning Gorky, Nietzsche's views can be unmistakably traced in the character of Mayakin in his early novel *Foma Gordeev* (1899); the character of Luca in his social drama *The Lower Depths* (1902), which affirmed the Russian author's popularity in the West; and in a number of his allegorical fables: the juxtaposition between the stormy petrel and other birds in *The Song of the Stormy Petrel* (1901), or between the falcon and the grass snake in *The Song of a Falcon* (1902). As a young man, Gorky spent quite a lot of time studying Nietzsche, and according to his contemporaries, grew his iconic moustache to enhance his likeness to the German thinker.⁶⁸ Speaking of Gorky's theories of social improvement, which he did not cease to promote in the pages of his *New Life* journal, they were remarkably close to those expressed by Wells through his numerous fictional poetic personas. Both men believed in the primacy of the revolution of the human psyche, which would lead to the formation of the new men (in the terminology of Gorky) or the new enlightened intellectual experts (as in Wells). 'The Revolution,

66 Both men ended up sharing the same mistress, Mura Zakrevskaia Budberg, who was Wells' interpreter on his Russian trip in 1920, and who finally came to stay with him in London in 1933 (see, for instance, Nina Berberova, *Moura: The Dangerous Life of the Baroness Budberg* (New York: Review Books, 2005)).

67 The notion of a Samurai order was also suggested to him (as well as to the Webbs) by reading Nitobe Inazo's *Bushido: The Soul of Japan* (1899) (Michael Sherborne, *H.G. Wells: Another Kind of Life* (London: Peter Owen, 2010), p. 165).

68 Pavel Bassinsky, *Strasti po Maksimu: deviat' dnei posle smerti* (Moscow: Astrel', 2011), p. 189.

For the detailed analysis of Nietzsche's motives in Gorky's works see, for instance, M. Gel'rot, 'Nitshe i Gorky', *Russkoe bogatstvo* 5 (1903), pp. 24–65; Maxim Gorky, 'Besedy o remesle' (1930); Maxim Gorky, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 30 vols (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1949–55), XXV (1953), pp. 291–359 (p. 309, 322).

the only one which is capable of freeing and ennobling man', wrote Gorky, 'must take place within him, and it will be accomplished only by cleansing him of the mould and dust of obsolete ideas.'⁶⁹

Wells' close connections with Russian revolutionary circles (he and Gorky met again in May 1907, when the latter came to London to attend the fifth Russian Social Democratic Party Congress), and the similarity of their projects, ideas and opinions, especially against the background of his exasperating confrontation with the Fabian group, were important factors in configuring his attraction to all things Russian. He was actively reading Maurice Baring's *Russian Essays and Stories*:

Russian Essays is an admirable book, it makes me [sic] catch at one's adjectives before they get out of hand. Sympathetic & vast & a sort of depth of underlying & the sense of beauty alive & active, – I would value it if it came from a stranger and I should want to know you if I didn't;⁷⁰

and towards the end of 1913 he was giving some serious consideration to a visit. 'I think that this January I shall take a little journey to Berlin, Warsaw and Moscow',⁷¹ he wrote to Robert Ross in November.

When analysing Wells' account of Russia, communicated on the basis of his first 1914 journey, attention is drawn to at least two noteworthy observations. Firstly, one should argue in support of Swinnerton's claim regarding Wells being prone to seeing things through the prism of his own preconceptions, or, in Swinnerton's words with a definitive *parti pris*.⁷² Secondly, the spectrum of these *a priori* formed inferences and opinions can be described as a somewhat peculiar mixture of time-honoured national clichés, the landmarks derived from Maurice Baring's essays, and the writer's

69 Maxim Gorky, *Novaia Zhizn'*, p. 107 (1918). Quoted in Maxim Gorky, *Untimely Thoughts on Revolution, Culture, and the Bolsheviks 1917–18*, trans. Herman Ermolaev (New York: Paul S. Eriksson, 1968), p. 226.

70 Wells, letter to Maurice Baring, 6 November 1908, *The Correspondence of H. G. Wells*, II, p. 229.

71 Wells, letter to Robert Ross, November 1913, *The Correspondence of H. G. Wells*, II, p. 357.

72 Quoted in Zohrab, p. 10.

own socio-political views. A similar representation pattern will be traceable in Wells' account of his second Russian tour (in 1920), which makes it worthwhile to provide a closer consideration of the earlier trip.

On 13 January 1914 Wells arrived in St Petersburg on a private visit at the invitation of Count Alexander Benckendorff, the Russian Ambassador to the United Kingdom. In his preface to the 1909 Russian edition of his works (translated by Kornei Chukovsky), he claimed that he knew very little of the country, conjuring its image mainly from a number of sparse conversations with Gorky and the great volume of literary sources, which flooded British bookstores of the pre-World War I years. Characteristically it featured Russia's vast landscape, gloomy forests, jolly peasants and wooden huts:

When I think of Russia, I think of the descriptions of Turgenev and Tolstoi and of my friend Maurice Baring, of a country of heavy winters and bright, hot summers, of vast spaces of rather untidy cultivation, of wide and littered village streets with brightly painted houses and buildings of wood, of a peasant population, genial, humorous, patient, pious, and careless, of icons and bearded priests, of rough and lonely highroads running across great level spaces and through dark pine woods. I wonder how true that picture is?⁷³

It seems that the trip added fairly little to his earlier, allegedly romanticised and 'bookish' portrait. Written straight after his return back to England, Wells' essay 'Russia and England. A Study in Contrast' (1914) offered a set of colourful snapshots and descriptions, which still did not differ much from those attributed to the Russian fairground *lubok*-art:

It thawed on Sunday, and the surface of the ice was covered with inch-deep lakes of water and so rotten with snow slush that always we seemed near upsetting, and once we upset altogether. This water rippled a little under a chilly breeze, and except for that, it might have been an under-sky; the sledges that followed us hung low between clear sky and clear water, they were black against the serene levels of sunset

73 Published in English as 'Mr Wells Explains himself', *T.P.'s Magazine* 3 (1911), pp. 339–43 (pp. 339–40).

colour, pink and gold and mauve and their high arched yokes nodded over the heads of the horses;⁷⁴

or to the so-called 'stage' Russia, as the author himself called it in his letter:

Russia is most amooising. Exactly like the stage Russia – guard in huge furry cap and top boots [...] Outside are unfenced wilderness with deep snow, stunted firs & silver birch & (rarely) stunted hovels. Nobody speaks French or German, & the man who called up my passport called me Vowless.⁷⁵

In the same vein, this largely clichéd and exotified portrayal, which indeed calls to mind the backdrop for a Russian-theme stage set, was reiterated four years later in the Russian chapters of the novel *Joan and Peter* (1918) – a *roman-à-clef*-type narrative, which followed Oswald Sydenham's and his godson Peter's three-week trip to Russia at New Year 1914:

a sledge drive of ten miles along the ice of a frozen river, a wooden country house behind a great stone portico, and a merry house party that went scampering out after supper to lie on the crisp snow and see the stars between the tree boughs; the chanting service in a little green-cupolaed church and a pretty village schoolmistress in peasant costume; the great red walls of the Kremlin rising above the Moskva and the first glimpse of that barbaric caricature, the cathedral of St. Basil; the painted magnificence of the Troitzkaya monastery [...] the picturesqueness of Russia had a great effect upon him [*Oswald Sydenham*].⁷⁶

The characters' itinerary ('St. Petersburg – it was not yet Petrograd – visited a friendly house near the Valdai Hills, spent a busy week in and about Moscow, and returned by way of Warsaw'⁷⁷) and impressions provide a

74 H. G. Wells, 'Russia and England: A Study in Contrast', *Daily News*, 21 February 1914.

75 Wells, letter to Catherine Wells, [24] January 1914, *The Correspondence of H.G. Wells*, II, p. 362.

76 H. G. Wells, *Joan and Peter. The Story of an Education* (York, The Macmillan Company, 1918), p. 380.

77 *Ibid.* p. 379; 'a friendly house near the Valdai Hills' is a reference to Ariadna Tyrkova-Williams' family estate in the Novgorod region (in the village of Vergezha), discussed later in this chapter.

close match for those of the author, whose features are carefully disguised in Oswald and Peter (two different aspects of Wells' personality), while Mr Bailey is portrayed as a Maurice Baring-like figure.⁷⁸

Maurice Baring was Wells' devoted guide and mentor during the Russian trip of 1914. A well-rounded specialist in Russian history and culture, he pursued his interest in the country through a whole spectrum of extensive publications, including such titles as *Landmarks in Russian Literature* (1910), *Russian Essays and Stories* (1908, 1909), *A Year in Russia: 1905–1906* (1907), *The Russian People* (1911), as well as his earlier memorable work on the Russo–Japanese War – *With the Russians in Manchuria* (1906). According to one of his reviewers, Baring's lifetime intention was to reshape British perception of Russia as that of 'fiction and imagination [...] the knout and the half-shaved convict train dragging bloody chains across the snowy steppe'.⁷⁹ When it came to reshaping Wells' perception, Baring's undertaking was, perhaps, not entirely successful, but he was certainly instrumental in configuring Wells' interests and pursuits.

Baring's prime concern was the Russian people, their national character, and the reality of life. And it is not coincidental that straight upon his arrival in St Petersburg, Wells also declared that, apart from staying in the capital, he would be interested in observing a Russian village and that he was much more moved by people and their customs than by the monuments and historical relics (this interview for the journal *Rech'* was conducted by Vladimir Nabokov, the father of the famous writer).⁸⁰ The same was affirmed by the *Morning of Russia* correspondent. The newspaper reported that he 'categorically rejected an invitation to visit the monuments of antiquity, provided by his acquaintances', and after spending the first day

78 Harrison, p. 53.

79 William Churchill, 'Maurice Baring, *The Russian People* (1911)', *Bulletin of the American Geographical Society* 44.3 (1912), p. 218.

80 V. Nabokov, 'Uells', *Rech'* 14 (15 January 1914), p. 2.

Wells insisted on the same point three days later in another interview to Zinaida Vengerova, a journalist and a writer who had followed Wells' career over the years (Zinaida Vengerova, 'Dzhordzh Uells ego prebyvanie v Peterburge', *Den'* 17 (18 January 1914), p. 3).

in the streets of Moscow, dedicated the second one to following the daily routine of the Trinity Monastery in the small town of Sergiev Posad.⁸¹

The influence of Maurice Baring on Wells' account of Russia was analysed closely by Militsa Krivokapich, who argued that it was Baring's far more intricate and insightful descriptions that found their match in Wells' self-admittedly 'primitive and as yet half-baked views'.⁸² To give but a couple of examples: Baring persistently drew attention to the importance of Christianity in understanding Russia and its people ('Christian charity, their sympathy [...] is by far their most pleasing and attractive state'⁸³). Likewise, Wells insisted that in Russia, 'for the first time' in his life he felt he was 'in a country where Christianity is alive'.⁸⁴ Both authors wrote about the physical beauty of the Russian landscape, commenting on some mysterious strength originating from its vastness, as well as on the affinity between the national character and the power of the land. 'In the twilight, continents of dove-coloured clouds float in the east,' writes Baring,

the west is tinged with the dusty afterglow of the sunset; and the half-reaped corn and the spaces of stubble are burnished and glow in the heat; and smouldering fires of weed burn here and there; and as you reach a homestead, you will perhaps see [...] a crowd of dark men and women still at their work; and in the glow from the Dame of a wooden fire, in the shadow of the dusk, the smoke of the engine and the dust of the chaff, they have a Rembrandt-like power, the feeling of space, breadth, and air and immensity grows upon one; the earth seems to grow larger, the sky to grow deeper, and the spirit is lifted, stretched, and magnified.⁸⁵

This is paralleled in Wells' novel, when he dwells upon

The wild wintry landscape of the land with its swamps and wild unkempt thickets of silver birch, the crouching timber villages with their cupolaed churches, the unmade

81 Quoted in Inna Levidova, 'Pervyi priezd G. D. Uellsa v Rossiyu', in I. M. Levidova and B. M. Parchevskaia, eds, *G. D. Uells* (Moscow: Kniga, 1966), pp. 125–9 (pp. 127–8).

82 Krivokapich, pp. 25–7.

83 Maurice Baring, *Maurice Baring's Restored Selections from His Work*, ed. Paul Horgan (London: William Heinemann, 1970), p. 237.

84 Wells, 'Russia and England'.

85 Baring, *Maurice Baring's Restored Selections from His Work*, p. 267.

roads, the unfamiliar lettering of the stations, contributed to his impression of barbaric greatness [...] In Petrograd, he [Oswald Sydenham] said, 'away from here to the North Pole is Russia and the Outside, the famine-stricken north, the frozen fen and wilderness, the limits of mankind.'⁸⁶

Wells was clearly overwhelmed by the sheer scale and volume of his Russian impressions, maintaining that after spending two weeks in Russia, he found his 'mental arms full of such a jumble of impressions as no other country has ever thrust into them,' and that it would take him 'months of reflection before [he] could begin to sort out this indiscriminate loot, this magnificent confusion of gifts.'⁸⁷ Krivokapich, however, insightfully points out that despite being dazzled with the immense flow of new thoughts, feelings and observations, Wells displayed a noticeable tendency to highlight those that were specifically akin to or illustrative of his own social schemes.

As a steadfast 'evolutionary collectivist' (believing that 'through a vast sustained educational campaign the existing Capitalist system can be civilised into a Collectivist world system'⁸⁸), Wells was naturally inclined to see mankind's affinity with the surrounding landscape as a necessary prelude to apprehending the world as a community of nations,⁸⁹ a cosmic utopian brotherhood, which was one of the cornerstones of his social views. As he pointed out in his introduction to Denis Garstin's *Friendly Russia*, published in 1915, the author was 'engaged here upon one of the most necessary and beneficial tasks of our time, the explanation of a people much maligned, the increase of sympathy and understanding across spaces and ignorances that have separated men from men.'⁹⁰

86 Wells, *Joan and Peter*, p. 381. It seems that Wells was truly moved by the magnetic power of this darkness, reporting to Rebecca West: 'St Petersburg is more like Rebecca than any capital I have seen, alive and dark and untidy (but trying to be better) and mysteriously beautiful' (Wells, letter to Rebecca West, late January 1914, *The Correspondence of H. G. Wells*, II. p. 363).

87 Wells, 'Russia and England'.

88 Wells, *Russia in the Shadows*, pp. 138–9.

89 Further discussed in Krivokapich, p. 27.

90 H. G. Wells, Introduction to Denis N. Garstin, *Friendly Russia* (London: T. F. Unwin, 1915), p. 9.

Along similar lines, Wells' remark on the high level of culture and education in Russia was not entirely coincidental. This aspect was crucial for the formation of the social layer constituted by the enlightened intellectual elite – the backbone of his theories of reforming the human condition. Not unlike Baring, who maintained that 'an all-round development of faculties' was much more common in Russia than in other countries,⁹¹ Wells specifically commented on the intellectual curiosity of the younger part of the Russians' cultural circles:

far more interesting than the play to him was the audience. They were mostly young people, and some of them were very young people; students in uniform, bright-faced girls, clerks, young officers and soldiers, a sprinkling of intelligent-looking older people of the commercial and professional classes; each evening showed a similar gathering, a very full house, intensely critical and appreciative. It was rather like the sort of gathering one might see in the London Fabian Society, but there were scarcely any earnest spinsters and many more young men [...] This, then, must be a sample of the Intelligentsia. These were the youth who figured in so large a proportion of recent Russian literature. How many bright keen faces were there!⁹²

It would be, perhaps, unwarranted speculation to assert that during his first visit to Russia Wells started seeing the country's intelligentsia as a potential embodiment of his enlightened class of noble Samurai, who, if roused to action by some external forces, would bring about the new progressive social order. Wells had no illusions regarding the backwardness of Russia: he was acutely aware that in the country, which he portrayed as 'the vast barbaric medley',⁹³ 'eighty and ninety per cent' of the population were illiterate, 'superstitious in a primitive way, conservative and religious in a primitive way'.⁹⁴ However, it is worth bearing in mind that in a series of articles written as early as 1914, he did make reference to the exceptional qualities of the Russian intellectual experts, comparing them to 'the younger and brighter half of the London Fabian'⁹⁵ group ('Above these peasants come

91 Baring, *Maurice Baring's Restored Selections from His Work*, p. 236.

92 Wells, *Joan and Peter*, p. 389.

93 *Ibid.* p. 389.

94 H. G. Wells, 'The Liberal Fear of Russia,' *The Nation*, 22 August 1914.

95 Wells, 'Russia and England'.

a few millions of fairly well educated and actively intelligent people. They are all that corresponds in any way to a Western community such as ours').⁹⁶

And he did draw attention to the potential of the country's young cultural vanguard, whose intellectual vitality and critical thinking were pitted against the obtuse doom and repressiveness of the Tsarist order (in the Duma episode of *Joan and Peter*):

There the figure of the autocrat stood, with its sidelong, unintelligent visage, four times as large as life, dressed up in military guise and with its big cavalry boots right over the head of the president of the Duma. That portrait was as obvious an insult, as outrageous a challenge to the self-respect of Russian men, as a gross noise or a foul gesture would have been.

'You and all the empire exist for ME', said that foolish-faced portrait, with its busby a little on one side and its weak hand on its sword hilt ...

It was to that figure they asked young Russia to be loyal.⁹⁷

Wells was not the only Westerner who was impressed by the Russians and felt an attraction which was difficult to characterise in any specific or meaningful terms without slipping into some sort of vague statement concerning the innate goodness of the Russian people. He saw Russia through the prism of the mystic national idea, the Holy Land of spirituality, nesting in the depth of the mysterious Russian soul: 'Asia advancing on Europe – with a new idea,' he wrote,

One understands Dostoevsky better when one sees this. One begins to realize this Holy Russia, as a sort of epileptic genius among nations – like his Idiot, insisting on moral truth, holding up the cross to mankind [...] They seem to have the Christian idea. In a way we Westerns don't. Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and their endless schools of dissent have a character in common. Christianity to a Russian means Brotherhood.⁹⁸

Like many others (and despite his scientifically structured thinking), Wells was also falling into the trap of emotive generalisations, and his image of Russia, projected at the time, evidently did not go beyond the cliché-type

96 Wells, 'The Liberal Fear of Russia.'

97 Wells, *Joan and Peter*, p. 388.

98 Ibid. p. 389.

appeal of the mystical and the exotic. This fascination, however, was refracted through his own set of schemes and social models, the clear focal point of which was that of the well-educated cultural vanguard. One may even argue that during his stay in Russia, Wells, in fact, did have a chance to witness a micro-model of his Samurai leadership put into practice (though it was never mentioned in this way in his accounts). He spent some time in the close company of the members of the Russian revolutionary intelligentsia, while staying at the family estate of Ariadna Tyrkova-Williams in the Novgorod region (in the village of Vergezha). Tyrkova's brother, Arkadii Vladimirovich Tyrkov, was a member of the populist-revolutionary movement from the early 1870s. Having spent twenty years in exile in Siberia, he returned back to Vergezha still maintaining a proactive social position, advocating an indigenous version of populist socialism, based upon the massive Russian peasantry layer. Arkadii Tyrkov was very close to the Vergezha peasant community groups, in which Wells was warmly received during his stay with the Tyrkovs.⁹⁹

In this context it is also worth noting that in Russia there existed a bigger gap (in comparison to the West) between the country's intelligentsia and peasant masses,¹⁰⁰ which by way of sheer juxtaposition underscored the cultural affluence of its well-educated revolutionary circles. Upon returning to England Wells therefore expressed even more intense interest in Russia in all its forms. He became a convinced promoter of the Russian language, urging it to become part of the curriculum in secondary education. From a personal perspective, he suggested to the headmaster of his son's (Gip's) school that Russian should be taught there throughout the year – the headmaster dutifully obliged.¹⁰¹ It was, arguably, at that time

99 Zohrab, p. 4.

100 Wells, perhaps, had a chance to appreciate this gap when staying with the Tyrkovs in the Vergezha village; but the picture of the pervasive drinking and backwardness of the peasant masses could also have been drawn from his reading of Baring's essays (Maurice Baring, *Russian Essays and Stories* (London: Methuen & Co, 1908), pp. 178–9).

101 David C. Smith, *H. G. Wells: Desperately Mortal* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 246.

that Wells started seeing Russia as a prospective social project, and thus became keen on accentuating positive notes in the image of its people, its realities and its cause. 'My own experience of Russia has been of the briefest', he maintained, but

I went into one or two villages of the Government of Novgorod and into several peasants' houses. They are roomier than English labourers' cottages; they look more prosperous; the people seem more free and friendly in their manners, less suspicious of interference, and in all the essential things of life better off.¹⁰²

The February Revolution was a solid testimony of Wells' predictions (configured back in 1914). 'This great change in Russia, this banner of fiery hope that has been raised over Europe was no farce or spectacle', he wrote,

It comes, indeed, as the call of God, too, to every liberal thinking man throughout the world. We had not dared to hope it. Even men who, like myself, have been most energetic in pleading the cause of Russia in Western Europe and America, who have been saying ever since the war began: 'You are wrong in your fear of Russia: Russians are by nature a liberal-spirited people, and their autocracy is a weakness that they will overcome' – even we who said that counted on nothing so swift and splendidly complete as this revolution.¹⁰³

His statement was quoted in the open message to the Provisional Government, 'Assure New Russia of British Regard', and, strictly speaking, was nothing more than an affirmation of the author's hopes and sympathies for the new regime. More useful for the purposes of our examination is to look at the issues of Wells' reaction to the Bolshevik uprising, which was formative for shaping the image of Russia projected after the end of his 1920 visit.

A number of articles were published in the *Daily Chronicle*: 'Looking Ahead: World Language' (13 May 1916), 'Tidying up the Language question: With Particular Reference to Russia' (6 June 1916); see also his letter to the editor of the *Daily Chronicle* (16 May 1916) (*The Correspondence of H. G. Wells*, II, pp. 458–60).

102 Wells, Introduction to Denis N. Garstin, *Friendly Russia*, p. 12.

103 Bernard Shaw et al., 'Assure New Russia of British Regard', *New York Times*, 1 April 1917, p. 3.

Unlike many of those in his close social circle, the Bolshevik Revolution did not take Wells by surprise.¹⁰⁴ It was as late as the 1920s that the Fabian 'fathers' (Shaw or Sidney and Beatrice Webb) started to display definite signs of interest in the country where their socialist theories were being realised and put into practice. This was due to the introduction of Lenin's New Economic Policy in March 1921, which was seen as creating an effective bridge-passage to the gradualism of Fabian reforms. The first contacts with the leaders of the newly established state also prompted the Fabian idea of intellectual administrative experts. British democratic socialists were pleased to realise that the front-runners of the so-called proletarian revolution were, in fact, not proletarians at all, but rather a group of highly educated political activists. Georgii Chicherin, People's Commissar of Foreign Affairs, was an aristocrat by birth, a distant relative of Aleksandr Pushkin. Chicherin had a degree in history and languages, and could have made a career as a trained competent musician. Anatolii Lunacharsky, the People's Commissar of Enlightenment, was brought up in the family of a statesman. He received his education at the University of Zurich, where he entered the circles of the European Socialists (together with Rosa Luxemburg and Leo Jogiches). He was a playwright and an art critic, and produced a number of essays on the works of Western authors, including Shaw and Marcel Proust.¹⁰⁵ In one of her letters to Wells, Beatrice Webb remarked that Kamenev (Lenin's Deputy Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars) and Krassin (the People's Commissar of Foreign

104 The October events appear to have knocked Shaw into fairly uncharacteristic silence: only once in two years' time, at a meeting of the Fabian Society in 1917, where the Bolsheviks were anathematised and vilified (while the Civil War was being waged), did Shaw raise his voice, saying 'We are socialists. The Russian side is our side' – his words were greeted with silence (quoted in Allan Chappelow, *Shaw – 'The Chucker-out'* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1969), p. 231). His first public pronouncements of his support for the Bolsheviks did not appear until April 1919 in an article in *The Labour Leader* (24 April) which asked 'Are we Bolsheviks?'. Shaw definitively answered in the affirmative.

105 Anatolii Lunacharsky, 'Bernard Shaw', in A. V. Lunacharsky, ed., *Collected Works* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1965), VI, pp. 150–3; first published in *Proletarskii avangard* 8 (1931).

Trade), who arrived in London to conduct negotiations on the Anglo-Soviet trade and commercial agreement, pleasantly surprised her with their extensive knowledge of economic science, political professionalism and managerial skills:

We had an hour's oration from each of them – one in French, the other in German – at a little private meeting of Fabians and Krassin struck me as a remarkable personality – quite the most remarkable Russian I have ever met. His account of Soviet industrial organisation as it was and as he wished it to be, is that of the most rigid form of state socialism, the dominant note being 'Working to a Plan', conceived by scientific men and applied without any regard to personal freedom or group autonomy.¹⁰⁶

For Wells all of this was hardly a revelation. During war-time he had a chance to enhance his links with the Russian revolutionaries in exile. He was a regular at the so-called Elders' evenings. In addition to David Elder, his wife Edith, Shaw and many other Freudians and Fabians, the frequent guests at these meetings included Ivan Maisky, who was to return to London as the Soviet Ambassador in 1932; Georgii Chicherin and Ivan Litvinov, appointed in 1917 as the Soviet government representative in Britain, whom Edith Elder's niece, Ivy Low, had married in February 1916.¹⁰⁷ Wells found this circle intellectually stimulating and impressive. In an article published just a couple of months after the October Revolution (15 January 1918), he drew public attention to the fact that the greatest misconception about the Bolsheviks was to see them as an ignorant and illiterate clique of no account: 'when a Bolshevik leader meets a Junker, one might imagine Bottom was meeting Theseus', he wrote.¹⁰⁸ Basing his assertions on his personal contacts and the correspondence with Gorky, he affirmed that the Bolsheviks, contrary to what the British press writes, are

106 Beatrice Webb, letter to H. G. Wells, 8 September 1920, in Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *The Letters of Sidney and Beatrice Webb*, ed. Norman Mackenzie, 3 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), III, 141.

107 Ivan Mikhailovich Maïskiï, *The Maisky Diaries: Red Ambassador to the Court of St James's, 1932–1943*, ed. Gabriel Gorodetsky, trans. Tatiana Sorokina and Oliver Ready (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press 2015), p. xxxiii.

108 H. G. Wells, 'Mr Wells and the Bolsheviks. Some Disregarded Aspects', *Daily Mail*, 15 January 1918.

much better educated than our diplomatists. Our public has to realize this fact. These Bolshevik leaders are men who have been about the world; almost all of them know English and German as well as they do Russian, and are intimately acquainted with the Labour movement, with social and economic questions, and indeed with almost everything that really matters in real politics. But our late Ambassador, I learn, never mastered Russian. Just think what that means. Hardly any of our Foreign Office people know anything of Russian, of the Russian Press, or Russian thought or literature. It is they who are ignorant and limited men, and not these Bolshevik people.¹⁰⁹

Wells himself had no doubts regarding the knowledge and efficiency of these 'Bolshevik people'. Moreover, in many senses they did fall exactly into the category of his enlightened governing elite – the order of the noble Samurai (*A Modern Utopia*), who would lead the uneducated masses in shaping and running the ideal socialist system. The parallels between the two are unambiguously striking; and this, arguably, was one of the most important factors explaining Wells' attraction to Russia and its new regime. Having a distinct penchant for social planning, he did come to regard the Bolshevik government as the real life incarnation of his own fictional intellectual experts. As Henry Arthur Jones argued in his discerning analysis of *Russia in the Shadows* (straight after it was serialised in *The Sunday Express*), there were two main reasons for Wells' positive views of and favourable predictions for the country: his love for the Bolsheviks and his social models, namely a simple consideration that in Russia 'his international theories were being translated into fact'.¹¹⁰

Concerning the second point, Wells' projection of the role and activities of the Bolshevik leaders did offer a fairly close fit for the model function of his Samurai order. *Russia in the Shadows* presented a far from prosperous portrait of the country – a society devastated by the consequences of the Civil War, lying in ruins, chaos and economic degradation: broken trams, roads in disarray, a massive fuel crisis,

every one is shabby; every one seems to be carrying bundles in both Petersburg and Moscow. To walk into some side street in the twilight and see nothing but ill-clad

109 Ibid.

110 Quoted in Brome, p. 58; Krivokapich, p. 57.

figures, all hurrying, all carrying loads, gives one an impression as though the entire population was setting out in flight.¹¹¹

Wells remarked that the whirl of the Bolshevik revolution was overwhelming and all-embracing, smashing everything and devouring everything by the power of its pull.

Against this grim and ominous setting, the exclusive status of the cultural elite was singled out and highlighted. Cultural institutions, according to Wells, were the only ones to resist the forces of decrepitude and economic chaos; the theatre buildings remained intact and untouched by the traces of robbery and devastation:

Art, literature, science, all the refinements and elaboration of life, all that we mean by 'civilisation', were involved in this torrential catastrophe. For a time the stablest thing in Russian culture was the theatre. There stood the theatres, and nobody wanted to loot them or destroy them.¹¹²

The artists and opera singers continued to perform with remarkable devotion, despite hunger, cold and economic deprivation:

the artists were accustomed to meet and work in them and went on meeting and working; the tradition of official subsidies held good. So quite amazingly the Russian dramatic and operatic life kept on through the extremist storm of violence, and keeps on to this day. In Petersburg we found there were more than forty shows going on every night; in Moscow we found very much the same state of affairs. We heard Shalyapin, greatest of actors and singers, in *The Barber of Seville* and in *Chovanchina*; the admirable orchestra was variously attired, but the conductor still held out valiantly in swallow tails and a white tie; we saw a performance of Sadko; we saw Monachof in *The Tsarevitch Alexei* and as Iago in *Othello* (with Madame Gorky – Madame Andreievna – as Desdemona).¹¹³

Special attention was also drawn to the government's persistent support of arts, literature and science, as something not to be neglected even at the time of recession, life-threatening famine, and political unrest. Wells remarked

111 Wells, *Russia in the Shadows*, p. 17.

112 Ibid. p. 35.

113 Ibid. pp. 35–6.

on Gorky's catalytic role in this venture, his efforts in publication of the volumes of world literature in translation and his broad-minded view of the importance of intercultural dialogue and exchange:

He is possessed by a passionate sense of the value of Western science and culture, and by the necessity of preserving the intellectual continuity of Russian life through these dark years of famine and war and social stress, with the general intellectual life of the world. He has found a steady supporter in Lenin. His work illuminates the situation to an extraordinary degree because it collects together a number of significant factors and makes the essentially catastrophic nature of the Russian situation plain.¹¹⁴

Wells was clearly wedded to the idea of a monolithic unity of the intelligentsia and the new socialist order, seeing the former as the vanguard, the executives and the keepers of the latter. In a brief note to Middleton Murry he commented on the prosperous position of cultural luminaries, including Gorky, whom he found 'in pretty good health' and Chaliapin – 'in splendid form'. 'Things are hard – for everyone in Russia', he wrote, 'but all the stuff about a persecution of the intelligentsia is sheer lying.'¹¹⁵ This also partly explains why in the course of all the polemics concerning his Russian essays, Wells was quick to defend his position against Jones and Churchill, but chose not to respond publicly to the critical remarks of Bunin and Merezhkovsky.¹¹⁶ Confronting the latter would have cast a shadow on the integrity of the model, adding an element of unnecessary controversy and fracturing the generic image of the Russian enlightened vanguard he was trying to shape. The Bolsheviks' scandalous expulsion of the most eminent representatives of the country's cultural elite – the

114 Ibid. pp. 32–3.

Wells was appalled by the fact that Russian scientists had been deprived of contacts with the world's science since World War I, and upon his return to England he formed a committee to send up-to-date papers and articles to Gorky, who then distributed them to the libraries (David C. Smith, note to *The Correspondence of H. G. Wells*, III, 56).

115 Wells, letter to Middleton Murry, end of October 1920, *The Correspondence of H. G. Wells*, III, p. 49.

116 At least to the best knowledge of the authors (also confirmed in Krivokapich, p. 71), though Wells may have responded in a private letter.

so-called Philosophers' boats – took place only in two years' time (1922). Meanwhile Wells preferred not to focus on the hostility between the intellectuals and the leaders of the new system. The fact that he was well aware of the strain can hardly be questioned, for according to the testimonials of those present at his rally with the Petrograd *men of letters* (carefully staged by Gorky and his devotees), there were very few who supported Wells' optimism with regard to the new leadership and the country's prospects (the general reaction of the audience was overtly hostile).¹¹⁷ This was also evident from the writer's own note, which he felt obliged to issue in response to the discussion, and which consisted of a tensely dry affirmation of the necessity to disagree on some general philosophical matters:

We all understand the importance and greatness of Russia and we do not doubt that she is on the eve of a noble future. But the Russian and the British characters are very different, and two peoples cannot go quite the same way.¹¹⁸

The example of Chaliapin, whom Wells knew well, and whom he mentioned thriving under the Bolshevik system, would provide another illustration of the growing sense of tension and frustration. By 1921 the artist was already living permanently in the West, though still remaining on perfectly good terms with the English author, whose letter to Koteliansky of 26 September 1921 reads: 'Chaliapin will be dining with us on Tuesday [...] Will you come and dine too?'¹¹⁹

As regards Wells' positive appraisal of Lenin and the Bolsheviks, attributed to him by a number of his critics (including Jones' remark on his 'love

117 A. Damanskaia, 'G. Uells v Petrograde', *Narodnoe delo: Organ Komiteta gruppy sotsialistov-revolutsionerov Severo-Zapadnoi oblasti Rossii* 55 (8 October 1920), p. 2; A. V. Amfiteatrov supported Damanskaia's report by publishing his upsetting recollections of the meeting – 'Bitter Notes' (Aleksandr V. Amfiteatrov, 'Gorestnye zamety', *Novaia russkaia zhizn'* (Gel'singfors) 221 (27 September 1921); 222 (28 September 1921).

118 'Mr Wells in Petrograd', *The Times*, 4 October 1920, p. 10; also in *The Correspondence of H. G. Wells*, III, p. 48.

119 Wells, letter to Samuel Koteliansky, 26 September 1921, *The Correspondence of H. G. Wells*, III, p. 87.

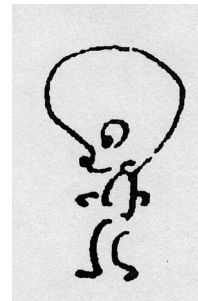
of Bolsheviks'), this was somewhat more complicated than a simple series of wrong-headed misconceptions. When raising his voice in support of the Bolsheviks, Wells was hardly talking from the standpoint of an outspoken communist or an assured Marxist, rather the reverse. He repeatedly disengaged himself from the Bolshevik platform ('I have always regarded Marx as a Bore of the extremist sort' or 'I do not agree with either their views or their methods'¹²⁰); and his distinctly anti-Marxist position was conspicuously (and more than once) affirmed in *Russia in the Shadows*:

I disbelieve in their faith, I ridicule Marx, their prophet, but I understand and respect their spirit. They are – with all their faults, and they have abundant faults – the only possible backbone now to a renascent Russia.¹²¹

When calling the Bolsheviks 'the only possible backbone now to a renascent Russia',¹²² Wells was interested in individuals rather than the system, for it was in these individuals that he saw the agents and the future of his theoretical views. In this respect, Wells' personal encounter with Lenin suggests an illuminating contribution to the point. Prior to his journey, Wells was known to have a fairly negative opinion of the Russian leader. 'Lenin, I assure you is a little beast', he wrote in a letter to Upton Sinclair in early 1919:

Like this
[see to the right, Figure 4. H. G. Wells' drawing of Lenin, letter to Upton Sinclair, early 1919.]

He just wants power and when he gets it he has no use for it. He doesn't eat well, or live prettily, or get children, or care for beautiful things ... Lenin is just a Russian Sidney Webb, a rotten little incessant intriguer ... He (Lenin not Sidney Webb) ought to be killed by solid moral sanitary authority.¹²³



120 Wells, *Russia in the Shadows*, p. 66, 69.

121 Ibid. p. 88.

122 Ibid. p. 88.

123 Wells, letter to Upton Sinclair, early 1919, *The Correspondence of H. G. Wells*, III, p. 3.

Russia in the Shadows, on the other hand, suggested an uncompromising re-shaping of this, strictly speaking, pejorative and denigrating portrait (to that of 'the dreamer in the Kremlin,' 'who almost persuaded me to share his vision'¹²⁴), which involves a reasonable question regarding the grounds and the incentive for such an abrupt transformation in the English writer's point of view.

It would not be inappropriate to suggest that it was Wells' personal conversation with his host in the Kremlin that had a crucial impact on the change in his opinion.¹²⁵ More specifically, the key element which made all the difference to the outcome of the encounter seemed to lie in the angle taken by Lenin in the course of their exchange. The discussion was focused on the aspects relevant to Wells' social models – education and scientific progress – rather than on ideology, methods and the general issues of the doctrine. Wells remarked that he had come to the meeting expecting to confront the committed Marxist and to struggle with the obscure tenets of the communist thesis; but 'found nothing of the sort.'¹²⁶ The two men, instead (led by Lenin's intuition or some sort of thorough preparation), engaged in an extensive discussion on the future of Russia and the course of action required to save the country from the detrimental chaos. For Lenin, as well as for Wells, this was first and foremost the defeat of all reactionary forces, rooted in mass illiteracy, drinking, passivity and social stagnation. Neither man had much care for the inept and materialistically selfish peasant masses;¹²⁷ and both believed in the critical necessity of their enlightenment and education. The conversation also turned onto the prospects of electrification of Russia; and although Wells was initially sceptical of its success (softened by the pleasure of encountering a fellow 'Utopian'¹²⁸), the very emphasis on the progressive use of technology and science made him focus on the positive side of the venture:

124 Wells, *Russia in the Shadows*, p. 136.

125 First pointed out in Krivokapich p. 73.

126 Wells, *Russia in the Shadows*, pp. 129–30.

127 Ibid. p. 136.

128 Ibid. p. 135.

In him I realised 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 formulae 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 realisation was very refreshing. He at least has a vision of a world changed over and planned and built afresh.¹²⁹

Judging from Wells' own subsequent reflections, it was Lenin's command of English, his candour and his belief in technology as a cornerstone of socialist construction that made a critical contribution to Wells' perception of and attraction to the Bolshevik cause. Considering himself 'neither Marxist nor Communist, but a collectivist',¹³⁰ he believed in his own model of reforming the human condition, based on a broad programme of mass enlightenment and the leadership of the educated cultural elite (given his scientific mind-set, he was more a social modeller than a socialist in its proper ideological sense). This was a scientific kind of socialism, rooted in the orderly, knowable and controllable system of which Russia, led by such impressive leaders as Lenin, was a forerunner to a certain degree. When communicating his account of the 1920 visit, he aimed at assembling an objective image of the country, but his conclusions were clearly refracted through the prism of his own attitudes and political concepts. Later on, in 1932, in an address entitled 'Liberalism and the Revolutionary Spirit', Wells affirmed that the use of the term 'samurai' in his theories of an utopian state was rather absurd, but referred to 'a very remarkable parallelism between those Samurai and Lenin's reorganisation of the Communist world'.¹³¹

Generally speaking, one can say that Wells' representation of Russia was based on what in cultural theories is termed an 'attitude – not knowledge' approach, which, arguably, speaks more about the perceiver than the culture which one chooses to perceive. At the same time, one has to admit that the very notion of a 'news without views' representation hardly

129 Ibid. pp. 137–8.

130 Ibid. p. 117.

131 H. G. Wells, 'Liberalism and the Revolutionary Spirit', in H. G. Wells, *After Democracy* (London: Watts and Co, 1932), pp. 1–28 (p. 11).

constitutes a reasonable assumption in the domain of intercultural communication: everybody tends to form their views within a certain mind-set of preconceptions, and an attempt to break the stereotypes essentially means replacing them by the new ones. Given that, it would be largely pointless to discuss whether a sensible degree of an unbiased representation of Russia could have ever been achieved in Wells' projection. Instead, it would be, perhaps, more fulfilling to look at the direction in which he wanted to shift an existing commonly established image, and to reflect on the ways in which his approach was put to use.

It is worth bearing in mind that *Russia in the Shadows* was written at a time when Russia was regarded with a high degree of hostility by its Western neighbours; and Wells' intention to project a more appealing image of the country should not be overlooked. To begin with, what he attempted to achieve was to break the stereotypical framework of mental connotations, within which one would readily come up with the notion of the Russian bear, if asked to continue the line of stock collocations including Spanish Jesuits, German officers and French maids. 'Some years ago I became interested in Russia,' he wrote back in 1914,

I took some pains to inform myself about Russia, and finally I went to the country [...] If a large mass of Western people remain saturated with the idea that the mass of Russian people are savagely brutal [...] and the daily life in Russia a profound misery occasionally enlivened by horrible cruelty, I see no hope [...] People had to clear their heads about Russia. That critical indolence of ours which has left it to foolish sensational novels and ignorant melodramas to build up our conception of this great people, is fraught with disastrous consequences for the whole world.¹³²

Further to the point, from the perspective of social psychology and the theories of identity construction, people are more willing to form an alliance with other cultures when, firstly, there are some positive common characteristics and attributes to share; and, secondly, when the 'other'

132 H. G. Wells, To the Editor, *North Mail*, December 1914, *The Correspondence of H. G. Wells*, II, pp. 406–12 (p. 409, 412).

culture appears different on a positively valued scale.¹³³ Both aspects were manifest in Wells' account of the country, as well as in his projection of the Russian viewpoint. By trying to associate Russia with its intelligentsia rather than the exotically barbaric peasant masses, he was striving to place an appealing hallmark on its identity and the image it enjoyed as a social group. For the same reason, he played down the role of state politics and ideological doctrines in the framework of his affiliations, stressing the absence of any political threat from Russia to Britain (i.e. the socialist revolution spreading to other countries¹³⁴), and conjuring the notion of an intellectual stronghold, capable of preserving and advancing the best aspects of the European tradition in the East.

Wells' expectations of Russia did not come into being, and the prospects of a prosperous liberal utopia he hoped to be realised in this country were not fulfilled. However, he was one of the first Western thinkers to project his vision of its people as key players among those defining the destiny of human civilisation. Focused on the long-term broader perspective and combined with an ability to capture and analyse the dialectics of the events, this vision proved to be instrumental for shaping British attitudes to Russia then and now, and for taking yet another step towards what Wells once lucidly defined as interpreting the 'writing on the Eastern wall of Europe'.¹³⁵

133 John C. Turner, 'Towards A Cognitive Redefinition of the Social Group', in Henri Tajfel, ed., *Social Identity and Intergroup Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 15–40 (p. 26).

134 See, for instance, his views on the impact of Moscow on the miners' strike in Britain in H. G. Wells, *Meanwhile: the Picture of a Lady* (London: George Doran, 1927), p. 45.

135 Wells, *Russia in the Shadows*, p. 153.

