

The Eighth George Lansbury Memorial Lecture  
19 November 2020



The above is a photograph of Commissar Kokko and his wife, the first and last people I met in Soviet Russia. Both sent love and greetings to British workers.

WHAT I SAW IN  
RUSSIA

BY  
GEORGE LANSBURY

LONDON  
LEONARD PARSONS  
PORTUGAL STREET

LANSBURY, RUSSIA AND THE LEFT

Chris Bryant MP

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Cover illustration: Frontispiece of George Lansbury, *What I Saw in Russia* (London: Leonard Parsons, 1920)

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## Lansbury, Russia and the Left

Let me start by saying that although I am going to be very critical of George Lansbury today, I have always admired him. He was a survivor. His father, an itinerant navvy, drank as heavily as his mother – he started work at the age of eleven at a coal merchant's and ran away to Herefordshire to work in a pub. His father died when he was sixteen, he suffered a severe bout of ill health which left him and his wife Bessie so impoverished when his mother died that the couple, their three children and George's two youngest brothers all upped sticks for Australia. This proved fruitless and within a year they were back, with fire in George's belly.

He was one of the founding members and Vice-president of the Christian Socialist League, whose President wrote 'we are a society of Socialists of various shades of Socialist opinion, and our common platform is not that of the ILP or the SDF but that of the Church of God. Our business is to convert Churchmen and make them Socialists, but the particular tint which may colour their Socialism is no concern of the League.'<sup>1</sup>

As George put it 'I am a socialist pure and simple... I have come to believe that the motive power which should and which *will*, if men allow it, work our social salvation is the power which will come from a belief in Christ.'

That was not all, though. He had an impish sense of humour. He was a great First Commissioner of Works, giving us many of the parks we still enjoy today and saving important parts of our heritage for the nation. He was a romantic, who believed in building a new Jerusalem. He had a sense of duty, honour and principle. And the values he espoused are needed today.

On occasion, he showed a positively Blairite determination not to be distracted by unwinnable political battles, as when he opposed Labour committing itself to abolishing the monarchy as it would be 'a distraction', despite his own fervent republicanism.

He could be infuriating, though. He was so committed to women's suffrage that he famously resigned his seat in the Commons to force a by-election on the issue in 1912. There were two flaws with this. Firstly, he managed to alienate half the women's suffrage movement by not consulting them. And secondly, since women couldn't vote, he lost the election and thereby deprived the movement of a voice in parliament for a decade.

This meant of course that he was not an MP but the editor of the *Daily Herald* when he visited Russia in February and March 1920 as part of a delegation of Labour leaders. The *Herald*, which Lansbury helped found, had always supported the Russian Revolution, but the visit was controversial. No nation had yet officially recognised the new Russian Government. The United Kingdom would be the first to do so, when Ramsay MacDonald became Prime Minister in 1924, which earned the UK Ambassador in Russia's car the right to be number 1. Thousands of British troops had been engaged in trying to squash the revolution – and the last of them had only departed in February 1919. Lansbury's trip was not without internal difficulties, too, as the sixty-one-year-old admitted. At one point he was arrested and imprisoned in a 'quarantine station' in Finland. And he came to loathe and distrust the British secret service under Sir Basil Thomson. But Lansbury enjoyed unique access to senior figures, including Lenin during his trip which was extended from three weeks to nine.

He wrote his trip up in *What I Saw in Russia*, which remains one of the most optimistic and naïve books of the era. In the dedication he commemorates the brothers and sisters of all ages

who have kept alive the principles of ‘love and comradeship’, had never seen a glimpse of ‘the dawn of a new day’ but had yet remained steadfast. And he gives a special mention to ‘the young, who are destined to see not only the dawn but the full noonday sunshine of the new day.’ Lansbury was not himself a Communist. Indeed, the Labour Party had expressly declined to describe itself as a Socialist party in its founding meeting, but Lansbury saw the creation of the Bolshevik Government under Lenin as the dawning of that new day. ‘No set of men and women responsible for a revolution of the magnitude of the Russian Revolution ever made fewer mistakes or carried their Revolution through with less interference with the rights of individuals, or with less terrorism and destruction, than the men in control in Russia,’ he wrote.<sup>ii</sup>

As for Lenin, he had never met anyone ‘on the same footing of far-reaching ability, downright straightforwardness and whole-hearted enthusiasm and devotion to the cause of humanity.’<sup>iii</sup>

And as for religion, he predicted that ‘the Russian Church will rise purified and sanctified from the troubles of today and with a whole-hearted purpose join Lenin and his comrades’<sup>iv</sup> because he saw ‘the Socialists of Russia as a band of men and women striving to build the New Jerusalem [and] doing what Christians call the Lord’s work.’<sup>v</sup>

There were evident contradictions in this. The *Suffolk and Essex Free Press* noted, ‘Mr George Lansbury is a pacifist. He is hand in glove with Lenin, who believes in violent revolution... He is a professing Christian. His Russian master is a declared enemy of religion.’<sup>vi</sup>

Lansbury faced criticism in parliament for his visit. Horatio Bottomley – who later went to prison for fraud – accused Lansbury of trying to suborn British soldiers who were under arrest in Russia from their allegiance to the King by telling them that if they turned ‘Bolshevist he would undertake to obtain my immediate release.’<sup>vii</sup> Lloyd George said he had seen no evidence of this and wisely refused to prosecute, but the accusations of a lack of patriotism continued.

Lansbury was unapologetic, though. ‘I did not go to Russia as a cold-blooded investigator seeking to discover what there was of evil,’ he wrote. ‘I went as a Socialist, to see what a socialist revolution looks like at close quarters’.<sup>viii</sup>

In hindsight of course Lansbury looks very naïve. We know communism led to Stalin’s 2,000 and more gulags (the Russian acronym for ‘Chief Administration of Corrective Labour Camps and Colonies’) where every kilo of gold extracted cost a human life and more than 2,750,000 Russians died. We know that Stalin’s deliberate famine designed to force peasant farmers to join collectives saw 7 million die between 1927 and 1932.

Yet it is important to recognise that Britain and her allies had been mired in a significant rear-guard attempt to undo the revolution and thousands of Empire troops had spent nearly two years on Russian soil. Churchill would tell the Commons in 1949, that ‘the strangling of Bolshevism at its birth would have been an untold blessing to the human race.’ And he is right. But the *failed attempt* to strangle it at birth poisoned relations between Russia and the West for many decades.

Moreover, you don’t have to be a convinced Communist to point out that the Romanovs were hardly an enlightened ruling dynasty. Much of Russia still operated a form of medieval serfdom. Tsar Nicholas II proved himself a disastrous military leader in the War, the royal court was riddled with cronyism and corruption, especially exemplified by Rasputin, the vastly overpopulated Russian aristocracy was as authoritarian as it was incompetent. And millions of ordinary Russians starved.

So it is easy to see why some hoped for a brighter future in Russia, opposed the British support for the White Russians in the ongoing civil war (which itself saw 14 million die) and wanted to give the Bolsheviks the benefit of the doubt.

What was less understandable, though, was quite how long the hard left in Britain continued its romantic dewy-eyed love affair with Soviet Russia. Hewlett Johnson, for instance, the famous Red Dean of Canterbury, paid two visits to Russia in the 1930s and wrote a glowing review of Soviet Communism in *The Socialist Sixth of the World*. Most of it consisted of recycled Soviet propaganda in translation. George Bernard Shaw wrote in 1933 that ‘The power to exterminate is too grave to be left in any hands but those of a thoroughly Communist government.’

Sidney and Beatrice Webb wrote in their 1935 book *Soviet Communism: A New Civilisation?* that the deliberate famine was understandable because, ‘Strong must have been the faith and resolute the will of the men who, in the interest of what seemed to them the public good, could take so momentous a decision.’

Likewise the Labour MP Stafford Cripps joined the Communist Party member John Strachey in advocating a Popular Front combining the Labour Party, the ILP and the British Communist Party to defeat fascism. The ultimate naivete of this position was made apparent when Molotov signed the non-aggression treaty with Ribbentrop in August 1939.

Left-wing academics like Eric Hobsbawm still supported Communism when tanks rolled into Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968.

And there is still a strain in modern-day left-wing politics of bizarre nostalgia for the communist regimes in Russia, East Germany, Bulgaria, Hungary and Yugoslavia. Never mind the autocratic nature of these regimes, the denial of fundamental human rights of free speech and free assembly, the confinement of political dissidents in brutal psychiatric institutions, the espionage infrastructure and the economic stagnation. Somehow the collectivist theory trumps all such considerations.

Let’s just remember the charge sheet against Putin’s Russia.

Putin has repeatedly invaded other countries:

- He invaded South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia in August 2008, signed an agreement with Sarkozy to withdraw – and is still there.
- He annexed Crimea, even though he had guaranteed the territorial integrity of Ukraine in the Budapest Accord in exchange for which Ukraine surrendered its nuclear capability.
- He has continued to fund and resource separatist militias in Ukraine and according to the Joint Investigation Team into the downing of the Malaysian airline flight MH17, Vladislav Surkov, one of Putin’s top aides was in direct contact with the Donetsk People’s Republic military commanders who shot the plane out of the sky, killing 289.

Putin has repeatedly resorted to the excessive use of force.

- His use of gas at the Moscow Theatre siege led to the deaths of 130 hostages, in part because of the secret services’ refusal to let doctors know what gas had been used.
- His mishandling of the Beslan School siege in 2004 led to the deaths of 334 people, including 186 children. The day after the storming, bulldozers gathered the debris of the building, including the body parts of the victims, and removed it to a garbage dump. Putin’s comment? ‘We showed ourselves to be weak. And the weak get beaten.’

Putin has repeatedly despatched his political opponents.

- The murder of Anna Politkovskaya in 2006 was just one of more than a hundred journalists who have been killed during Putin’s reign.

- In 2006 he commissioned Andrei Lugavoi to murder Alexander Litvinenko with polonium in London.
- In 2018 he commissioned a colonel and a doctor in the GRU, Anatoliy Vladimirovich Chepiga, and Alexander Mishkin to travel to the UK under the false names Ruslan Boshirov and Alexander Petrov to murder Sergei Skripal with novichok. They failed – but did kill Dawn Sturgess.
- In addition he commissioned the murders of Sergei Magnitsky and Boris Nemtsov, and the poisoning of Viktor Yushchenko and Alexei Navalny.

He supported President Assad's assault on his own people.

And then there's his domestic record. Russia's GDP per capita has risen in Putin's twenty years, but its share of global GDP has fallen significantly since 2008. It remains a mono-gorod – a one industry nation, reliant on petro-carbons and therefore on global oil and gas prices. The economy has stalled since 2013. A third or more of Russia's economic activity is in the corrupt so-called 'grey' or informal sector and there has been a steady flight of capital out of the country.

Democracy has been stifled. In 2004 he gave himself the power to appoint mayors. This year he pushed through a new constitution allowing him perpetual presidency wrapped up in a referendum on increased pensions. Non-governmental organisations have been hassled into bankruptcy or closed. Those involved in political demonstrations are given crippling fines. Gay 'propaganda' is banned. Corruption is endemic and Transparency International ranks Russia 137<sup>th</sup> out of 180 nations.

And yet for some inexplicable reason some on the left have a romantic attachment to Russia, even under a right-wing, security state nationalist like Putin. I can only explain it as follows. Some on the left see the world in a Manichean way. There is good and there is bad. Darkness and light. America is bad. It stands for neo-liberalism, the arms trade and unfettered capitalism. It stops Cuba, Iran and Venezuela from flourishing. America's friends must be dubious and America's enemies must therefore be good.

If that's how your mind is set, it must be difficult to see things straight. But that's the only way I can explain Jeremy Corbyn's extraordinary decision to side with the Russians in the Salisbury incident. Send the novichok to Putin for him to test it, he suggested.

That wasn't all. In the general election last year Jeremy Corbyn called for Nato to de-escalate tensions with Russia and signalled that he would downgrade Britain's relationship with the US if he became prime minister.

I should say that Tory Prime Ministers have been equally naïve, albeit in a different way. David Cameron believed he could press the reset button with Putin. He thought a purely mercantilist approach with a BRIC economy was in the UK's interests. He and William Hague pursued more trade with Russia, even when many industrialists in the UK were warning that it is difficult to do more trade in a country where bribery is endemic.

So, what should be the basis of our future relations with Russia?

1. A relentless determination to tackle Russian state corruption, especially as it infiltrates the UK through wealthy Russians laundering money through the London property, banking and legal system. That must mean far greater transparency and an end to the 'golden' Tier 1 visas for those with £2 million to invest.
2. A clear-sighted focus on human rights abuses in Russia – as with human rights in every country, as humanity is a single entity and human rights are a single seamless garment.

3. A deep respect for Russian culture, its history and its way of life.
4. An ‘eyes wide open’ approach to every engagement, recognising our shared agenda where we can but equally recognising that Russia has her own economic interests – and her present leaders have a set of personal interests which they are often determined to pursue.

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<sup>i</sup> *Church Socialist Quarterly*, vol. IV, no. 3, July 1909, pp. 236-7.

<sup>ii</sup> George Lansbury, *What I Saw in Russia*, London, Leonard Parsons, 1920, p. xiii.

<sup>iii</sup> George Lansbury, *What I Saw in Russia*, London, Leonard Parsons, 1920, p. 22.

<sup>iv</sup> George Lansbury, *What I Saw in Russia*, London, Leonard Parsons, 1920, p. 52.

<sup>v</sup> George Lansbury, *What I Saw in Russia*, London, Leonard Parsons, 1920, p. xv.

<sup>vi</sup> Suffolk and Essex Free Press, 14 April 1920, p. 3.

<sup>vii</sup> *House of Commons Debates*, 2 December 1920, vol. 135, col. 1426.

<sup>viii</sup> George Lansbury, *What I Saw in Russia*, London, Leonard Parsons, 1920, p. xiii.