

Extract from:

## **Iron Curtain: From Stage to Cold War**

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### 4. Camouflage and Potemkinism: George Lansbury's example – from chapter 8

Accusations of 'camouflage' would fly in both directions as the British argued over the Soviet revolution. Visiting Russia in September 1920, H.G. Wells was repeatedly warned that he would be 'hoodwinked' by the Bolsheviks, and that 'the most elaborate camouflage of realities would go on.' By that time Churchill himself had become engaged in a ferocious correspondence with James H. Baum, the socialist secretary of Leicester and District Trades Council, who had written to denounce the British government's 'war policy against Soviet Russia.' Baum insisted that 'the great mass of the people' had been deliberately kept in the dark, as Churchill must have known 'perfectly well', and that the policy had been 'deliberately camouflaged by you, your colleagues and the vast press that keeps you in power.'

H.G. Wells replied to the charge that he would inevitably be deceived by insisting that 'the harsh and terrible realities of the situation in Russia cannot be camouflaged,' since it was 'hardly possible to dress up two large cities for the benefit of two stray visitors.' A similar rebuttal would be made by the French convert, Marcel Cachin. Speaking in December 1920 at the Congress of Tours (at which the Communist faction won control of the French Socialist Party), Cachin repudiated the accusation that he had been duped by 'Potemkin villages' during his visits to Russia, insisting that 'in reality it is impossible to camouflage an entire country.'

In Britain, the Tory Press had allowed no such doubts as it accused George Lansbury [Christian Socialist, labour leader and editor of the Daily Herald] of having yielded to systematic stage-management when he returned from Bolshevik Russia, brimming with the defiant enthusiasm of one who had seen the coming of the Lord, a few weeks before the British Labour Delegation set off on their mission.

The Morning Post opened the attack by printing a letter by a correspondent who could not, so the paper claimed, safely be identified except as a 'prominent Russian in Moscow'. Dated 16 March 1920, this missive described how the utterly miserable conditions in Moscow had been aggravated by an almost complete absence of electricity. The Kremlin may have glowed all night like a beacon, but ordinary people were reduced to spending 'their last roubles in buying seats for the theatres, not to see or enjoy the plays, but simply because they are the only public buildings in Moscow which are accessible to all and are warm (from the heat of hundreds of spectators) and lighted.' Yet a few weeks previously, so this anonymous witness testified, things had suddenly got better for a few days:

Quite unexpectedly one evening the current was switched on all over the town, the principal streets were lit up. You can't imagine what a treat it was. The trams were started again . . . We didn't know why this transformation took place so suddenly till we heard that a famous English statesman – a certain Lord Lansbury (do you know him?) – had arrived from London to negotiate peace, and our rulers wanted to show off Moscow at her best – aren't they childish – as if any intelligent Englishman, even if he was so carefully "conducted" over the place and shown only "Potemkin (sic) villages," like this Lord Lansbury, could not perfectly well realise what a state Russia is in, and that all the things he was shown were only "stage-settings".

Genuine or not, this letter had triggered a heated correspondence. Responding to his own 'accidental' elevation to the peerage, Lansbury named the western journalists with whom he had

shared his visit to Moscow: he dubbed them variously Viscount, Count, Senator and Judge, and then went on to mock, without specifically denying, the *Morning Post's* allegations that he had been served with 'sumptuous food' and 'splendid entertainment.' Other anti-Bolshevik witnesses quickly responded to this further provocation, including a number of recently returned Britons who described how they too had seen 'Lord Lansbury' in Moscow, whirling past in a car full of commissars bent on preventing him from 'having intercourse with any but specially chosen people'. As Albert V. Frank wrote of the steps that were taken to control and improve the view from Lansbury's limousine, 'I confirm that not only were the places visited by Mr. Lansbury specially prepared for his visits but also that the streets and boulevards were better lighted for his special benefit than they had been hitherto or have been since his departure'.