

An Early Sociologist, Edward Alsworth Ross, Describes the Russian Revolution of 1917

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Abstract

This article examines Edward Alsworth Ross's reflections on the Russian Revolution of 1917, derived from his six-month journey through Russia during this pivotal period. A renowned sociologist, Ross focused on the social and cultural transformations, offering vivid descriptions of ordinary Russians rather than political figures or events. His account highlights interactions with diverse populations and documents the societal changes amid the revolution. Ross's observations on women's suffrage, labor relations, and ethnic identities underscore his progressive outlook and comparative analysis with the United States. The article contextualizes Ross's writings as precursors to later social histories, emphasizing their value for understanding revolutionary Russia.

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Rex A. Wade

“The Russian, with his sociable nature,” wrote Edward Alsworth Ross, “takes a lively interest in what happens to his fellow-man, so when I am trying to make myself understood at a buffet, some one is sure to come to my rescue with English or French. Indeed, this *camaraderie* and good will is the outstanding feature of my twenty thousand miles of travel in Russia.” Thus Ross, a noted American sociologist and scholar, summarized his six months in Russia during the second half of 1917. Nearly six and a half feet tall and considered handsome by many, he would have been a striking figure at the time, both in the United States and during his Russia trip.

When Ross arrived in Russia at the beginning of July 1917, a critical time in the Russian Revolution, he already was a famous sociology professor and author of many books and articles. Others were to follow later, eventually totaling twenty-seven books and hundreds of articles. He was one of the founders of sociology as a recognized academic field and was president of the American Sociological Society in 1914 and 1915. His *Principles of Sociology*, printed in 1920, was widely used as a textbook for a long time. He departed for Russia only three years after he helped found the American Association of University Professors, the leading institution still protecting academic freedom in American universities today. The latter grew in part out of a famous academic freedom conflict Ross had with Mrs. Leland Stanford over his pro-American labor views while he was at Stanford University early in his career. This led to his departure from there first to the University of Nebraska and then to the University of Wisconsin, where he lived out the rest of his career and life.

The Russia trip was not Ross’s only or even first trip he made abroad to explore and write about other countries and cultures, usually for about a similar half-year length to fit with academic semester leave periods. Most were used in his writings, as separate books and as material in others. In others, although none, perhaps, as much as this Russia trip, which led to three books on the Russian Revolution and Civil War plus input into his broader sociological thinking and writing. His trips included China in 1910 to “look into the relations of the sexes, the family system, native faiths, missionary work, the sway of custom and public opinion, education old and new” and other questions. He came to the conclusion that the Chinese were “quite as gifted as ourselves,” which would not have been

common thought at the time he wrote that.¹ He traveled around South America for several months in 1913, a trip which included lunch with former President Theodore Roosevelt, with whom he was acquainted, in Santiago, Chile. Then came Russia. After the war he took trips to and wrote about society in Africa, India, and elsewhere, spending a year as professor on a round-the-world boat trip. In all these trips his focus was on understanding and explaining societies. All of this came on top of an earlier lengthy period studying in Germany and then traveling around Europe as a young man. He had a remarkably international outlook for the time.

Throughout his career Ross was dedicated to academic freedom and social reform, and to sociology as a way to comprehend its need. He also was a strong proponent of women's rights, including the right to vote, which partially explains his lengthy chapter on women in Russia and their achievement of universal suffrage. After returning home he became a proponent of recognizing the Soviet government during the long era between 1918–33 when the United States refused to do so. He also engaged in a wide range of social reform movements and, as he wrote later, was a deeply committed speaker. He intermingled with and exchanged correspondence with a wide range of leading figures of his time: Theodore Roosevelt, Clarence Darrow, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and William Jennings Bryan among many others. He also had numerous conflicts with the political conservative movement of the 1920s and 1930s: during one of them he was called before a committee from the Wisconsin state legislature for questioning as a possible communist, an event he proudly and humorously describes in his memoir.²

Ross went to Russia under the sponsorship of the American Institute of Social Service "to examine and report upon the prospects of practical social progress there." Arriving early July 1917 and crossing back out of Russia January 1, 1918, he was there during a key period in history.³ He traveled extensively across the country, talked to a wide range of people, and wrote a very unique account that focused more on the people and less on politics and political figures. As he states in his brief introduction:

I have taken it as my business to describe impartially the major social changes going on in Russia during my sojourn there in the latter half of 1917, and leave it to others or to time itself to judge them.... No doubt my account will seem drab to a public

¹ Edward Alsworth Ross, *Seventy Years of It: An Autobiography* (New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1936), 120-21.

² Ross, *Seventy Years*, 313.

³ He arrived in late June by the Russian calendar, July by the American. Russia was still using the Julian calendar, which in 1917 was thirteen days behind the updated Gregorian calendar in use in America and most of Europe. One result is that what Russians and most historians today call the October Revolution is called the November Revolution by those using the Gregorian calendar. Ross uses the Gregorian dates throughout, and only in special instances do I add the Julian date.

that has become accustomed to the iridescent stories of revolutionary Russia that have been appearing in our periodicals. Unfortunately for my readers I conceive it my duty to present the typical rather than the bizarre. I could easily have unreeled a film of astonishing and sensational happenings, such as present themselves in troublous times, which would leave the reader with the impression that the Russians are fools or madmen. It happens, however, that I found the Russians behaving much as I should were I in their place and furnished with their experience.

He follows through on that remarkably well: the ordinary people, Russians and others, are nicely described in a period of rapid radical change. In contrast to most books published at the time, major political figures and big political events (July Days, Kornilov Affair, Bolshevik Revolution) are given little space. The focus of the book is more on telling about the people and society than the politics going on. His observations clearly had an immediate impact: on July 5, 1918, Charles R. Crane, a special advisor to President Woodrow Wilson and long time friend and patron of Ross, requested some notes for Wilson on methods of helping Russia.⁴

Although his book probably was of relatively little value to the competing pro-Soviet or anti-Soviet movements that quickly emerged to dominate discussion of the revolution in the United States or to the later Trotskyite-Stalinist battles, for more serious readers it was invaluable. For someone wanting to understand the broader social context of the revolution it is very illuminating and one of the best early accounts... In the longer-term context, it is a predecessor of the social history focused academic studies that emerged in the United States and Great Britain in the 1980s. After this book, Ross published in 1921 a more traditionally structured history book that also presented an excellent account of the 1917 revolution, and then in 1924 one on the civil war and early Soviet years.⁵ Clearly, the revolution fascinated him.

The book initially seems to have two parts that reflect his travels and the development of his understanding of the revolution. The first five chapters at first seem almost travelogues, heavy on descriptions of the country, the people, and a life that was changing as it entered the revolutionary era (with civil war to come). In the process, however, he shows his sociologist's skill in looking at people and

⁴ Crane had played an important role in Ross's time and experiences in Russia. Crane was a sort of sponsor of Ross, encouraging his trip to Russia, then visiting him in Moscow in the early fall of 1917 and providing extra funding for him to stay on to the end of December (the rapid inflation of the ruble in 1917 had undercut Ross's monetary resources and threatened to make him return home earlier than intended). On Ross and Crane, see Normal E. Saul, *The Life and Times of Charles R. Crane, 1858–1939* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2013), especially 257.

⁵ *The Russian Bolshevik Revolution* (New York: The Century Co., 1921), and *The Russian Soviet Republic* (New York: The Century Co., 1924).

cultures. In the first chapter he moves from east to west across Russia by train, from the newest and least developed areas to the oldest and most densely settled. In doing so he provides an excellent description of the varying land and farming systems, and indicates initial changes coming out of the revolution. Later in the same chapter, in an unusual organizational structure, he recounts his return trip to Vladivostok six months later. It places right up front both the differences between Russian summer and winter and the social-political changes that had occurred during his time there. The chapter opens with a fascinating description of his first impressions and ends with an equally fascinating revelation of how conditions for a train ride had deteriorated. It includes a description of his and his train-mates' celebration of their crossing the border out of Russia, similar to what many later visitors to the Soviet Union did on leaving. Throughout, he provides excellent descriptions of the land and peoples, and especially of their interactions.

After about a month in Petrograd, as the then capital of Russia was known at the time, during which he interviewed "outstanding [Russian] liberals and extracted their views,"⁶ he began a three-month trip down the Volga river and on to the Caucasus and Central Asia. Although he does not mention him by name, his companion was M. O. Williams of the *Christian Herald*, from whom, as he notes elsewhere, he obtained most of the photographs in his original book after many of his own were lost. (The original book's pictures were mostly of Central Asia and the Caucasus and only a few of them are used here.) The trip, described in chapters 2–5, provides a broad picture of the Russian Empire and its variety of peoples. These are first seen and described as he travels to Nizhnii Novgorod on the upper Volga River and then on his trip by boat down the lengthy Volga, following a major trade route to the Caspian Sea. Along the way he observed a variety of small ethnicities and ways of life. He later attributed one of his major sociology articles about labor relations to what he saw, staying up all one night on the boat to draft it.⁷

Along one portion of the Volga, because of the German-descent population, he was often able to speak with people without a translator (the same was true in Petrograd and Moscow, where German, French, and English served him well with the better educated population, especially his own professional middle class). From the bottom of the Volga he crossed over into the Caucasus Mountains area, especially into Georgia, whose people he clearly loved and was fascinated by: "The Caucasians are the handsomest people my eyes have ever lighted on." While there he observed the installation of the new patriarch of the Georgian Orthodox church, which office had been abolished under the Russian tsars. Then he goes on east across the Caspian Sea to Central Asia and, again, provides a sociologist's accounts of the people and their activities. These chapters would have presented a new and exotic world to his readers in the United States and Britain. He also

⁶ Ross, *Seventy Years*, 152. An account of the initial month is skipped over at first in the book while he starts his Volga-Caucasus-Central Asia trip, but helps shape much of the book from chapter 6 onward. St. Petersburg was renamed Petrograd at the outbreak of the war, then to Leningrad in 1924, and again to St. Petersburg in 1991.

⁷ Ross, *Seventy Years*, 160. He published the article in 1922.

picked up on the unfortunate impact the runaway inflation was having on them. In chapter 5 he makes an analysis of how the demand for famous Tekke rugs during wartime and inflation affected local society for the worse—a good example of his sophisticated observations of what he is seeing. Ironically, in his later autobiography he admits that he bought several rugs.

In chapters 6 and 7, Ross turns to describing the Russian people and the land question for peasants, one of the greatest issues for Russia before, during, and after the revolution. In “The Russian People” he offers a somewhat contradictory picture, starting with how they were helpful, gregarious, and in other ways nice, but then slides in a more negative picture of the backwardness of ordinary people with faces “dull, unlit, the mouth a little open.” There are some naïve statements, usually based on things he was told. At the end, however, he remains very optimistic about the Russians becoming more modern and quickly democratic. Here he introduces a not unusual theme among Americans visiting Russia at this time, namely, the idea that America was like a wiser older brother to the Russians as they developed. Chapter 7, on agriculture, was influenced by a trip to the countryside and an examination of varying farming and landholding methods. He describes both the traditional communal system with its strip farming and the development of huge, modern agricultural operations. He again makes comparisons to America, especially farming in the Midwestern states. At the end he speculates about the extent to which the land redistribution going on, much as the peasants wanted it, would lead to a reversion to poorer quality agriculture.

In chapters 8–10, drawing upon both what he was told there and earlier research, he takes up the question of the roots of revolution, the returning revolutionaries, and revolutionary movements. Chapters 8 and 9 provide a history of the political problem and the revolutionary movement. In chapter 9 he gives a graphic account of the Siberian exile system under the old regime, including extensive biographical accounts of two revolutionaries, one a man and one a woman, who were sent to Siberia but then escaped, and who, it is implied, were active in the revolutionary process going on in 1917. He concludes this section with chapter 10, which brings the revolutionary movements up into the events of 1917 and includes a remarkable multipage interview with Leon Trotsky in December 1917.

Then, in chapters 11–14, he turns to a series of social issues: “Caste and Democracy,” Russian women, “Labor and Capital,” religion, and the Orthodox Church. These chapters reflect his interest in people, and in all of them he takes an interest in and shows a remarkably good understanding of life and the issues of 1917. Here and there in these chapters he got some features off-key, but remarkably few for an author of the time. These are noted in footnotes in this edition. Throughout, most of this would have been completely new to most readers, not only because there was so little information on Russia available in English at the time, but because he offered up so much more on social features and the way people lived than did most books of the era.⁸

⁸ He actually wrote some of these chapters while in Russia and sent them on ahead to the U.S., and at least one or two were published separately as magazine articles in *The Century* before he got back home and other later <<incomplete?>>

This is reflected throughout his book, but nowhere is this better illustrated than in chapter 12 on women. It is one of the longest and most fascinating of the book. On this topic it compares favorably to most books of the time. He was there just as Russian women gained a remarkable right—Russia was the first major country to grant women equal and universal voting rights. He extolls Russian women and discusses them in the context of women's positions and social development in the U.S and Russia, with the U.S. not necessarily coming out ahead. He sees a remarkably advanced women's situation in Russia, of which he fully approved. Clearly he interacted extensively with the more educated women, but nonetheless his account is quite complex. As one might expect from a liberal social science professor, he is sort of avant-garde for the times in his attitude toward women and their rights and position in society. At the same time, it must be noted, he also sticks in here and there traditional views of the role of women in society. His focus, or perhaps just his circle of contacts, tends to be educated women, and he touches relatively little on peasant women or working-class women, both of whom were a different story. Still, it is a fascinating chapter deserving wide readership.

In the last two chapters he turns to looking at Russia's possible future, maybe even as "The United States of Russia." In chapter 15 he confronts the very complex and still developing question of national and ethnic identities and the controversial debates about their futures. During 1917 there was a movement among many peoples of the empire toward some sort of autonomy, with pressures for more extensive autonomy growing monthly. After the October Revolution, and especially after the Constituent Assembly was dispersed on January 6/19, 1918, many argued that the former state no longer existed and moved to declare independence. The outbreak of civil war—*wars*, really—furthered that. Ross had a good sense of the rapidly changing issues but could not get it all down in detail. His weakest section is on Ukraine, which he did not visit. He does, however, give a somewhat eerie prediction of the Russian state becoming a federal republic structured along ethnic lines, which is what happened in 1922–24 under the Communists with the formation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the Soviet Union. In part he is applying, as some in Russia and these areas did, the American notion of states within a federal union, with power distributed. This is all the more striking in that the original version of this chapter was written and published in Russia in late 1917 for the local American Committee of Publicity, and also translated and published in Russian.⁹

In chapter 16 he concludes with a number of broader issues about Russia's future and Russian-American relations. In the process he explicitly rejects the then popular, but erroneous, claim that Lenin and Trotsky were German agents. He ends with a discussion of labor and wage issues, rich and poor, in the United States, in effect tacitly suggesting that if those were not addressed, a revolutionary situation could develop here; this in effect foreshadowed some of the controversies and problems of the immediate postwar period in the United States.

⁹ Ross, *Seventy Years*, 168-69.

Politics plays a relatively small role in his book compared to the writing of other Americans and Westerners who went over to see the revolution. Still, he cannot and does not ignore it. His account of the political reality in late summer and fall was one of the best available to an American of the time. Similarly, his section on the origins of political parties in chapter 10 is very good, and again suggests he may have done significant research before going and conducted lots of interviews while there. His discussion of the revolution of 1905 in chapter 8 suggests the same. One of the special features that grabs the reader is the multi-page interview with Leon Trotsky in December in chapter 8. It is remarkable and beautifully catches Trotsky's thoughts, assumptions, and plans in the early days of the Bolshevik regime, before the Constituent Assembly affair and the Civil War changed everything. The interview is all the more striking in that politics and the major political figures of the Russian Revolution—Miliukov (the leader of the liberals, whom he apparently met and talked with), Kerensky, and Lenin (who successively headed the government while he was there), etc.—are largely absent in the book, very unlike other books written by foreign visitors of the time.

The reader might be surprised by the absence of extensive discussion of the war and its relation to the revolution. In a level of honesty unusual in writings about Russia of the time, Ross notes in his introduction that “[t]he reader may be disappointed that I have not discussed the effect of the Revolution upon Russia's attitude toward the belligerent nations nor the question of Russia's future relation to the war. On these momentous topics I have remained silent for the simple reason that I have nothing authoritative to offer.” Few authors of the time showed that kind of modesty, and in fact he did not do so consistently.

One special feature is that he makes frequent comparisons to the United States, which had just entered the war in April before his July arrival in Russia. To help American readers understand what he was seeing or talking about, he often makes comparisons to the United States: “just like they do in Montana,” or “a town as new looking as Oklahoma City,” among other examples. Sometimes he praises one over the other. This was a way to help readers understand what he was seeing and they were reading. Sometimes it is merely part of his description of what he saw. In some cases, his comparison puts one or the other into a less favorable light. Sometimes the U.S. comes out better, in others Russia does. Chapter 13 on “Labor and Capital” often stresses the progressiveness of American conditions (and his progressive outlook), while rejecting not only the terrible condition of Russian workers, but also what he sees as Marxism's simplicity. In contrast, in the latter part of the last chapter he turns to the income inequalities in the U.S., denounces them, and implies that unless addressed, revolutionary unrest and “a calamitous class strife” could happen in the United States as it had in Russia.

He says little about how he acquired his knowledge and understanding of revolutionary Russia. Clearly, what he saw and heard in his 20,000 miles of travel in the country was of utmost importance. Still, he also obviously acquired information from other sources. This included information picked up from Americans and other foreigners who he talked with, especially people who had lived there a long time, although he sometimes was critical of their “knowledge.” In addition,

he had clearly done quick, impressive study of Russian history and society before arriving and so had a framework from which to understand the changes and the new, revolutionary society that he observed. The chapters on the revolutionary movements most extensively reflect that, as he notes in his preface.

The reader should not be put off by certain features of style and language that reflect that book was put together in haste: parts of it were written while he was in Russia and sent to the publisher for publication directly from notes he made while traveling.¹⁰ Indeed, he uses the present tense throughout, probably because he was writing at least the draft of the chapters at the time, rather than waiting until his return home. Some features, such as his frequent use of colons, semi-colons, or commas rather than a period and new sentence, are not in his other publications. I've changed some of those that most obviously might confuse, but left the others as the hurried style in which he wrote the book. Related is his love of describing places and people in long strings of phrases separated by semi-colons. At the end of chapter 2 he has a sentence of sixteen phrases (some of them lengthy) to describe "characteristic features of the Orient," the term then commonly used for the more easterly and non-European areas of the Russian empire, especially the Muslim regions. Perhaps this reflects the sociologist in him trying to describe fully and clearly something foreign to his readers. I have left them.

Ross gives an excellent picture of the peoples of Russia at a critical, rapidly changing, time. It focuses on people rather than politics, which makes it quite different from most accounts by Americans and other foreigners who went over in 1917–18. Indeed, his is the only one written by a real academic, by a person of major scholarly standing and with significant scholarly publications. This helps explain his rather different approach, which offers unique insights into what was happening in 1917. From it a modern reader can gain much understanding of Russia, the revolution, and especially the people.

¹⁰ In Ross, *Seventy Years*, 160, he describes an article on a sociology issue that he was inspired to draft while on the Volga—it was published in a sociology journal in 1922.