

Melanie Ilic

Nelson Fell: Eyewitness to the February Revolution

The following extracts from the diary and letters of Nelson Fell provide an insight into the revolutionary events taking place between February and May 1917 from the perspective of an overseas eyewitness. After detailing his visit to the Romanov family in Tsarskoe Selo, Fell outlines the gradual unfolding of the events of the revolution as they took place on the streets of Moscow and, later, in Petrograd. One of his letters details his experience of train travel during his trip to Kazan' in March 1917. In the final extract from May 1917, Fell considers the fate of Tsarism and the future prospects for further revolution in Russia.

Nelson Fell was born on 11 October 1895 in New Haven, Connecticut, and became part of an extensively travelled family¹. His father, Edward Nelson Fell, was a mining engineer, who moved with his family to Russia in 1901 to become manager of the Spasskii copper mine on the Kirghiz steppes in Siberia, remaining in post until 1908. The Fells were astute observers and keen recorders of their surroundings and experiences. Various literary sketches detail their stay in Russia – they are supplemented and superbly illustrated by pencil drawings and watercolours. The family had a camera and an extensive slide and photographic collection forms part of the family archive. Postcards, song

sheets and embroidered cloths have also been preserved.

The years 1901 to 1908 provided Nelson Fell's introduction to the Russian empire, its language, culture and peoples. Although his family was based for the most part in Kirghizia, he spent some of this time attending schools in England and Germany, including two to three years in England at Rugby school before returning to the United States to complete his schooling in Newport, Rhode Island. He recalled his experiences of Russia in short articles contributed to the school magazines. In 1913, he took up a place at Harvard University, graduating to the Law School in 1916. Very soon, however, Nelson abandoned his studies, joined the war effort working with the Red Cross and travelled back to Russia

¹ For more detail on Nelson Fell and his family, see Ilic 1999.

After the events related in the materials published here² and following the United States' entry to the First World War in 1917, Nelson Fell returned to America and enlisted in the army aviation corps, serving much of his time in Europe. He was discharged in 1919. Fell worked for a short period in New York before returning to law school in 1921, this time at the University of Virginia. He graduated with distinction in 1924. He qualified for the Bar and continued to work as an attorney, forming a partnership in October 1926. On 19 December 1926, at the age of 31 years, he died in a car crash.

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Nelson Fell took on the responsibility to oversee the delivery to the Red Cross of forty ambulances to Russia, and he sometimes had to rely on the *ambulance money* for his own financial support during the trip. He set sail from America on 6 January 1917, arriving in Liverpool on 15 January, and eventually in Petrograd on 3 February.

² The diary and letter extracts (edited by Melanie Ilic) are included here with the kind permission of Jamie Vans.

The first few days in Petrograd were spent preparing for business, making arrangements for a reception with the Tsarina, for whom Nelson was carrying a Gift Book, and shopping.

With his travelling companions, Nelson Fell was granted a fifteen-minute audience with the Tsarina on 9 February during which they discussed the “ambulances and their work” (Diary entry: 9 February 1917). They hoped that the patronage of the Tsarina would secure the safe passage of the ambulances from their arrival in Archangel to their delivery at the front. The diary entry for this day details the trip to Tsarskoe Selo, the imperial palace and the appearances of the Tsarina and two of her daughters, Ol’ga and Tat’iana.

Soon after, Nelson Fell began preparations for his trip to Moscow. He left Petrograd on 13 February, on which day his diary notes that there were “vast seething crowds on our platform for all civilian Moscow-Petrograd traffic is to be stopped in two days” (Diary entry: 13 February 1917). He arrived in Moscow on the following day.

The early days in Moscow were spent in a round of business appointments, social engagements and cultural outings. From Moscow, Nelson

Fell made a short trip to Kazan' from 26 February to 3 March. He arrived back in Moscow on 6 March, noting in his diary that "in Moscow there is no bread; only 200 miles away" (Diary entry: 6 March 1917). A few days later, he recorded: "Absolutely nothing going on. (...) Rumours of troubles in Petrograd about food. There may be some here too, for the bread lines are

growing immensely long" (Diary entry: 10 March 1917).

Nelson Fell's account of the Russian revolution starts on 13 March 1917. He left Moscow and returned to Petrograd at the end of March, where he remained during April, when Lenin returned to the city.

Bibliography

Ilic 1999: Melanie Ilic, *The Diary and Letters of Nelson Fell*, «Revolutionary Russia», I, 1999, 12, pp. 115-56.

Materials and Discussions