**‘Russia is all right’: British newspaper reporting of the Russian Revolution of February 1917**

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**Introduction**

Like all good journalists grappling with the complexities of world-changing events, the Reuters correspondent in Petrograd at the time of the revolution of February 1917 knew what was most important for readers

The first duty of a British correspondent in these days of national upheaval is to assure his compatriots that “Russia is all right” as a friend, ally, and fighter. The very trials she is undergoing will only steel her heart and arms.[[1]](#endnote-1)

This article will argue that while such expressions of optimism were widespread in the coverage of the February revolution – especially in editorial columns written in London – some of the reporting from correspondents did actually give readers a good sense of the way that events were unfolding; the difficulties involved in reporting revolutions in general, and this one in particular, notwithstanding. It will consider the political influences on news coverage, and the practical difficulties with which correspondents had to contend. Covering revolutions makes extra demands on the journalist who is already struggling to explain what is happening. In time of revolution, of lasting social and political change, the correspondent is also expected, to a degree at least, to explain to his or her audience what might happen. If this article argues that on the second count much of the British newspaper coverage – especially the editorials – of the 1917 February revolution fell short, then it hopes to make a new contribution to the field by proposing that on the first – the correspondents’ reports – it did better. It will conclude by suggesting that the desire to believe that Russia would fight on was so strong that it eclipsed other interpretations of events, and meant that readers – including policy makers – were ill prepared for what would eventually come to pass.

**Editorial and political contexts to the coverage of February 1917**

Policy makers needed to know more than anyone, yet Russia had to a large extent been a mystery to British political elites for decades. As Michael Hughes has pointed out, ‘No British Prime Minister or foreign secretary visited Russia in the 20 years between 1894 and 1914.’[[2]](#endnote-2) That changed with the outbreak of the First World War, when St Petersburg (its name soon changed to the less-German sounding ‘Petrograd’) was the capital of an important British ally against the Kaiser. Nevertheless, what Hughes has also identified as the ‘Whig’ convictions of Embassy staff over Russia’s political destiny[[3]](#endnote-3) may have persisted, not least because their networks of contacts were also limited. Diplomats ‘before 1914 usually tried to avoid dealings with correspondents from foreign newspapers working in the city, since some journalists had contacts with individuals and groups that were anathema to the Russian government.’[[4]](#endnote-4)

When revolution came, the most important question for political leaders and the press alike was whether Russia would continue to fight the war. Lloyd George himself having long seen ‘the vital role of Russia in the war’ as ‘an article of faith’[[5]](#endnote-5), it is no wonder this preoccupied correspondents and editors to the extent that it did. Unfortunately for the optimists, the Russian Army soon proved unreliable in playing the martial role which London wished to assign it to it. There were clues in the unfolding of the February revolution itself. Wildman calculated that there were an astonishing 232,000[[6]](#endnote-6) men under arms in Petrograd and the suburbs at the time of the revolution, ‘the overriding unanswered question,’ as he put it, ‘how deeply the general dissatisfaction in the country had penetrated the units that would have to be used’[[7]](#endnote-7) to put down the uprising. In the event, the conclusion was that it had penetrated enough for the soldiers not to do the bidding of the Tsar and his commanders.

Like many journalists faced with the challenges of making sense of a revolution while in the midst of it, the correspondent cited above, Guy Beringer, had made a bold prediction which would turn out to be wrong. For the revolution of February 1917 did not ‘steel’ Russia’s ‘heart and arms’. It is true that the Russian Army did launch an offensive in July of that year: an operation which initially ‘made good progress’[[8]](#endnote-8) – but then ‘ground to a halt as the troops, feeling they had done their duty, refused to obey orders to attack.’[[9]](#endnote-9) Neither heart nor arms, in other words, were sufficiently steeled. In fact, the July offensive was the Russian Army’s last major action in the First World War. The unrest of the July days followed the operation’s failure. Four months later, Lenin and his Bolshevik followers seized power from the Provisional Government which had been formed after the February revolution. Less than a year after the Reuters despatch was published, its confidence in Russia as a fighting force was finally confirmed as groundless. Russia’s new government signed the treaty of Brest-Litovsk, making a ‘shameful peace’[[10]](#endnote-10) with Germany. From the point of view of the countries still at war with Germany, Russia was no longer a fighter, or an ally. The eventual rise of Soviet power would mean Russia was no longer a friend, either.

This was not the way that the British political or press establishment hoped or expected that the February revolution would end. Not surprisingly, the British priority was winning the war, although as Charlotte Alston has argued, when looking at the debate which surrounded the extent and nature of allied opposition to the fledgling Bolshevik regime, ‘military and political decision making on intervention was more concerned with the war against Germany than with Russia.’[[11]](#endnote-11) This was certainly the view of the most powerful of the press barons, Alfred Harmsworth (Lord Northcliffe), proprietor of both *The Times* and the *Daily Mail*. As Jean Chalaby has put it, ‘From the early days of Anglo-German antagonism until the 1919 Versailles peace conference, Northcliffe ceaselessly crusaded on jingoistic values.’[[12]](#endnote-12) He also had an unshakeable belief in his own political influence. Only a few months before the February revolution, he had claimed credit for what he saw as his part in the departure from office of the then Prime Minister, Herbert Henry Asquith.[[13]](#endnote-13) His newspapers had been patriotic to the point of jingoism during the Boer War, and in warning – for years – of the dangers of Germany’s desire to increase its military power. In his memoir, the American war correspondent, Stanley Washburn, gave an extraordinary account of a meeting with Lord Northcliffe in 1914. Washburn had been hired to go to Russia for *The Times*. Passing through London on his way to take up his posting, Washburn was granted an audience with ‘The Chief’, as Northcliffe liked to be known by his subordinates. ‘I am very glad you are going to Russia for us,’ Washburn later recalled the press baron telling him

but before you go I want you to thoroughly understand that perhaps the *Times* is different from any other paper for which you have worked. Of course, as I told you, we want the news, but I want you to realize first and foremost, if you find you can do anything in diplomacy, in a military way, or through political intrigue, which I gather is a favourite pastime of yours, you are to forget the *Times* and serve the “Cause,” which is more important to me even than exclusive dispatches.[[14]](#endnote-14)

Northcliffe’s priorities were confirmed by the turn his own career was to take a year after the February revolution: he was appointed to the advisory committee of the Foreign Office’s Department of Information as ‘director of propaganda’.[[15]](#endnote-15) The existence of this Department also had a bearing on the work of Reuters in particular – an important factor not least because the despatch cited above was very widely used. The revolution took place at a moment when, ‘There was also an intensification of Britain’s propaganda effort, particularly after the establishment of a Department of Information in February 1917. Reuters played an ever-increasing role in the work of this Department’[[16]](#endnote-16). At the time of the revolution, Beringer, ‘enjoyed a virtual monopoly of reporting to the west’[[17]](#endnote-17) (as others struggled with technical and other obstacles discussed below).

Beringer is also an example of another factor with which correspondents had to contend: that of their own political views, and the consequences which followed. ‘Personally, Beringer was strongly anti-Bolshevik’. The following year, after the Bolsheviks had taken power, he was arrested.[[18]](#endnote-18) Other correspondents found themselves subject to verbal attacks and intrigues from their compatriots: Morgan Philips Price, the left-wing correspondent for the *Manchester Guardian* so loathed the coverage of Russia which appeared in the Northcliffe titles (during the First World War these included both *The Times* and the *Daily Mail*) that later in 1917 he wrote of, ‘abominable behaviour of the Northcliffe Press […] especially of its correspondent, Wilton’ – even expressing the hope ‘the Russian people [...] will turn [him] out of Petrograd.’[[19]](#endnote-19) The papers of David Soskice, also working for the *Manchester Guardian*, show that as early as 1914 he corresponded with Francis Acland, a foreign office minister, to raise concerns about Arthur Ransome, then another member of the British Press corps in the Russian capital.[[20]](#endnote-20)

**The challenges of newsgathering and distribution**

In addition to this broader context, those reporting on the revolution also faced considerable challenges in their immediate surroundings. It would be too easy to criticize a journalist, faced with the immensely difficult task of predicting the consequences of a revolution, for getting it wrong. Trotsky himself, writing in his own history of the Russian Revolution, excused an error made by John Reed, that author of *Ten Days that Shook the World* on the grounds that ‘work done in the heat of events, notes made in corridors, on the streets, beside camp fires, conversations and fragmentary phrases caught on the wing, and that too with the need of a translator – all these things make particular mistakes unavoidable.’[[21]](#endnote-21) News was extremely hard – and breathtakingly costly – to come by. The *Daily Mail* reported on March 19th ‘fights at the station’ to get copies of newspapers, ‘one copy of the *Russian Word* (*Slovo*) is said to have been bought for £1000. I myself saw one knocked down for £350.’[[22]](#endnote-22) Sympathy for correspondents facing immense challenges has not been confined to those observers, such as Trotsky, who might have been expected to show it for journalists who largely shared their views. The consequences of revolutions are far easier for historians to evaluate than for correspondents to predict. ‘Very few […] could forecast the degree and range of the impact of events of the February-March Revolution of 1917, the ease by which the imperial government fell, terminating a 300-year-old dynasty, or their long-term effects,’[[23]](#endnote-23) as Normal Saul has argued. For journalists, there were other issues, too: censorship; political pressure; and the great difficulties of reliable communication with the outside world.

This was the greatest initial challenge which correspondents faced. On March 14th 1917, the *Daily Mail* published the following news item – if that is an adequate description. In fact, it was more of a non-news item

Up to a late hour last night the Russian official report, which for many months has come to hand early, had not been received, nor was there any news of events later than the announcement on Monday that the Duma and Council of Empire sittings had been suspended by imperial orders.[[24]](#endnote-24)

One can almost sense the writer’s frustration in the phrase ‘up to a late hour’. Yet presumably the item was considered newsworthy because the *Mail*’s editorial team suspected something was up. When Nicholas II’s decision to give up his throne brought to an end centuries of Russian autocracy, even as the country was fighting the First World War, the telegraph from Petrograd had been cut off. Donald Thompson, a pioneering news cameraman from the United States, wrote in a letter to his wife of his experience as he tried to send a cable, ‘the old lady in charge […] told me not to waste my money – that nothing was allowed to go out.’[[25]](#endnote-25) For a country which had been relatively late to industrialize, Russia did have reasonably efficient telecommunications. The order to mobilize troops some two-and-a-half years earlier had been given from St Petersburg’s[[26]](#endnote-26) Central Telegraph Office ‘to the principal centres of the Russian Empire.’[[27]](#endnote-27) The technology existed: the Russian authorities just preferred that the country underwent massive political change away from the gaze of the entire globe.

The correspondents, of course, had different ideas; their newspapers, different expectations. Yet the closure of the telegraph office was not the only obstacle which they faced. The First World War is not a glorious chapter in the history of journalism. As Phillip Knightley has argued, ‘More deliberate lies were told than in any other period of history, and the whole apparatus of the state went into action to suppress the truth.’[[28]](#endnote-28) One of the main reasons for this was censorship. As John T. Smith has pointed out, ‘All the combatant countries restricted news from the front at the start of the war.’[[29]](#endnote-29) Russia was no exception, although, in terms which recall the verdict the 19th century Russian satirist, Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin passed on his country – ‘the severity of Russian laws is alleviated by the lack of obligation to fulfil them’ – Smith went on to argue, ‘The Russian censorship regulations were thus comparable with those of other belligerents. However, in the implementation of these regulations, Russian censorship appeared more lax.’[[30]](#endnote-30) It was not lax for the first days of the February Revolution. It simply cut the capital off from international communication. Nor was this a problem confined to this particular episode of Russia’s revolutionary history. Later that year, as the October revolution loomed, W.P. Crozier of the *Manchester Guardian* wrote to Soskice in Petrograd, explaining ‘We are rather under the impression that some of your telegrams to us may have been suppressed at the Russian end’[[31]](#endnote-31) and asking him to send duplicates of his despatches by post, too.

**The optimism of the editorial columns**

The cutting of communication had led the newspapers in London to expect big news. The *Telegraph*, in fact, reported on March 16th, ‘For several days no news with regard to the political situation in Russia which, however, was known in well-informed quarters to be critical, had been received in London.’[[32]](#endnote-32) ‘Since Monday no word had come from Russia, and silence had fallen upon what was manifestly a serious situation,’[[33]](#endnote-33) wrote the *Manchester Guardian* once news finally made it to out. The *Daily Herald* decided that, ‘the information that is allowed to reach the outer world is often studiously vague.’[[34]](#endnote-34) Once the facts were confirmed, the revolution was widely welcomed: the leader columns echoing David Monger’s conclusion that, ‘Before the Bolsheviks’ emergence, propagandists interpreted the Tsar’s overthrow as positive for both Russia and the alliance.’[[35]](#endnote-35) This was not confined to the fervently pro-war editorials in titles owned by Lord Northcliffe, although they led the charge. ‘The cause of freedom and of the Allies has triumphed,’ the *Daily Mail*’s editorial of March 16th, 1917 boldly announced. ‘The one power which will gain nothing from this great stroke will be Germany’[[36]](#endnote-36), ran the final sentence. This belief was echoed in the edition of *The Times* which appeared on the same day, even if *The Times* was more reflective. ‘It is still too soon for entire confidence in the issue,’[[37]](#endnote-37) its editorial said – adding a measured note of caution to its categorical opening statement ‘A great Revolution has been accomplished in Russia’ – before continuing, ‘but the general trend of events and the attitude of the Army and of the more important elements of the population justify the Allies of Russia in optimism.’ Grounds for optimism were sought everywhere. *The Times* also carried a news story – headlined ‘Revolution in Russia’ – which included reports of military activity on the Somme, and in the Balkans. It appears to have been part of a daily series. The words ‘The War: 3rd Year: 225th Day’ appear between the headline and the story – a reminder of the true preoccupations of readers then, even if much of what was served up to them was characterized as part of one of the most shameful episodes of journalistic history.[[38]](#endnote-38) Beyond the newspapers’ welcoming change in Russia, optimism was scarce, perhaps one reason why the *Times* editorial also offered hope in the form of ‘the manifest eagerness of all parties that Russia should continue to wage the war with even greater vigour than she has displayed hitherto.’[[39]](#endnote-39) In another delayed despatch from the streets of Russia’s revolutionary capital, the *Mirror* told its readers on March 20th, ‘‘The workmen express the determination to employ themselves on overtime in order to make up for all the work that has been lost, and are loud in declaring their intention of carrying on the war to victory.’[[40]](#endnote-40) The *Express* announced confidently, ‘The Russian revolution has been accomplished, and the forces of reaction have been overcome.’[[41]](#endnote-41) The *Observer* of Sunday 18th March reported the revolution with a series of stacked headlines, which included, ‘A marvellous rising’.[[42]](#endnote-42)

It is understandable that, with the First World War now well into its third year, and conscription having been introduced in 1916[[43]](#endnote-43), the effect which the revolution would have on Russia’s contribution to the allied war effort against Germany was the leading concern. It continued to be so for as long as the war lasted. Then, as now, the Sunday newspapers faced the challenge of trying to find new angles to the big stories of the week. The *Sunday Times* of March 18th was fortunate enough to have the text of ‘The Tsar’s Manifesto’[[44]](#endnote-44) published in Petrograd too late on Friday to make the Saturday papers in London. The headlines of an analytical piece on the preceding page promised, ‘Fidelity to the allies’; the text ‘an energetic prosecution of the war by the new Russian government’[[45]](#endnote-45). The *Financial Times* of the following day was even more forthright: ‘There is now but one desire among the people—to fight on until Prussian militarism has been destroyed.’[[46]](#endnote-46) The *Daily Mirror* – which had published the ‘Russia is all right’ despatch – told its readers on March 20th, ‘The workmen express the determination to employ themselves on overtime in order to make up for all the work that has been lost, and are loud in declaring their intention of carrying on the war to victory.’[[47]](#endnote-47) This was wishful thinking of the first water. The workers of Petrograd were among the reddest of the red: just the kind of constituency which would have been receptive to the argument that the war was being waged in the interests of aristocrats and capitalists, and at the expense of the workers. The *Mirror*, which had been founded in 1903 by Northcliffe, had, unsurprisingly, not lost its patriotic outlook since its sale in 1913 to his brother, soon to become Lord Rothermere. The *Daily Express* also published the Reuters ‘Russia is all right’ despatch – perhaps showing, among other things, that the Reuters correspondent understood very well that fulfilling his ‘first duty’ would have the added benefit of getting his despatch used more widely. The *Manchester Guardian* was another newspaper in which it appeared. The *Manchester Guardian* went even further than the optimism of the Reuters wire, in an editorial which brightly declared, ‘England hails the new Russia with a higher hope and surer confidence in the future not only of this war, but of the world.’[[48]](#endnote-48)

It is worth recalling here the admonishment which Stanley Washburn remembered receiving from Lord Northcliffe about the importance of ‘the Cause’. While press barons’ and their readers’ shared desire for an allied victory may have led to some wishful thinking, the press barons’ ties to political elites – such as Northcliffe’s role as ‘director of propaganda’ – were another factor. As Alice Marquis wrote, the British system of censorship during WWI ‘consisted of a close control of news at the source by military authorities, combined with a tight-knit group of ‘press lords’ who (over lunch or dinner with Lloyd George) decided what was “good for the country to know’”[[49]](#endnote-49). While it may be, as Curran has argued, that, ‘The press barons are usually accused of using their papers as instruments of political power’[[50]](#endnote-50), this was one era when they were largely happy to place that power, real or imagined, at the service of the state.

**Strong eyewitness reporting**

Telegraph links restored, the newspapers enthusiastically caught up with the news. The *Times* printed almost 6,000 words from its correspondent. In accordance with the convention of the time, he was not named. The correspondent can be identified as Robert Wilton, both from his own memoir, *Russia’s Agony*, and from the less than complimentary opinions of his coverage from Philips Price, and, later, by The *Times* itself. Its own history, published in the 1950s, concluded that, ‘Wilton’s service, often important, was erratic,’[[51]](#endnote-51) and that the newspaper felt that ‘their writer did not command full confidence’[[52]](#endnote-52). Such a verdict presumably delighted Morgan Philips Price – who, given that he died only in 1973 – would have lived long enough to read it.

For all that Wilton has not been remembered favourably – *Russia’s Agony,* his rather flawed account of the revolutionary year of 1917, rushed out the following year, may have something to do with that (the book was dedicated to the Cossacks, who, Wilton maintained, would soon drive the Reds from Russia) – and the reputation he had ‘in Zionist circles, and even into the Foreign Office’[[53]](#endnote-53) of being an anti-Semite, his coverage of the February revolution was lively and informative. Especially given his relatively advanced years for a war correspondent – Wilton was born in 1868, and so was approaching fifty when the revolution started – Wilton did a first-rate job of getting to the action, and getting the story. He was rewarded with as much space as *The Times* could find for everything he had sent. Wilton’s story appeared under stacked headlines: ‘Abdication of the Tsar’; ‘First News from Petrograd’; ‘Revolution Complete’[[54]](#endnote-54) (one the sub-editors might later have wished for the chance to rewrite), even though, despite the middle of those three, the paper had to admit, ‘we are still without news of the first outbreak’[[55]](#endnote-55). Even though they finally had news from Russia, they did not appear to have all that their correspondent had sent, or to have it in the right order. Wilton’s prose gave his story pace, even if the passive voice in lines such as ‘Warnings not to assemble were disregarded. No Cossacks were visible’[[56]](#endnote-56) seems, to modern readers at least, to soften the sense of urgency. Walking the streets of Russia’s revolutionary capital, Wilton suddenly found himself in the middle of the fighting

…as the armoured cars, which all appear to be in the hands of the revolutionaries, have been dashing through the streets around The Times office, fusillading the Government machine guns, all attempts to get from one place to another were attended with the greatest risk[[57]](#endnote-57)

Wilton went on to tell his readers that, returning from calling on the British ambassador, he ‘was walking through the Summer Gardens when the bullets began to whiz over my head.’[[58]](#endnote-58) For all this excitement, *The Times* was very keen to situate Wilton’s coverage in the wider context as it was seen from London. Under the headlines, but before the reader reached Wilton’s ‘History of the Movement’, there was a paragraph explaining that Andrew Bonar Law, who was then in the war cabinet, had told the House of Commons that the revolution ‘was not an effort to secure peace, but an expression of discontent with the Russian government for not carrying on the war with efficiency and energy.’[[59]](#endnote-59)

Covering revolutions is one of the biggest challenges for journalists. Philips Price even found himself in the wrong place – he was reporting from the Caucasus at the time – but showed enough initiative to get to Moscow, and thence to Petrograd. On the way, he caused the resignation of the foreign minister, Pavel Milyukov, by reporting unguarded remarks the minister had made about Russia’s war aims[[60]](#endnote-60). Those who were in Petrograd faced not only the difficulties of coming by reliable information, but also great danger. Wilton was not alone in having bullets pass close by. Alfred Fletcher of Central News, whose report was published in both the *Financial Times* and the *Daily Telegraph* on March 16th, wrote of streets, ‘full of the whizzing of bullets from rifles and machine-guns’. Apparently unable to contain his own excitement, and just in case his reader had not got the message, he explained, ‘In short, we are faced with revolution in the truest sense of the word.’[[61]](#endnote-61) Not wanting his professional activity to draw unwanted attention, Donald Thompson became a pioneer of secret filming. He cut a hole in his camera bag to, ‘get pictures with this gyroscopic camera of mine without anyone knowing what I am doing.’[[62]](#endnote-62) This was prudent. The revolutionary streets of Petrograd could suddenly become the scene of deadly acts of violence. An Associated Press despatch, published in the *Manchester Guardian* and the *Daily Mirror* on Saturday March 17th described, ‘Regiments called out to disperse street crowds clamouring for bread refused to fire upon the people, mutinied, and (slaying their officers in many cases) joined the swelling ranks of the insurgents.’[[63]](#endnote-63)

Given the strong political views of their owners, and the dangerously unpredictable circumstances in which they were working, the correspondents deserve credit for the picture which they were able to paint of Petrograd at the end of autocracy.

His despatches delayed as those of Robert Wilton and others had been, the *Daily Mail*’s correspondent finally got his work into print once the telegraph links had been reopened. As with Wilton, the *Mail*’s correspondent is not named. He may however be assumed, on the basis of bylines which appeared the previous month, to be Henry Hamilton Fyfe. On Friday March 16th, the *Daily Mail*, like *The Times,* published a series of reports together. Readers were informed at the beginning that the section datelined ‘Saturday’ (and presumably all that followed) had been ‘transmitted on Wednesday at 9.55am’. Fyfe did not seem scared by the fact that walking the streets was, in Wilton’s words, ‘attended by the greatest risk’. Hamilton Fyfe brought the atmosphere of the streets of revolutionary Russia to the breakfast tables of Britain. The weeks leading up to the February revolution were a time when ‘Bread had to be queued for, and its availability was unreliable.’[[64]](#endnote-64) The queues were so long that the people of Petrograd had sometimes to wait for hours, even during Russian winter nights. One of Thompson’s first impressions on arrival was to ‘notice bread lines in front of bakeries, and, in fact, at every place where food is sold.’[[65]](#endnote-65) In one memorable passage, he wrote

Bread shops are besieged by hungry people. Last night I did not retire until nearly 2:30 and I could look out from the back of the hotel from my window and see the people lined up in front of a bakery. In the morning when I got up some of those same people were still standing there.[[66]](#endnote-66)

In the 1918 edition of his book, the page following is a photograph of a bread queue, perhaps the one he describes. A thick line of dark figures in heavy coats and fur hats stand patiently and apparently motionless on the snow-covered street. There were suspicions that what bread was available was not being shared fairly. The hungry, their patience exhausted, sometimes took the law, and bread, into their own hands. Hamilton Fyfe reported one such incident. ‘A baker’s shop well known for its profiteering had its windows smashed, and the place looted.’[[67]](#endnote-67) Hamilton Fyfe explained that ‘large quantities of bread [were] being kept for richer and more fortunate customers.’ In a forthright tone of the kind which might still be found in the *Daily Mail* today, Hamilton Fyfe was blunt in his assessment of the incident. ‘Such conduct,’ he wrote, ‘when people have to stand from 5 till 11 o’clock in a queue deserves punishment.’ Hamilton Fyfe’s reporter’s eye for detail helped him to bring to life for his readers the Russian capital as it responded to the news that the autocracy was no more. It was on the Tuesday – as his paper waited for news that Hamilton Fyfe, walking around the streets of the Russian capital, began ‘to meet incongruous sights. Here a soldier, rifle-less but with an unsheathed officer’s sword in hand, there a civilian carrying, somewhat gingerly, a rifle with fixed bayonet, and farther on a delighted youth with a carbine.’ The details which Hamilton Fyfe picked out form a pattern within their apparent randomness: a pattern of shocking change, which mapped the reversal of the old order. In the same issue of the *Daily Mail*, that of March 16th, once the news floodgates had been opened, Hamilton Fyfe wrote of an encounter between a group of mutinous soldiers, on foot, and two mounted officers. Faced with guns, the officers backed off. ‘This slight incident showed what was really happening,’ Hamilton Fyfe wrote. The confrontation seemed to represent in miniature the failure of tsarist authority. On March 19th, the *Daily Mail* even hinted at the revolution’s socialist future reporting ‘Order No. 1’, the Soviet edict which declared that soldiers should be answerable to the committees which they formed amongst themselves, and to the Petrograd Soviet, rather than to officers or the government. In the *Mail*’s view, Order No. 1

‘shook the old army to its foundations’[[68]](#endnote-68). Even if the correspondent judged it a ‘treasonable incendiary document’[[69]](#endnote-69), they understood it was newsworthy.

The reporting of Wilton, Fletcher, and Hamilton Fyfe and others provided eyewitness accounts of what was happening in the revolutionary capital: eyewitness accounts which added indispensable context to the celebratory editorials which were being gleefully written in London.

**Conclusion**

Was everyone then really as optimistic as the leader columns seemed to suggest? In his autobiography, the bulk of which was written, as Rupert Hart-Davis said in his prologue, ‘between 1949 and 1961’[[70]](#endnote-70), Arthur Ransome gave an account of a lunch in London on November 7th 1916 with two government ministers (one of them, Francis Acland, apparently not put off by David Soskice’s earlier concerns about Ransome) ‘I told them,’ Ransome wrote, ‘that I thought we should be considering the possibility that, if we could not bring the war to an end in 1917, we should have to manage without the help of the Russians.’[[71]](#endnote-71) It would clearly not be beyond a writer of Ransome’s talent to have put a shine on this in the intervening decades. In the following chapter, which covered the coming to power of Lenin and the Soviets, Ransome conceded, ‘Forty years after the events I find it hard to remember the actual dates of this or that happening at which I was present.’ He was referring there to the way the October revolution unfolded, but the point could arguably be more widely applied. Nevertheless, even if those of his fellow correspondents who were reporting from Petrograd in February 1917 were able to give detailed accounts of what was happening, the analysis, the weighing up of the significance of those events in the London editorial columns, was less impressive.

As John Reed showed in *Ten Days that Shook the World*, his influential account of the October revolution, the Bolsheviks understood that the British press was against them. Reed described a revolutionary laughing defiantly at an editorial in *The Times* which had thundered, ‘The remedy for Bolshevism is bullets’[[72]](#endnote-72). At the time of the February revolution, the Northcliffe papers did not see Bolshevism as such a threat. Even after the October revolution they insisted that Lenin’s government could not last. Headlines such as ‘Leninists paralysed’[[73]](#endnote-73); ‘Lenin losing control’[[74]](#endnote-74); ‘Bolshevist split’[[75]](#endnote-75) were common during November 1917. This did their readers no favours in terms of informing them, in terms of helping them to understand what the west was dealing with.

There was, therefore, a contrast between the perspectives which the correspondents offered, and those which appeared in the editorial columns. In some ways, the correspondents, drawing on a more detailed knowledge of the country and its affairs than that possessed by press barons or political elites, did an admirable job. There were exceptions: the message that ‘Russia is all right’ filed from Petrograd, and widely published, being among them. The *Daily Telegraph*’s correspondent also wrote, ‘Let it be said at once that so far as the common cause of Great Britain and Russia is concerned, the revolution gives no ground for anxiety—or, at least, very little’[[76]](#endnote-76). The focus on food shortages, demonstrated by people breaking into bakeries suspected of hoarding, gave an insight into the state of the country. It also, implicitly if not explicitly, cast doubt on the idea that Russia could continue the war, even supposing that it wanted to. For if a country’s infrastructure was so weak that it could not feed its own capital city, how might it feed, clothe, and arm troops at the front? Even taking into account the ‘unseasonably cold’[[77]](#endnote-77) winter of 1916-17, and the effect it had on rail transport, the system was not working efficiently. Even those correspondents, Wilton being the leading example, who came to loathe the Bolsheviks, and to yearn for their downfall, had not allowed themselves to be blinded to the nature of the revolution, and the shortcomings of the Tsarist Russian army. During the war, Wilton’s reporting even threatened to sour relations between the British and Russian governments because, as Keith Neilson put it, ‘The British idea of fair reportage found little sympathy in Russia. Even during the war, Wilton’s condemnation of ‘unduly optimistic’ reports concerning Russia’s war effort was viewed by the Russian censors as ‘tantamount to treason”’[[78]](#endnote-78). Perhaps sensing that their publics did not wish to hear of Russian weakness, and possible abandonment of the cause, the newspapers’ owners, through their editorial columns, did not offer it. They, too, preferred to think that Russia was all right.

This was nothing but wishful thinking of the most fanciful kind – as Lenin’s later, and enduring, revolutionary success with the slogan, ‘Peace-Bread-Land’, would come to show. Both editors and the political elite wanted desperately to believe that revolution in Russia would not be bad for the overall allied war effort. In consequence, those were the terms in which events in St Petersburg were portrayed.

Notes

1. *Manchester Guardian*, March 16th 1917, 5; Daily Mail March 16th 1917, 6 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Hughes, *Diplomacy Before the Russian Revolution*, 2 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Hughes, *Diplomacy Before the Russian Revolution,* 91 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Hughes, *Diplomacy Before the Russian Revolution,* 77 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Hughes, *Diplomacy Before the Russian Revolution,* 196 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Wildman, *The End of the Russian Imperial Army: The Old Army and the Soldiers’ Revolt,* 124 [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Wildman, *The End of the Russian Imperial Army: The Old Army and the Soldiers’ Revolt,* 125 [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Pipes, *The Russian Revolution 1899-1919*, 418. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Pipes, *The Russian Revolution 1899-1919*, 418. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Figes, *A people’s tragedy: The Russian Revolution 1891-1924*, 548. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Alston, ‘British Journalism and the Campaign for intervention in the Russian Civil War, 1918-20’, 35 [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Chalaby, ‘Northcliffe: Proprietor as Journalist’, 37 [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. McEwen, ‘The Press and the Fall of Asquith’, 863 [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Washburn. *On the Russian Front in WW1*, 25 [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Marquis, ‘Words as Weapons’, 473 [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Putnis, ‘Share 999’, 154 [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Read, *The Power of News*, 152 [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Read, *The Power of News*, 154 [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Philips Price, *Despatches from the Revolution: Russia 1916-18*. (London: Pluto Press, 1997), 41 [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Acland to Soskice, 11 January 1914, Parliamentary archives, [STH/DS/1/AC.1](https://www.portcullis.parliament.uk/CalmView/TreeBrowse.aspx?src=CalmView.Catalog&field=RefNo&key=STH%2fDS%2f1%2fAC.1) [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, 1200. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. *Daily Mail*, 19th March 1917, 5 [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Saul, *War and Revolution,*  59 [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. *Daily Mail*, 14th March 1917, 5 [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Thompson, *Donald Thompson in Russia*, 41 [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. It was only after the declaration of war, in August 1914, that the city’s name was changed to ‘the more Slavonic Petrograd’. Figes, *A people’s tragedy*, 251. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe went to war in 1914*, 507 [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Knightley, *The First Casualty*, 80 [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Smith ‘Russian military censorship during the First World War’, 74 [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Smith ‘Russian military censorship during the First World War’ 79 [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. W.P. Crozier to Soskice, 2nd October 1917, Parliamentary Archive, STH/DS/1/MG/25 [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. *Daily Telegraph*, 16 March 1917, 5 [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. The *Manchester Guardian*, 16 March 1917, 4 [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. *Daily Herald*, 17 March 1917 [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Monger, *Patriotism and Propaganda in First World War Britain,* 130 [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. The *Daily Mail*, March 16th 1917, 4 [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. *The Times*, March 16th 1917, 7 [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. See, for example, Knightley, p. 97. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. *The Times*, March 16th 1917, 7 [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. *Daily Mirror*, March 20th 1917 [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. The *Daily Express*, 16th March 1917 [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. The *Observer*, 18th March 1917, 6 [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Taylor, *The First World War: An Illustrated History,* 114. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. *Sunday Times*, 18 March 1917, 7 [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. *Sunday Times*, 18 March 1917, 6 [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. *Financial Times*, 19 March 1917, 3 [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. *Daily Mirror*, March 20th 1917 [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. The *Manchester Guardian*, 16 March 1917, 4 [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Marquis, ‘Words as Weapons’, 476 [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Curran, *Power Without Responsibility*, 44 [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. The Times. *The History of The Times, The 150th Anniversary and Beyond 1912-1948, Part I, Chapters I-XII 1912-1920* (London, The Times, 1952), 242 [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. The Times. *The History of The Times,* 244 [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. The Times. *The History of The Times,* 248 [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. *The Times*, 16th March 1917, 7 [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. *The Times*, 16th March 1917, 7 [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. *The Times*, 16th March 1917, 7 [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. *The Times*, 16th March 1917, 7 [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. *The Times*, 16th March 1917, 7 [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. *The Times*, 16th March 1917, 7 [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. Philips Price, *My Three Revolutions*, 52-53 [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. *Financial Times*, 16th March 1917, 3; Daily Telegraph, 16 March 1917, 5 [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. Thompson, *Donald Thompson in Russia*, 64 [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. Associated Press despatch printed in *The Manchester Guardian*, 17th March 1917, 7 [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. Service, *A History of Modern Russia: From Nicholas II to Putin*, (London: Penguin, 2003), 32 [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. Thompson, *Donald Thompson in Russia*, 26 [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. Thompson, *Donald Thompson in Russia*, 26 [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
67. *Daily Mail*, March 16th 1917, 5 [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
68. Wildman, *The End of the Russian Imperial Army: The Old Army and the Soldiers’ Revolt,* 187 [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
69. *Daily Mail*, March 16th 1917, 5 [↑](#endnote-ref-69)
70. Rupert Hart-Davis, prologue to *The Autobiography of Arthur Ransome*, (London: Century Publishing, 1985), 9 [↑](#endnote-ref-70)
71. Ransome, *The Autobiography of Arthur Ransome*, (London: Century Publishing, 1985), 204 [↑](#endnote-ref-71)
72. Reed, *Ten Days that Shook the World*, 74 [↑](#endnote-ref-72)
73. *Daily Mail*, 12 November 1917, 3 [↑](#endnote-ref-73)
74. *The Times*, 12 November 1917, 8 [↑](#endnote-ref-74)
75. *The Times*, 22 November 1917, 5 [↑](#endnote-ref-75)
76. Daily Telegraph, 16 March 1917, 5 [↑](#endnote-ref-76)
77. Pipes, *The Russian Revolution*, 272. [↑](#endnote-ref-77)
78. Neilson, *Britain and the Last Tsar*,46

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