

Editor's Introduction

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A popular revolt broke out in Petrograd, Russia, on February 23–27, 1917. It grew rapidly into a full revolution that overthrew the tsarist monarchy, replacing it by a Provisional Government that was officially created a few weeks later on March 2. The United States ambassador to Russia, David R. Francis, successfully pushed his government to be the first state to recognize the new regime diplomatically, which it did on March 9 (22).¹ This quickly led President Woodrow Wilson to take various steps to facilitate the Russian war effort. One of these was the creation of a special delegation to go to Russia to study the situation there and report back. Recognizing the importance of Russian socialists in the politics of the time, he realized that having a prominent American socialist in the group—even a moderate one—could be useful. Charles Edward Russell was an attractive choice. While famous as a leftist, socialist, activist, and author, in early 1917 he emerged among American socialists as a major supporter of the American war effort, something many American socialists of the time opposed.

Russell was a major intellectual figure and writer in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century America. He was a journalist, newspaper editor, political activist, and author of many books and articles about issues of the time. His was a very diverse but also very active life. His writing on social and economic issues made him famous as one of the “muckrakers” of the time, as Theodore Roosevelt called them. He became active in the American socialist movement and was a prominent member of the American socialist party from 1908 to 1917, including being a socialist candidate in New York four times for either state governor or US senator. In 1917, however, he was one of the socialists thrown out of the party for supporting American entry into the war, which then opened another avenue of notable activity, as we will see in this book.

¹ I have changed all the dating from the Gregorian calendar that he used to the Julian calendar—the calendar in use in Russia in 1917. The latter, thirteen days behind the former, was still in use in 1917 Russia, and is increasingly used in most writing today about the Russian Revolution of 1917. One result is that the original 1917 revolution is known as both the February Revolution and the March Revolution, and the Bolshevik acquisition of power is known as both the October Revolution and the November Revolution in writings by Americans and other Westerners, depending on the calendar they used. The Bolshevik regime changed the Russian calendar to the Gregorian one in early 1917.

He later won the Pulitzer Prize for his 1928 book *The American Orchestra and Theodore Thomas*, the only Pulitzer Prize ever awarded for the biography of a musician! Russell was one of the founders, an officer, and a lifetime member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, even though he was white, and was given notable praise by it at his death in 1941. He was a fascinating, important figure, famous in his time in many ways.²

Born and raised in Davenport, Iowa, Russell worked in the local newspaper under his father, and then finally moved to New York City in 1886. He quickly built a notable reputation, partly based on innovative, investigative reporting about political and social issues. He also became a famous reform advocate. His pre-1917 writing became especially famous after his investigation of New York City's Trinity Church's corruption as a slum landlord, but he also wrote about railroad abuses, stockyard workers, and other topics that made his reputation as a major reformer with socialist leanings, although he was not among the more radical socialists of the time. Therefore, President Woodrow Wilson could add him as the "leftist" in the official American delegation to Russia in 1917. His experience there had a big impact, leading to the production of this book, and it also led to other Russia-related activities, including his participation in a 1917 American film about the revolution, *The Fall of the Romanoffs*.³ After his involvement in Russia ended, he continued to be politically active and the author of numerous books and articles on a wide range of topics. Despite often calling himself and being called by others a socialist, and participating in a socialist party, he was not so much opposed to capitalism as much as to the extreme concentration of wealth and the resulting power of only a few. His focus was on creating more equal opportunity for everyone.

Russell's *Unchained Russia* book told readers a great deal about Russia in mid-1917. He starts by stating that the people of the US and Russia did not understand each other at that time, a theme that was correct and runs throughout the book. He stresses immediately, page one, that the revolution was economic as well as political, which reflected both a better-than-normal understanding of the revolution in 1917 and his own political-economic and pro-labor background. It also gave him an opportunity

² Many authors and works, on many subjects, reference Russell's writing. Two particularly relevant ones for our subject, but very different in size, might be mentioned. One is Robert Miraldi, *The Pen is Mightier: The Muckraking Life of Charles Edward Russell* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), which speaks about the central part of his life from 1889, when he was 29, to 1918, when he was still only 59, with many years yet to live and write. Another especially informative document is a more recent (2020), lengthy Wikipedia piece, "Charles Edward Russell," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Edward_Russell. In addition to a good biographical essay, it identifies thirty-two of his books, gives a long list of selected articles, names the one 1917 film that he participated in, and provides a References and a Sources section. Miraldi provides the same list of books and a year by year list of magazine articles.

³ A remarkable early film which started in 1917 and had revised versions following that.

to emphasize the importance of sweeping political change and social-economic reform in the US as well as in Russia. However, he notes that when many Americans saw that what was happening in Russia was social-economic change as well as basic political democracy, “instinctively we shied away.”⁴ The opening pages make clear his own relative political and economic radicalism in the US at that time, which, as we have noted, had played a role in his selection to be on the American delegation.

The image of revolutionary Russia that he communicated was a complex, somewhat contradictory one. Early, in Chapter I, he lays out the popular foreign image of drunken peasants and how that shaped our attitude as the revolution progressed and influenced foreign newspaper accounts. He notes, however, that Russians had achieved much social and economic change already, but that “our” newspapers focused more on the drunken peasants story than on what ordinary Russians were achieving. We were profoundly misinformed, he argues. He blames that image not on the American correspondents who were there, but on German press agents deliberately developing false stories that seemed believable. This stress on the role of German agents in various events runs for several pages here and is repeated from time to time, and perhaps is the book's chief weakness. It should be largely ignored by modern readers except as an example of widespread American thought of the times, especially after our entry into the war. However, Russell does assert with significant accuracy the sacredness of the revolution to ordinary Russians of the time and recognizes that so many saw it as the beginning of a new era for them, and for humanity generally, and that the new order should be based on workers and peasants. He agreed! He does criticize, again correctly, that the Allied governments did not generally recognize that belief.

Russell notes early on that the real power in Russia rested with the Soviets, first the Petrograd Soviet and then its later reconstructions, including the first All-Russian Congress of Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies on July 1–3 (Russian calendar), which he observed. Indeed, he apparently met frequently with the Russian moderate socialists who, in effect, controlled the Russian government and policies in mid-1917, many of whom are rarely mentioned in Western books written at the same time he wrote his, and even more rarely after the Bolsheviks seized power and civil war broke out. He talked with important Soviet leaders of 1917, such as Irakli Tsereteli, Nikolai Chkheidze, and Mikhail Skobelev, among others, and even with the recently arrived but rapidly rising Leon Trotsky.⁵ He gives us good, brief accounts of these people, as this Americans in Revolutionary Russia series of books generally does—a picture

⁴ Charles Edward Russell, *Unchained Russia* (New York: D. Appleton, 1918), 3.

⁵ Tsereteli, Chkheidze, and Skobelev were especially important leaders from March to October 1917, and some might say they actually governed Russia at the time Russell was there—Chkheidze and Tsereteli through their leadership of the Petrograd Soviet, Skobelev in his role as one of the Soviet and government leaders. Trotsky had just returned from exile in the United States and was at the beginning of his rise to effective leadership of the radical left,

of what Russia and its revolution seemed to be at the time, not the kind of heavily revised versions that followed later. At the same time, he had a high admiration for ordinary Russians and a belief that the Soviets could create a complete democracy in Russia, a democracy stripped down to its plainest terms and accepted unflinchingly.

He was very struck by important symbols of revolution and a changed world. This comes up regularly, such as in his description of the Congress of Soviets, which he had observed. He is not just describing a Russian event, however, but giving a vision of a new world. Indeed, he devotes significant space to celebrating the Russian Revolution not only as a major change for Russia, but also as a new symbol of worldwide change. That included his early notation of the symbolism of the red flag adopted in 1917 Russia, significantly before the Bolsheviks took over and used it as theirs. Indeed, much of the book reflects the Russian and Western optimism of the time that a turn from a horrendous old regime toward a better new world had begun. That fit with the perspectives, even reality, of 1917. Being aware of that is useful to a modern reader in that it reflects a very popular belief at the time, especially in the US after our entry into the war.

He also dwells on and repeats the most negative depictions of tsarist officials. He gives a very negative picture of the old regime, and especially the behavior of officials and military officers. His account of the tsarist police in Chapter IV is perhaps a bit exaggerated, but it does reflect a reality that existed, although he probably overstates the ability and extent of the old police.

Russell spent railroad time in Siberia and in other parts of the countryside, and he gives interesting descriptions of ordinary Russians that he met along the way. Indeed, his discussion of railroads, especially the Trans-Siberian in Chapter V, is overall quite good, noting that in some respects the Russian railroads were better than the American ones and in other ways were worse than American ones, and why. He gives a good account of the railway problems and issues, reflecting the American concern about the need for the railroads in the Russian war effort. The US put significant effort into keeping the railroads working, in part because it was essential to getting US supplies and support to the Russian government and its war effort. His travel across Russia—from the Pacific to Petrograd and Moscow and then back again—also provided him some interesting possibilities for descriptions of rural Russia. He even gives a good description of Lake Baikal when frozen over in winter and the issues that caused, something that also was of importance to the US. He would have learned that from the Russians there, given that he was in the Lake Baikal region in summer, not winter.

Russell gives a full chapter to women and stresses the role they played. He, like most visitors who wrote, had a great interest in the subject of the Provisional Gov-

soon to be head of the Petrograd Soviet and then a top leader of the Bolshevik government at the time Russell wrote this book.

ernment giving women universal and equal voting rights, making Russia the first major power to do that. He not only focused on women in the February Revolution and certain significant ones such as “Mother Catherine” and Maria Spiridonova, but also on women who participated in various meetings, worked on various jobs (such as railroads), and helped reshape society generally. He adds to that a section on women’s military service, especially Maria Botchkareva and the newly created women’s battalions, a subject that aroused the interest of many visitors.

In the final two chapters he turns increasingly to the Bolsheviks, who were not yet in power when he was there, but were by the time he returned home and wrote the book, which came out in early 1918. These would have been very important topics for his readers. His chapter on Bolsheviks gives an interesting, and reasonably good, account of the early Western attitude toward Bolsheviks. He viewed the Bolsheviks’ success as perhaps inevitable in the Russia of the time: “Instead of an abnormal product the Bolshevik was in Russia the most natural fruitage” of the old regime.⁶ Few people would have used that terminology, perhaps, but it fit with his view of the Bolsheviks as a passing phenomenon. Actually, it is a pretty good reflection of the initial optimism of many at the time that the Bolshevik seizure of power was a temporary thing. Although he disliked the Bolsheviks and their seizure of power, he retained confidence that broader democracy would prevail.

Overall, he writes a quite optimistic view of the revolution, not only as an event in and of itself, but for the future of world politics. Indeed, he argues, reflecting both his admiration for the revolution and his own political hopes for significant change in the United States, that “the Russian Revolutionists had shot far beyond political democracy; they aimed at industrial democracy no less.”⁷

Perhaps I should close this introduction with a few notes about my editing, as I tried to make it more readable in our times. I have changed all the dating from the Gregorian calendar that he used to the Julian calendar, the one in use in Russia in 1917, as mentioned in a footnote earlier. The other major revision is that I changed his frequent use of the word “slavery” to “serfdom,” which is what had existed in Russia. Serfdom did impose restrictions on peasants, but they also were partially free and certainly were not slaves in the American sense. Going back and forth between the two terms was common for foreigners, especially Americans writing at that time. I also changed his use of the word “czar” (widely used at the time in the West) to the more accurate and modern spelling “tsar.” He refers to Bloody Sunday in 1905 Russia as Bloody Monday, and I have changed all of those. He may be pulling the term from a nineteenth century American event known as Bloody Monday. Once in a while I add a word in parentheses to make the sentence or subject clearer. Lastly,

⁶ Russell, *Unchained Russia*, 253.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 2–3.

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Suggested Further Reading

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