

DID LENIN READ *THE TIME MACHINE*?¹

Patrick Parrinder

In his influential essay ‘Assessing H. G. Wells’ (1967), David Lodge remarked on the flattering coincidence that Wells had been able to discuss one of his own works, *The Time Machine* (1895), with both the US President Theodore Roosevelt and the Soviet leader V. I. Lenin.² Lodge clearly derived his information from one of the books he was reviewing, Yuli Kagarlitski’s *The Life and Thought of H. G. Wells* (1966). But, four years later, Kagarlitski would publish a note in a Russian journal explaining that he no longer believed that Lenin had spoken about *The Time Machine* with Wells at their meeting in the Kremlin in October 1920.³ This has not stopped Lenin’s alleged remarks from being widely and repeatedly quoted in both scholarly and non-scholarly sources up to the present day. Indeed, I am guilty of doing so myself in *Shadows of the Future* (1995).

What Lenin is supposed to have said about *The Time Machine* is as sensational as its origins are obscure. It is not to be found in any of Wells’s published accounts of his meeting with Lenin, beginning with Chapter 6 of *Russia in the Shadows* (1920), and there is no other official or unofficial record of what the two men may have said to one another. Yet, to quote Moura Budberg’s 1966 translation:

In 1920, after a conversation with Lenin, Wells made a note, which was published fairly recently – after the Soviet flight to the moon. ‘Lenin said,’ wrote Wells, ‘that as he read *The Time Machine* he understood that human ideas are based on the scale of the planet we live in: they are based on the assumption that the technical potentialities, as they develop, will never overstep “the earthly limit”. If we succeed in making contact with the other planets, all our philosophical, social and moral ideas will have to be revised, and will put an end to violence as a necessary means of progress.’⁴

¹ I am very grateful to Galya Diment of the University of Washington and to Wells’s Russian translator, Vitaly Babenko, for help with this contribution.

² David Lodge, ‘Assessing H. G. Wells’, *Encounter*, 28.1 (January 1967), 54-61 (56).

³ Yuli Kagarlitski, ‘Chital li Lenin Wellsa?’, *Voprosy literatury*, 10 (1970), 244.

⁴ Julius Kagarlitski, *The Life and Thought of H. G. Wells*, trans. Moura Budberg (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1966), 46.

Where had this ‘note’ written by Wells been found? Kagarlitski took it from an unspecified Russian source, later identified as an article by Elizaveta Drabkina published in both *Novy mir* and the newspaper *Izvestia* in December 1961.⁵ Here, it was credited to a French newspaper, in which it had appeared two years earlier. And, indeed, researching in the British Library very recently I came across the 15 September 1959 issue of *Paris-presse l'intransigeant*, where a front-page report of the launch of the Soviet Luna-2 rocket includes a text box headed ‘Ce qu’en pensait Lénine’, with the quotation from Wells’s alleged ‘note’ – in French! This was then translated into Russian, as we have seen, before being translated back into the language in which it must have been both written and spoken (since Lenin talked with Wells in fluent English). And the ‘note’ by Wells to which the Paris newspaper claimed access has not, I believe, been seen since.

As it happens, Lenin may possibly have read *The Time Machine* at some point after his interview with Wells, since there is a copy of the book in the Lenin Library. But, when he met the English writer, it seems that the only one of his works that Lenin had read (or perhaps just dipped into) was *Joan and Peter* (1918).⁶ The idea that *The Time Machine*, of all Wells’s scientific romances, had prompted the hard-pressed Soviet leader to think about interplanetary communications and the possibility of a world without violence must, alas, be dismissed as what the French newspaper would undoubtedly have called *un canard*.

⁵ Elizaveta Drabkina, ‘Nevozmozhnogo net!’, *Novy mir*, 12 (December 1961), 6-10. Reprinted in *Izvestia* on 22 December.

⁶ This is what he told the British sculptor Clare Sheridan a day later. (Sheridan, *Russian Portraits* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1921), 108.)