Russia's revolutionary era (1914–21) was marked by tumultuous events: war, revolution, mutinies, famine, political intrigue. Eyewitness accounts of these turbulent times came from people from many countries. Albert Rhys Williams's *Through the Russian Revolution* offered readers a first-hand account of the revolution’s most dramatic times (June 1917 to August 1918) by an American who was not only an eyewitness but also a participant. His account offered distinctive insights into how the revolution was affecting the countryside and Russia's Far East. What began as curiosity about the rising role of socialism and communism in Russia quickly became a lifelong passion, as the revolutionary ideals to which Williams bore witness led him to support the Soviet system to the end of his days.

Born to Welsh immigrant parents in Greenwich, Ohio in 1883, Albert Rhys Williams and his family moved often from Ohio to Pennsylvania to New York during his early life. Williams's father abandoned being a miner to become a Congregationalist minister just before Albert was born. Williams and his brothers would follow in their father's footsteps and become clergy themselves. Williams attended Marietta College in Ohio from 1900 to 1904 before pursuing further studies in theology at Hartford Theological Seminary in Connecticut. When he graduated in 1907, he earned a fellowship for further study in Europe. Williams studied in Germany and England, where he was exposed to labor, poverty, and inequality in a profound way. However, all through his theological education he was perplexed by the religious vocation he had undertaken. More than once during his studies, he doubted his future as a minister.1

Williams became a minister at the Maverick Congregationalist Church in Boston in 1908, but during his six years there he spent much more time working on labor issues, including campaigning for Socialist candidate Eugene V. Debs in 1908.

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1 Marietta College Alumni Records, Marietta College, 1940; email interview with Albert Resis, January 14, 2014; email interview with Eleanor Williams, June 18, 2014; Albert Rhys Williams, “Seminary Diary, 1904–1907,” Albert Rhys Williams Papers 1883–1962, Box 2, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University (hereafter RBML). This is an unprocessed collection of Albert Rhys Williams's papers that contained seventeen boxes of material when I used it in January 2014. My footnotes reflect the way it was organized at that time.
He took part in many notable labor demonstrations, such as the Lawrence Textile Strike of 1912, where he met journalist John Reed for the first time. Williams’s life as a minister in Boston was extremely busy but unsatisfying. His work in the church seemed to bore him, and he still doubted his calling. He dedicated most of his time to working on labor issues in Boston, attending strikes, and holding labor meetings in the church. When the opportunity to go back to Europe came along with the beginning of World War I, he jumped at the chance and took on the role of journalist. He seemed to relish this role for the rest of his life. With this move to Europe for the war, he determined that he would not return to Maverick Congregationalist Church, but rather work as a journalist and writer. In his later notes about his life, he gave a list of reasons why he decided to leave the formal ministry and join the ranks of journalists and socialists. He wrote that he had had a taste of a wider life and found it boring to return to the routine of his church duties. Williams’s second reason was that he was “tired of being good and respectable.” His third reason was that he felt overwhelmed with the work of the church, and it did not leave him time to think or read. His fourth reason was that the war had become the focus of the world, where the most important decisions and activities were taking place, and he wanted to be a part of it. Lastly, Williams remained most concerned about poverty, and the belief that patience and suffering would bring a later reward was ringing hollow in his mind and heart. He felt he needed to take much more direct action to alleviate the suffering of the people.\(^2\) Even though he never seemed to mention it specifically, he seemed to have moved closer to the ideal of Christian Socialism of this era.

Williams’s experience as a journalist was limited, but he had written for a newspaper while a seminary student in Connecticut. Now, though, he was a real war correspondent for the *New York Evening Post* and *Outlook*. After several months in the war zone, where he had many adventures, he returned to the United States and published his first book, *In the Claws of the German Eagle*, in 1917. Many parts of this book had been previously published in newspapers and magazines.\(^3\) While in the war, he had many adventures with German and Belgian troops. The most famous episode was one in which he helped Belgian photographers and soldiers stage a photograph of a German civilian’s execution. In the picture Williams posed as the German in front of a Belgian firing squad. While the photograph was intended as a joke, it was reprinted all across Europe in error, highlighting Belgian atrocities against the Germans. Even though the image is somewhat blurred, it is clearly Williams in the

\(^2\) Albert Rhys Williams, “Leaving Church—Maverick,” Albert Rhys Williams Papers, 1883–1962, Box 1, RBML.

photograph, because the “German civilian” appears in the distinctive overcoat that Williams wore nearly everywhere he went.⁴ Not long after his book was published, he heard of the events in Russia and decided he had to witness them for himself. The February revolution of 1917 in Russia and his growing allegiance to socialist ideas prompted him again to seek journalist credentials for his first adventure to Russia.

By the end of March 1917 he had been hired again by the New York Evening Post and Outlook to report on Russia. The United States government was also organizing an official mission, known as the Root Mission, to observe the events in Russia. Williams briefly considered being part of this mission but preferred to travel as a journalist because he felt that he would have more independence. He departed for Russia in mid-May, stopped off in Stockholm, where he made a brief visit to the Socialist Peace Conference, and arrived in Petrograd in early June. Williams and fellow sympathetic journalist Bessie Beatty arrived at nearly the same time. However they did not know each other and would not meet for several weeks. John Reed and Louise Bryant would not arrive until September.⁵ Not long after Williams arrived in St. Petersburg, he began enthusiastically to learn the Russian language, realizing that in order to interview key leaders and better report his observations, he needed to be able to communicate more effectively. Few other American journalists knew any Russian.

Williams depicted the Petrograd to which he arrived as a great and beautiful city with enticing white nights. His initial goal was to hear and, if possible, meet the leaders of the Provisional Government, who had toppled the Romanov dynasty in the February Revolution. They had characterized their revolution as “socialist,” and it was this that attracted Williams to them. To more radical socialists like Vladimir Lenin, however, the events of February were not the true revolution, and he and his Bolsheviks were still working to achieve that goal. Williams heard Alexander Kerensky speak and met several ministers of the Provisional Government but left feeling as though something were lacking. He found them pleasant enough but wrote that he felt “they were not real representatives of the masses, that they were ‘caliphs of the passing hour.’”⁶ He concluded that the true and future power in Russia rested in the workers’ soviets.

He attended the First All-Russian Congress of Soviets, which had begun in mid-June. In his memoirs Williams recalls a conversation in which he revealed to the president of the congress his true purpose for being in Russia, that while he had come

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⁴ Williams, “With the War Photographers,” 79–83.
“ostensibly as a journalist … the real reason [was] the Revolution. It was irresistible. It drew me hear like a magnet. I am here because I could not stay away.”

Addressing the congress, Williams told the delegates that he represented the socialists of America and that one day very soon all workers in the world would look upon Russia as the model for true revolution and liberation. The First Congress was dominated by Socialist Revolutionaries, but Williams would find that he had more in common with the more extreme agenda of the Bolsheviks. The Bolsheviks held just over 100 of the 900 seats, making them a significant, yet still minority, voice. Despite the fact that Williams’s bourgeois guide described the Bolsheviks as “mostly fools, fanatics, and German agents,” Williams decided to seek more information about them. To do this, he headed to the factories.

In the factories, Williams was greeted warmly. One worker invited the American to his home, where he was well fed and found that his host had an intense admiration for Abraham Lincoln and the Bolsheviks. Playing devil’s advocate, Williams challenged the worker’s beliefs by stating that since the tsar was gone, the revolution was complete. The worker responded that the removal of the tsar was only the beginning and that the workers did not want “to put [the government] into the hands of another ruling class, the bourgeoisie. No matter what name you give it, slavery is the same.” The words of the Bolshevik worker impressed and inspired Williams. It was this view of revolution and socialism that Williams had been seeking on his journey. He arrived in Russia believing that the Provisional Government was the revolution that would shape the future of Russia, but by the end of his first month in the country he had embraced a more radical path.

One of Williams’s most notable experiences was the “July Days” of 1917. In reaction to the chaos of World War I and the Provisional Government, the Bolsheviks along with sympathetic soldiers and sailors attempted to overthrow the weakened temporary government. He wrote about the glory and splendor of the “red columns” dressed in fanciful garb and singing as they proceeded past St. Isaac’s Cathedral on their way to address the First Congress at the Tauride Palace. Williams depicted this spontaneous demonstration in the most positive terms. He noted that there were thousands of banners with Bolshevik slogans on them, “so many that even the Bolsheviks were surprised.” It was here, too, that Williams was particularly harsh toward the Root Mission for its failure to see the country changing right before its eyes. On July 1, as the Root Mission attended a mass at Kazan Cathedral, they were confronted with massive protests along Nevsky Prospekt. Williams wrote, “Blind men! They did not see that faith that day was not in the mass within those musty

7 Ibid., 14.
8 Ibid., 15.
9 Ibid., 16.
10 Ibid., 22.
walls, but in the masses without.” 11 This uprising would result in 56 people being killed and more than 650 wounded, according to Williams. Williams remarked that “three times that night our feet slipped in blood on the ground.” 12

Fellow American journalist Bessie Beatty viewed these events from a different part of Petrograd. She was on Nevsky Prospekt near the Hotel Europe when she saw armed Red Guards patrolling the streets. Beatty also observed the procession of banners in support of the Bolshevik cause, but it was the real threat of violence that dominated her thoughts. Bursts of gunfire up and down Nevsky Prospekt kept her from being able to reach the Hotel Europe. She was shoved to the street and into a doorway before she could find refuge in the hotel. She noted that many on the street felt that a civil war was beginning and that “the streets will run [with] blood before this thing is over.” 13

Like Williams, Russian observer and Socialist Revolutionary Nikolai Sukhanov also witnessed the events of the July Days mostly from the Tauride Palace. Sukhanov writes, “At that time, in the early morning of July 8th, lying on my sofa, I listened to [Anatoly] Lunacharsky’s account in utter dejection. The devilish grimacing mask of the July Days, looming over me like a nightmare, passed before my eyes. So then, there had been not only a spontaneous course of events but a malevolent political blunder.” 14 For Sukhanov, the radicals in the First Congress had missed a grand opportunity to seize power. Worse yet, in the weeks to come Kerensky’s Provisional Government, which Sukhanov had described as having once been a true defender of democracy, was now engaged in conservative reaction in order to preserve the Provisional Government itself.

After his very hectic first few weeks in Russia and the conclusion of the events of July, Williams left Petrograd to spend about a month in the countryside to see how the revolution and, in particular, the Bolsheviks were viewed outside of the capital. Williams spent a month with Mikhail Petrovich Yanishev in Spasskoye, where he seemed to fall in love with the Russian countryside. Yanishev, having once been in America, was a good guide to the culture, food, religion, and daily life of ordinary Russia. While most viewed provincial Russia as traditional, Yanishev, a Bolshevik, proclaimed that the peasantry shared Lenin’s vision. 15 When Williams returned to Petrograd in September, the country was on the verge of another revolution. Williams was warmly greeted by his Russian comrades, as they looked for support from foreign

11 Ibid., 22.
15 Williams, Through the Russian Revolution, 24–27.
radicals. It was during this tumultuous summer that Williams seems to have solidified his views on Russia, the Provisional Government, and the Bolsheviks.

Williams’s account takes him through the October Revolution itself. He describes how he moved from building to building, close by such main players as Lenin and Leon Trotsky. On November 7 he found himself at the Smolny Institute, where there was a hustle and bustle of soldiers, cars, and officials as power changed hands. While many observers tried to deny that a revolution was coming, Williams asserted that they “may as well refuse to recognize a tidal wave, or an erupting volcano as to refuse to recognize this Revolution.” He wrote with great excitement about the movement of the revolution across the city from Smolny to the streets leading to the Winter Palace. Williams seemed excited by the chaos and the new society the revolution promised to bring. With profound respect he records how, as the Bolshevik throngs reached the Winter Palace, some were tempted to loot its treasures but were stopped by revolutionary commanders, who declared, “Take nothing. The Revolution forbids it. No looting. This is the property of the people.”

As the revolution continued to unfold, Williams and other sympathetic journalists found themselves in trucks roaming through Petrograd helping to distribute pamphlets to tell the people of the city that the Provisional Government had fallen and the Bolsheviks were in power. As the Bolsheviks took control, Williams observed their interactions, their exhaustion and confusion, and their debates about what to do next, for example, how to confront the White opposition that was forming or whether Russia should continue fighting in the war. The latter discussion was particularly heated, as a central element of Lenin’s mission was to withdraw Russia from the First World War, which he viewed as a war of imperialism. This debate would go on for weeks in December 1917 and January 1918, eventually resulting in the signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918.

In early 1918, Williams worked with several other people, including Reed, on Bolshevik propaganda that was intended for distribution in Germany. As Russia left the war, the Bolsheviks hoped for the rise in Germany of radical parties, worker discontent, and unrest on the streets. Williams helped draft the pamphlets that would be sent to Germany to help incite a revolution like the one in Russia.

As the Civil War broke out in Russia, Williams tried to volunteer for the Red Army, which had recently been placed under the control of Trotsky. However, Lenin and Trotsky believed he should help form an international brigade of foreign soldiers who would fight on behalf of the Bolsheviks. Williams took up this assignment with enthusiasm. By the spring of 1918, many of the Americans in Russia were leaving.

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16 Ibid., 40.
17 Ibid., 69.
Williams stayed a bit longer, but as the civil war intensified in early summer 1918, he set off for the United States via Siberia.\(^\text{19}\)

Williams secured two letters from Lenin to guarantee his safety as he crossed Siberia on his way to Vladivostok. Siberia was not fully under Bolshevik control, with White forces holding key territory and often disrupting train service. His journey was long and turbulent, but he arrived safely in Vladivostok, only to find his path home blocked once again, this time by American soldiers who had arrived in the Far East preparing to intervene in the Civil War. Williams was delayed in Vladivostok for weeks. His account of his time in Vladivostok illuminates widespread popular support for the Bolsheviks as well as the role of newly freed prisoners in the first phases of the Civil War. Williams spent a lot of time talking to young Bolshevik soldiers, listening to them sing, and photographing them. The young soldiers were intrigued by Williams, an American so far from home who supported their cause, in contrast to the American soldiers interventionists flooding into the port. By the time Williams was finally able to leave, he had run out of money. He had to borrow money from Bolshevik soldiers to travel to China in an attempt to secure passage to Hawaii and eventually to San Francisco. However, his passage from China was also delayed. He spent nearly another month waiting in Shanghai. He had to send a telegram to his friend and fellow writer Upton Sinclair in order to get more money to pay for the ship’s passage to Hawaii. Once he secured the money, he departed for the United States.\(^\text{20}\)

Williams carried a large trunk full of papers, notes, placards, and more as he traveled across Siberia and boarded the ship in Shanghai. When he arrived in Hawaii, representatives from the US Naval Intelligence Division were there to greet him. Based on articles Williams had published in the *New York Evening Post*, *Outlook*, and other periodicals, as well as reports by Americans who had encountered him in Russia, Williams had been identified as a communist sympathizer. The Intelligence Division confiscated his materials and sent him on to San Francisco with orders to appear in Washington, DC within a few weeks. By the time he reached San Francisco, it was early September 1918, and he made his way to Washington to be interviewed by various departments of the United States government.

The confiscation of his papers was a great hardship for Williams that significantly altered his plans once back in the United States.\(^\text{21}\) He had planned to write an account of his time in the Russian Revolution, but without these notes, manuscripts, and other documents, he did not feel capable of doing this. While he waited for the return of


his papers, he wrote two books. One was a short pamphlet called *The Bolsheviks and the Soviets: The Present Government of Russia, What the Soviets Have Done, Difficulties the Soviets Faced, Six Charges Against the Soviets, the Soviet Leaders and the Bolsheviks, the Russians and America* that was published in 1919 by the Rand School. It consists of a set of questions and answers that Williams thought people who knew nothing of Russia and its revolution would ask. He tried to answer these questions. The other book, which came out later in 1919, was called *Lenin: The Man and His Work*. This work included impressions of Lenin from American Red Cross official Colonel Raymond Robins and British journalist Arthur Ransome. While not a traditional biography, it was perhaps the first biographical treatment of Lenin in English. It was during this time, though, that other observers of the Russian Revolution, like Reed, Bryant, Beatty, and others were publishing their firsthand accounts. Interest in Russia’s revolution was high in 1918 and 1919.\(^\text{22}\)

In February 1919, Williams was called to testify before the Overman Committee in the US Senate. During this hearing, and in the press, he was depicted as a friend of other known radicals such as John Reed and Louise Bryant (who also testified before the committee) and a Soviet apologist. Nearly all of the questions related to the role of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) as an agent of Bolshevik propaganda and whether Williams advocated a Bolshevik system in the United States. Williams gave a favorable account of the Soviet ideal and contested allegations that the Bolsheviks had been engaged in massacres. The exchange between Williams and several senators on the committee was seemingly endless and often humorous. Williams frequently sparred with the senators and was unapologetic for his support of the Bolsheviks despite the political reality of the Red Scare. The senators seemed frustrated by Williams’ open acknowledgement of his bias. After the hearings, Williams spent much of 1919 on speaking tours and promoting his book on Lenin.\(^\text{23}\)

In 1921, with the return of his confiscated personal papers, Williams was finally able to complete and publish his account of his experiences of 1917–18, *Through the Russian Revolution*. Unfortunately, by that time interest in the revolution had fallen off and the market had been saturated by more famous works, such as Reed’s *Ten Days that Shook the World*. Williams’s book did not get the attention that he thought it deserved, though a review in the *American Bar Association Journal* noted of his book that “[o]f the books from the pens of friends of the Russian revolution this is among the best.”\(^\text{24}\) One prominent and sympathetic reviewer, Floyd Dell, wrote of how Williams had made his way through World War I and the Russian Revolution in a dress suit


\(^{23}\) Kunitz, “Biographical Sketch,” lxxxxvi–c.

despite the trials and tribulations he encountered. Dell concluded that Williams’s chapter “Red Funeral” was “one of the most poignant and beautiful chapters of modern prose.”

Williams did not linger long in the United States. In 1922, he returned to Russia, where he would spend the next six years investigating the lives of Russian peasants after the revolution. During this time, Williams married Lucita Squier, an American screenwriter who had arrived Russia in 1922 as part of a Quaker mission to make a film about relief efforts in some of the areas hardest hit by the famine. Williams and Squier had met a few years earlier in the United States, but married only in 1923, at an official marriage office of the new Soviet government. Squier worked with the Quakers on their documentary but would often leave Russia for London, where she would work as a screenwriter to earn money that the newlyweds badly needed. During these years, Williams published a handful of articles in American periodicals about his adventures in Russia. Williams and Squier moved often and saw much of the country. Whether because of the rudimentary state of the transportation and communication systems or because, as some speculated, Williams wanted to “get lost” in Russia, he was so out of touch with friends and family that at one point there was even a rumor that he had died in a remote part of Russia. In 1928, the couple returned to the United States and Williams published his new book on Russia, The Russian Land, perhaps one of his most insightful works about the life and world of ordinary Russians. The following year the couple’s only child, Rhys Williams, was born.

For most of the 1930s, Williams continued to argue strongly for a more moderate approach to the Soviet regime. He had always been an advocate, along with Raymond Robins, for diplomatic recognition of the Soviet Union. In 1930–31, he accompanied a delegation of US senators, including Alben Barkley of Kentucky (later to serve as vice president under Harry Truman), to view the new Soviet Union under Stalin as the United States considered official recognition. In 1937, Williams again returned to the Soviet Union, where he witnessed the show trials of the Purges. Despite this experience, he still held positive views of the Soviet regime. In that same year, he published a book titled The Soviets, organized around eighty-eight questions and answers addressing every facet of Soviet life and government in astounding detail.

As World War II began, many Americans wanted to know more about their new ally in the fight against fascism. Even though Williams was often accused of being an apologist for the Soviet government, he was asked to write another account about the USSR for a general audience. In this work, The Russians: The Land, The People, and Why They Fight, published in 1943, he gave an overview of some prominent features

26 “Biographical Sketch,” Kunitz Papers, RBML.
27 Albert Rhys Williams, “The Senators Visit the Soviet Villages” Box 9, RBML.
of Russian and Soviet life. His detailed accounts provided much for the American reader to consider as the war with fascism dominated their lives. Both of these books were generally well reviewed as extremely valuable, if not a bit overly positive.28

From 1945 to the end of his life, in 1962, Williams felt forgotten by the Soviet Union and harassed by American officials. The later years of Stalin’s reign were marked by increased tensions with the United States. Even though Williams had been a favorite American of the Soviet regime for three decades after the revolution, this friendliness cooled as the Cold War intensified. With the rise of the second Red Scare, Williams was again a target of investigation for his enduring defense of the Soviet regime. While he did face questioning, he did not face the blacklisting that so many other Americans did. This was probably because he was a known quantity, a bit older, and he did not work in any of the key industries like education, government, or entertainment that were the targets of the US government at this time.29

In 1957, the Soviets made their successful Sputnik launch. This had repercussions across the world, including the United States. Williams wrote a very positive review of the launch in early 1958 that prompted a re-establishment of positive relations with the Soviet regime, now under the control of Nikita Khrushchev. In 1959, Williams was invited to return to the Soviet Union one last time on a goodwill tour commemorating the success of the Sputnik launch. The trip, which included his wife, Lucita, their son, Rhys, and Rhys’s wife, Eleanor, was tremendously successful; it also provided Williams an opportunity to seek special medical care for his recently diagnosed leukemia. Williams’s warm reception in the USSR did much to assuage his hurt at having been ignored in later life and reinvigorated his work on a much more extensive account of his revolutionary experience.

In his last years Williams worked with his wife and several research assistants in the United States and Soviet Union to write a more detailed version of Through the Russian Revolution, but he died in February 1962 before completing the book. Williams’s wife and assistants finished the work in 1969 and published it under the title Journey into Revolution: Petrograd, 1917–1918. Lucita Williams would maintain her contacts with Soviet academics and officials until her death in 1980. In 1977, she sent many of her husband’s papers to the Lenin Library in Moscow as part of the sixtieth-anniversary celebration of the Russian Revolution.

Williams’ dedication to the Soviet regime lasted his entire life and was reflected in his publications and private writings. The book that brought him the most prominence in the minds of those interested in the Russian Revolution, however, was Through the Russian Revolution. It is one of a small number of books by Americans who were on the ground, observing and even taking part in the revolution.


29 “Biographical Sketch,” Kunitz Papers, RBML.
Suggested Additional Reading


Francis, David R. *Russia from the American Embassy, April 1916–November 1918*. New York: Charles Scribner’s, 1921.


