Petrograd During the Early Part of 1919

By Arthur Ransome

ON January 30, a party of newspaper correspondents, 2 Norwegians, a Swede and myself, left Stockholm to go into Russia. We travelled with the members of the Soviet Government's Legation, headed by Vorovsky and Litvinov, who were going home after the breaking off of official relations by Sweden. Some months earlier I had got leave from the Bolsheviks to go into Russia to get further material for my history of the revolution, but at the last moment there was opposition and it seemed likely that I should be refused permission. Fortunately, however, a copy of the *Morning Post* reached Stockholm, containing a report of a lecture by Mr. Lockhart in which he had said that as I had been out of Russia for six months I had no right to speak of conditions there. Armed with this I argued that it would be very unfair if I were not allowed to come and see things for myself. I had no further difficulties.

We crossed by boat to Abo, grinding our way through the ice, and then travelled by rail to the Russian frontier, taking several days over the journey owing to delays variously explained by the Finnish authorities. We were told that the Russian White Guards had planned an attack on the train. Litvinov, half-smiling, wondered if they were purposely giving time to the White Guards to organize such an attack. Several nervous folk inclined to that opinion. But at Viborg we were told that there were grave disorders in Petrograd and that the Finns did not wish to fling us into the middle of a scrimmage. Then some one obtained a newspaper and we read a detailed account of what was happening. This account was, as I learnt on my return, duly telegraphed to England like much other news of a similar character. There had been a serious revolt in Petrograd. The Semenovsky regiment had gone over to the mutineers, who had seized the town. The Government, however, had escaped to Kronstadt, whence they were bombarding Petrograd with naval guns.

This sounded fairly lively, but there was nothing to be done, so we finished up the chess tournament we had begun on the boat. An Esthonian won it, and I was second, by reason of a lucky win over Litvinov, who is really a better player. By Sunday night we reached Terijoki and on Monday moved slowly to the frontier of Finland close to Bieloostrov. A squad of Finnish soldiers was waiting, excluding everybody from the station and seeing that no dangerous revolutionary should break away on Finnish territory. There were no horses, but three hand sledges were brought, and we piled the luggage on them, and then set off to walk to the frontier duly convoyed by the Finns. A Finnish lieutenant walked at the head of the procession, chatting good-humouredly in Swedish and German, much as a man might think it worth while to be kind to a crowd of unfortunates just about to be flung into a boiling cauldron. We walked a few hundred yards along the line and then turned into a road deep in snow through a little bare wood, and so down to the little wooden bridge over the narrow frozen stream that separates Finland from Russia. The bridge, not twenty yards across, has a toll bar at each end, two sentry boxes and two sentries. On the Russian side the bar was the familiar black and white of the old Russian Empire, with a sentry box to match. The Finns seemingly had not yet had time to paint their bar and box.

The Finns lifted their toll bar, and the Finnish officer leading our escort walked solemnly to the middle of the bridge. Then the luggage was dumped there, while we stood watching the trembling of the rickety little bridge under the weight of our belongings, for we were all taking in with us as much food as we decently could. We were none of us allowed on the bridge until an officer and a few men had come down to meet us on the Russian side. Only little Nina, Vorovsky's daughter, about ten years old, chattering Swedish with the Finns, got leave from them, and shyly, step by step, went down the other side of the bridge and struck up acquaintance with the soldier of the Red Army who stood there, gun in hand, and obligingly bent to show her the sign, set in his hat, of the crossed sickle and banner of the Peasants' and Workmen's Republic. At last the Finnish lieutenant took the list of his prisoners and called out the names "Vorovsky, wife and one bairn," looking laughingly over his shoulder at Nina flirting with the sentry. Then "Litvinov," and so on through all the Russians, about thirty of them. We four visitors, Grimlund the Swede, Puntervald and Stang, the Norwegians, and I, came last. At last, after a general shout of farewell, and "Helse Finland" from Nina, the Finns turned and went back into their civilization and we went forward into the new struggling civilization of Russia. Crossing that bridge we passed from one philosophy to another, from one extreme of the class struggle to the other, from a dictatorship of the bourgeoisie to a dictatorship of the proletariat.

The contrast was noticeable at once. On the Finnish side of the frontier we had seen the grandiose new frontier station, much larger than could possible be needed, but quite a good expression of the spirit of the new Finland. On the Russian side we came to the same grey old wooden station known to all passengers to and from Russia for polyglot profanity and passport difficulties. There were no porters, which was not surprising because there is barbed wire and an extremely hostile sort of neutrality along the frontier and traffic across has practically ceased. In the buffet, which was very cold, no food could be bought. The long tables once laden with caviare and other *zakuski* were bare. There was, however, a samovar, and we bought tea at sixty kopeks a glass and lumps of sugar at two roubles fifty each. We took our tea into the inner passport room, where I think a stove must have been burning the day before, and there made some sort of a meal off some of Puntervald's Swedish hard-bread. It is difficult to me to express the curious mixture of depression and exhilaration that was given to the party by this derelict starving station combined with the feeling that we were no longer under guard but could do more or less as we liked. I split the party into two factions, of which one wept while the other sang. Madame Vorovsky, who had not been in Russia since the first revolution, frankly wept, but she wept still more in Moscow where she found that even as the wife of a high official of the Government she enjoyed no privileges which would save her from the hardships of the population. But the younger members of the party, together with Litvinov, found their spirits irrepressibly rising in spite of having no dinner. They walked about the village, played with the children, and sang, not revolutionary songs, but just joly songs, any songs that came into their heads. When at last the train came to take us into Petrograd, and we found that the carriages were unheated, somebody got out a mandoline and we kept ourselves warm by dancing. At the same time I was sorry for the five children who were with us, knowing that a country simultaneously suffering war, blockade and revolution is not a good place for childhood. But they had caught the mood of their parents, revolutionaries going home to their revolution, and trotted excitedly up and down the carriage or anchored themselves momentarily, first on one person's knee and then on another's.

It was dusk when we reached Petrograd. The Finland Station, of course, was nearly deserted, but here there were four porters, who charged two hundred and fifty roubles for shifting the luggage of the party from one end of the platform to the other. We ourselves loaded it into the motor lorry sent to meet us, as at Bieloostrov we had loaded it into the van. There was a long time to wait while rooms were being allotted to us in various hotels, and with several others I walked outside the station to question people about the mutiny and the bombardment of which we have heard in Finland. Nobody knew anything about it. As soon as the rooms were allotted and I knew that I had been lucky enough to get one in Astoria, I drove off across the frozen river by the Liteini Bridge. The trams were running. The town seemed absolutely quiet, and away down the river I saw once again in the dark, which is never quite dark because of the snow, the dim shape of the fortress, and passed one by one the landmarks I had come to know so well during the last six years —the Summer Garden, the British Embassy, and the great Palace Square where I had seen armoured cars flaunting about during the July rising, soldiers camping during the hysterical days of the Kornilov affair and, earlier, Kornilov himself reviewing the Junkers. My mind went further back to the March revolution, and I saw once more the picket fire of the revolutionaries at the corner that night when the remains of the Czar's Government were still frantically printing proclamations ordering the people to go home, at the very moment while they themselves were being besieged in the Admiralty. Then it flung itself further back still, to the day of the declaration of war, when I saw this same square filled with people, while the Czar came out for a moment on the Palace balcony. By that time we were pulling up at the Astoria and I had to turn my mind to something else.

I inquired for a meal, and found that no food was to be had in the hotel, but they could supply hot water. Then, to get an appetite for sleep, I went out for a short walk, though I did not much like doing so with nothing but an English passport, and with no papers to show that I had any right to be there. I had like the other foreigners, been promised such papers but had not yet received them. I went round to the Regina, which used to be one of the best hotels in the town, but those of us who had rooms there were complaining so bitterly that I did not stay with them, but went off along the Moika to the Nevsky and so back to my own hotel. The streets, like the hotel, were only half lit, and hardly any of the houses had a lighted window. In the old sheepskin coat I had worn on the front and in my high fur hat, I felt like some ghost of the old regime visiting a town long dead. The silence and emptiness of the streets contributed to this effect. Still, the few people I met or passed were talking cheerfully together and the rare