

THE EARLY “IRON CURTAIN”

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In his famous Westminster College address on 5 March 1946 in Fulton, Missouri, Winston Churchill fired one of the opening salvos of the Cold War by proclaiming that from “Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic an iron curtain” had been lowered across Europe. Patrick Wright’s intriguing and provocative book does not examine the phrase “iron curtain” in its popular Cold War context. Instead, he maintains that many characteristics of this metaphor, “including the pronounced sense of theatricality it would bring to international politics, were inherited from the period before the Second World War” (p. 18).

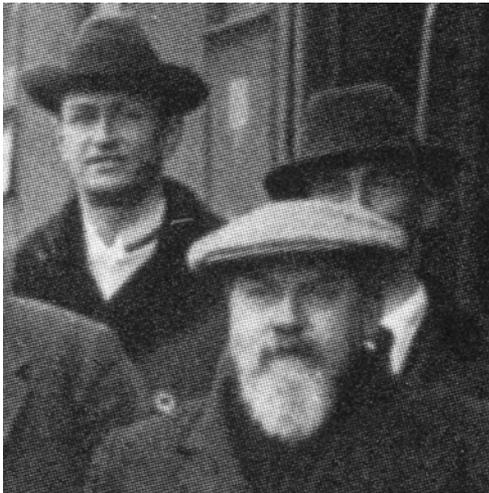
Wright divides *Iron Curtain* into two primary chronological sections, the first covering the period from 1914 to 1920. An iron curtain originally referred to the steel safety screen that descended in English theatres, beginning in the late-eighteenth century, to separate the audience from the often catastrophic fires that broke out on the stage. The phrase entered the lexicon of international relations in January 1915 when British author and pacifist Violet Page (writing under the pseudonym Vernon Lee) published an article lamenting that “War’s cruelties and recriminations, War’s monstrous iron curtain” (p. 80) had alienated European nations such as England and Germany sharing a common cultural heritage. But the barrier quickly moved east in the aftermath of the 1917 Russian Revolution and “took the form not just of exaggerated political rhetoric, but of an economic blockade enforced by naval power” (p. 171), as the Allies sought to contain the infection of Bolshevism. Wright devotes most attention in this section to documenting the 1920 visit to Russia by the British delegation jointly sponsored by the Trades Union Congress and the Labour Party, which sought to penetrate the dense fog of Allied anti-Bolshevik propaganda and validate the delegation members’ own preconceived views about the nascent socialist utopia in Russia. British delegates witnessed images both of progress carefully stage-managed by their hosts and of terrible economic dislocation and poverty caused by the Allied blockade and the civil war, which allowed the majority of them to return home to lavish praise on the Soviet experiment that would, in their minds, inevitably fulfil its potential once the Bolshevik government became stable.

The second section of Wright's book examines Western reports of life behind the iron curtain between 1920 and 1939. Here, the author focuses heavily on the theatrical nature of Soviet attempts to create modern-day Potemkin villages that were—with a limited number of exceptions—accepted as reality by an endless parade of left-wing visitors. A second British Trades Union Congress delegation in 1924, for example, received a dramatically embellished picture of Soviet economic progress that included a train journey past a long-abandoned factory belching smoke created by burning wet straw frantically provided by Russian peasants; the resulting report of the delegation “repeatedly collapsed into the most abject conformity with the Soviet view of reality” (p. 245). The most tragic examples of Western visitors' blindness to the truth occurred during the 1930s famine deliberately induced by Stalin, and Wright exposes a wide cast of characters who adopted a blinkered view of conditions in the USSR. Among intellectuals, Wright documents the 1931 visit of George Bernard Shaw, who cavalierly dismissed reports of widespread food shortages while dining sumptuously in Moscow's Hotel Metropole. Among journalists, Wright develops the case of Walter Duranty, the *New York Times* correspondent who knuckled under to demands of Soviet censors to produce sanitized accounts denying or ignoring the famine in order to protect his privileged place in that society. Among politicians, the “eminent visiting dupe” (p. 321) was Édouard Herriot, the socialist mayor of Lyon and former French prime minister who visited cities in the famine zones in 1933 which temporarily had been carefully cleansed of any signs of poverty or want. Wright deftly closes by returning the focus to Winston Churchill, emphasizing his links with many of the *dramatis personae* of the interwar years discussed in the book and the rapid development of Churchill's Cold War definition of the iron curtain.

Bertrand Russell scholars will find much in *Iron Curtain* of significant value. Russell frequently employed the phrase “iron curtain” in its Cold War application in his published work, the first occurring in April 1949 when he warned that “East of the Iron Curtain, all that has made Europe valuable to mankind is extinct. And the Iron Curtain, alas, is capable of moving westwards.”¹ Russell does not appear to have explicitly referred to the iron curtain in the interwar period, but his writings on international relations at that time are filled with the idea of a sharp political, social, and economic divide between Soviet Russia and the West. Wright frequently refers to Russell's observations while he accompanied the 1920 Labour Party delegation to Russia, and Russell was one of the few returning Britons who refused to lavish fulsome praise on the Bolshevik experiment. The greatest utility of *Iron Curtain* is its capacity to place Russell's interwar writings on Russia within the broader current of left-wing thought.

¹ “The Future of Europe”, *European Affairs* 1, no. 1 (April 1949): 3.

Wright's dismissal of the 1924 TUC delegation's official report, for example, can be compared with Russell's much more favourable evaluation.² Although Russell recognized that the TUC report was "not an impartial scientific survey", he concluded that "the bulk of it seems incontrovertible" and "an unprejudiced reader is forced to admit that the case for the defence is a very strong one" in light of the apparent economic and social progress occurring in Russia after the civil war ended. Furthermore, Wright provides valuable information about a host of individuals with whom Russell interacted, including personal acquaintances in Britain such as Philip and Ethel Snowden, Clifford Allen, and E. D. Morel, and disillusioned former supporters of Bolshevism such as Emma Goldman and Freda Utley. Finally, plate 16 provides Russellians with the opportunity to speculate about the identity of the individual partially shielded by the bearded Ben Turner on the train platform at Narva, Estonia, in May 1920. If this is Russell, it is the only known photograph of him taken during his visit to Russia with the Labour Party delegation.³



In sum, *Iron Curtain* is a superb piece of scholarship with only a few discernible blemishes. Wright's frequent anecdotal digressions—ranging from the proper preparation of Missouri hickory-smoked ham to Churchill's plans to institute scarlet dress uniforms in the British army as a recruiting tool—entertain

² "The New Economic Policy in Soviet Russia", *Foreign Affairs* 6 (June 1925): 282–3.

³ Cf. the 1918 photograph of Russell in hat and overcoat in Ronald Clark, *Bertrand Russell and His World* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1981), p. 58.

the reader but often cloud the book's primary theme. The chronological integrity of the narrative is also occasionally compromised. After introducing the 1920 British delegation to Russia in the eighth chapter, for example, Wright discusses, among other topics, camouflage during the Great War, the economic blockade against Germany, and the institutional weaknesses of the League of Nations before returning in the eleventh chapter to the Labour visit to Russia. Finally, Wright seems at times forced to adopt an inflated definition of the East–West divide beyond the specific metaphor of the iron curtain, and he admits that the book's title phrase "seems to have fallen into comparative disuse during the 1930s" (p. 285). But these issues do not seriously detract from the impressive quality of this study. In *Tank* and *The Village That Died for England*, Wright previously offered unique and compelling interpretations of military technology and English rural life, and *Iron Curtain* will only add to his established reputation as a leading cultural and social historian.
