

“Russia owes a great deal to Mr Stead”: Tsarism’s unlikely champion and the international press

an article by Janet Ashton

originally published in Atlantis magazine, Vol. 5, no. 2, 2004

W.T. Stead was a legend in his own lifetime. Sensational journalist who invented the dubious concept of “trial by journalism”, ceaseless social campaigner, spiritualist, self-publicist, childrens’ author, Joycean prototype (he inspired *Finnegan’s Wake*) and *Titanic* victim, he left a mountain of written evidence behind him. Considering his spiritualist preoccupation, it is not too surprising that many of these works are even posthumous. Today he is probably remembered above all as the man who went to prison for the purchase of a thirteen-year-old girl, but in his own day he was equally well known – among other things - for his loud and unpopular championing in the British press of the cause of Tsarist Russia, and for being the first journalist ever to interview an Emperor.

William Thomas Stead was born at Embleton in the northeast of England on July 5th 1849, second child and eldest son of a country clergyman and his wife. His two-year-old sister Mary, distressed at losing her status as “sole daughter of the house and heart” of their parents, responded to his arrival by suggesting that he be put down the well like a supernumary kitten. Stead enjoyed this tale in later years, repeating it often with glee to his own children. [1] He and the unwelcoming sibling became in the end very close, sharing their lessons and a rivalry for their father’s approval, since their father was also their first teacher and would have whichever child was currently top of the class on his knee during lessons while the other had to make do with a stool. They were taught exactly the same subjects, and Stead claimed that he already knew Latin to degree standard when he went away to school at just twelve. [2] There were other younger children too, including a brother who died aged fifteen from scarlet fever and a sister who only lived three years. Infant mortality was common in all walks of society in the England of the 1850s, but it was never taken lightly, and perhaps to an extent it contributed to the contemporary fascination with the paranormal and all manner of life after death. Stead’s spiritualist friends said that he was often seen during his own séances with the manifestation of a little blonde child beside him. They assumed this was his sister Henrietta.

His equal, companionable relationship with Mary most likely laid the ground for the many (theoretically) platonic friendships he had with women as an adult, as well as for his own ardent feminism. Stead was reasonably unusual in his generation for accepting women as his intellectual equals, but he also had a decidedly romantic, protective attitude that manifested itself very early in a profound awareness of the opposite sex and a series of crushes. “In his life and actions he was undoubtedly a rigid moral Puritan and his strong self-control kept him in the narrow path,” wrote the sex analyst Havelock Ellis when asked for own opinions of Stead’s adult preoccupations and relationships. “But in his interests and emotions he was anything but a Puritan, and in the absence of that stern self-

control he would have been quite a debauched person. The mastery of sexuality was a great problem with him. His repressed sexuality was, I consider, the motive force of many of his activities." [3] Stead might have agreed with him; he could write with considerable honesty and openness on his own confused feelings for women who were supposed to be platonic friends. He did so privately, however; his public utterances were never less than proper where his own intimates were concerned.

At the time of Oscar Wilde's conviction for homosexual activity, Stead put some of his stern thoughts on the necessity for platonic relationships into writing: "The heinousness of the crime of Oscar Wilde and his associates does not lie, as is usually supposed, in its being unnatural. It would be unnatural for seventy-nine out of eighty persons. It is natural for the abnormal person who is in a minority of one. If the promptings of our animal nature are to be the only guide, the punishment of Oscar Wilde would savour of persecution, and he might fairly claim our sympathy as the champion of individualism against the tyranny of an intolerant majority. But we are not merely animal. We are human beings living together in society, whose aim is to render social intercourse as free and as happy as possible. At present, fortunately, people of the same sex can travel together, and live together in close intimacy, without any one even dreaming of any scandal. Between persons of the same sex suspicion of impropriety or the thought of indecency has been so effectually banished that the mere suggestion of the possibility will seem to most an incredible absurdity. Between individuals of opposite sexes no such free unfettered communion of life is possible. That, however, is the goal towards which we ought to progress; and it would be a fatal blunder at the very moment when we are endeavouring to rid friendship between man and woman of the blighting shadow of possible wrong-doing, were we to acquiesce in the re-establishment of that upas shade over the relations between man and man and man and woman." [4] Thus, by suppressing the sexual element of his feelings, he hoped to be able to enjoy many natural, intimate, and intellectually fulfilling relationships with women.

"Somehow I have never been very sorry for men. I have been sorry for horses, for women and for birds, but men have not touched me," he wrote carefully as an adult thinking back on his childhood attitude to the opposite sex. [5]. Aged five, he admitted, he was in love with Queen Elizabeth I; not much after that he transferred this to two more of her same name: his own aunt Bessie and a little girl called Lizzie. At ten he experienced what he called his "first serious love affair" with a girl named Lydia, who had long blonde curls and ignored him completely. "All the village boys were crazy over her" he recalled, and he ended by having a public fight with one of these rivals. His sister, deeply ashamed, conspired with him to keep news of this from Papa, who as vicar would have been mortified to hear of his offspring engaged in a common brawl. [6] Not until he was eighteen though, Stead admitted, did he find a woman who actually deigned to pay him any attention in return!

In 1861 the twelve year old Stead was sent to Silcoates School near Wakefield. He seems to have been fairly popular and successful, acquiring "cricket, Christianity and democracy" from his lessons there. To readers of his many autobiographical articles, it must have seemed strange that this minister's son only acquired religion in his teens; but then, Stead himself declared, he had been "born without the bump of veneration" [7] He questioned everything remorselessly, and his father's Congregationalist religion would

have been less a model than a challenge to argument for the boy. Nevertheless, at school he seems to have become convinced, and thereafter Christianity was one of the guiding forces of his life, strongly informing his many social and political crusades and furnishing the rather purple titles of many of his works. (“If Christ came to Chicago”; “The maiden tribute of modern Babylon”, “Satan’s world” and so forth).

Stead had just two years of formal education before leaving school to become a shipping clerk in Newcastle. The job bored him; he began to plan a massive biography of Oliver Cromwell, having always had leanings towards being a writer, though his parents had dissuaded him from trying to make it his career. While pondering his magnum opus (never in the event to be published) he also began to submit articles and letters – often moralistic rants about the evils of prostitution, which was much on his mind for some reason - to local newspapers, and was enormously surprised to be offered out of the blue the job of editor of the *Darlington Echo*. He was just twenty; the youngest newspaper editor ever appointed. [8] He was also one of the most noticeable. Slightly under average height, blue-eyed and red-headed with, in time, a full beard like so many mid-Victorians, he did not stand out physically from the crowd. It was his behaviour which attracted attention. According to one perhaps apocryphal tale, even while at the shipping office he had been in the habit of catching office mice, cooking them, and serving them up to himself on toast, in order to understand the experiences the besieged residents of Paris (it was 1871 and the Franco-Prussian War was on). [9] This type of behaviour was to be repeated in spades when he became a public figure.

A campaign while editor was both to make Stead’s national reputation as a journalist and simultaneously cement his popular association with Russia.

In later years he furnished his “Somehow I have never been very sorry for men,” quote while discussing his pity for the horses of the Crimean War, which he said was one of his earliest memories. His real association with Russia, however, dated from his days as a shipping clerk. His employer was also Russian Vice Consul in the city, and introduced him to members of the Russian community there as well as to crews from Russian ships, which meant that for Stead the Russian Empire was somehow less strange than it seemed to much of the British population. [10] In 1876 Serbia went to war with Turkey over the putative independence of two Balkan states comprising part of Turkey’s Empire: Bosnia and Herzegovina. Russia was inclined to favour the Balkan states; British public opinion, with the Crimean War of two decades previous still on its collective mind, instinctively sided with the Ottoman Empire. Amongst politicians, William Ewart Gladstone tended to a different opinion, pointing to the atrocities committed by the Sultan’s armies and – as a liberal - leaning on principle towards Balkan self-determination.

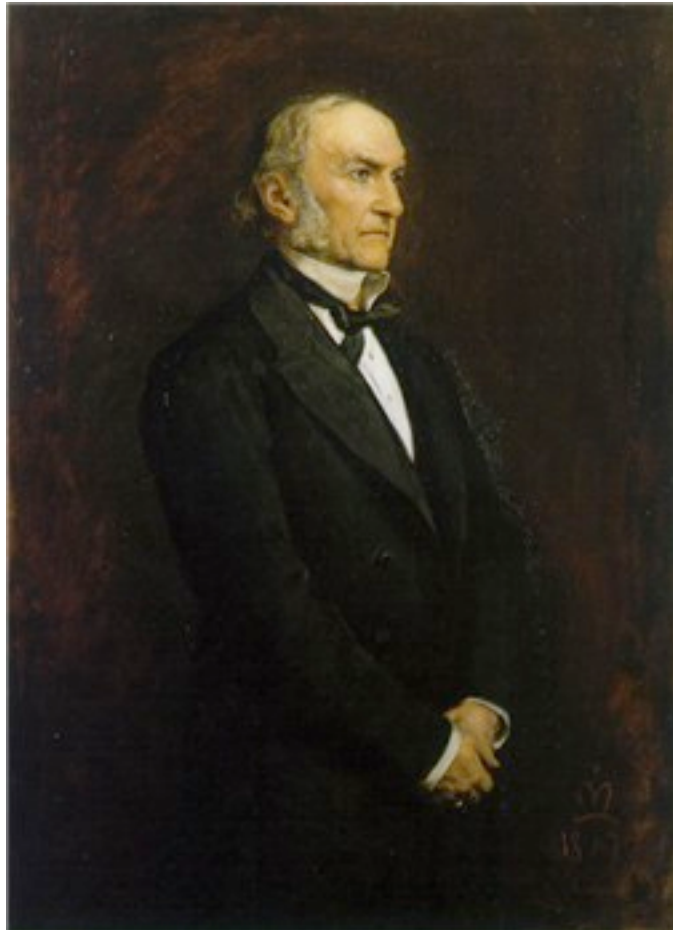
Gladstone was the least glamorous of politicians. He had a didactic and lecturing manner which put peoples’ backs up, including Queen Victoria’s: she complained that he talked to her as if she were a public meeting. He was also dourly moralistic, opposing the liberalisation of divorce laws, and prone to pithy and acerbic comment. In addition to all of this, he had a particular propensity to befriend “fallen women”, entering into extensive correspondence with Lily Langtry and inviting prostitutes into his home to minister to their souls. In the climate of mid-Victorian England, where surface respectability

concealed appalling sexual squalor of various kinds, this peccadillo attracted attention from other politicians – both wry and not so wry.

Stead must have felt an instinctive sympathy for this man. His own liberal politics, his fascination with the seamy side of life – apparently ministering and benevolent, but veering towards the prurient – and above all his unfashionable sympathy for Russia, tended to make him a natural champion for the politician’s cause. In one respect they differed hugely: Stead was colourful and flamboyant, a master of melodrama and of the overstated gesture. After seeing Gladstone campaigning against Turkey – a sight he rated as number one in his list of “the most memorable scenes of my life” [11] he championed the politician’s cause and he popularized it. Flinging such terms as “moral eunuch” into the face of the pro-Turkish Prime Minister Disraeli, he is credited with changing

Gladstone’s image into that of the upstanding “Grand Old Man” of British politics, the nickname known to posterity. [12]

Gladstone, in the long term, showed himself less than grateful. “That man has done more harm to Journalism than any other individual ever known.” he once declared, expressing all-too-common misgivings about Stead’s cavalier style. [13]



William Ewart Gladstone, painted by Millais

His Russian articles for the *Darlington Echo* also earned Stead the attention of Olga Novikoff. This lady, born Olga Alekseiévna Kireeva in Moscow in 1840, was a campaigner and independent journalist who spent much time traveling about Europe promoting her causes. She hailed from the most influential circles, being goddaughter and reputed illegitimate daughter of Tsar Nicholas I [14]. Her whole family was in court service; one brother, Alexander General Kireev, was attached to the suite of the determinedly Russophile Grand Duke Konstantin Kostantinovich [15], and Olga had

received much of her own social education in the sophisticated Petersburg salons of the Grand Duchess Elena Pavlovna [16]. It was there that she first met the baleful right-wing philosopher Konstantin Peobedonotsev, who was to play a small but important part in Stead's story too [17].

Olga married very young to the future curator of Petersburg University, and they had one son, Sasha. But Ivan Novikov, who was twenty years older than his wife, seems to have played little role in her adult life, and in her writing she even adopted a pseudonym based on her maiden name: "O.K.", for Olga Kireeva. The real loves of her life were ecumenical religion, Anglo-Russian understanding and the Slavophile philosophy, and Stead correctly saw the latter as a worldview which underpinned everything else:

"The Slavophile point of view is somewhat difficult to make clear to westerns whose politics are not based on any philosophical conception and who are to a man opportunists. The Slavophile approaches the world from a metaphysical, religious and philosophical point of view. Having established himself firmly upon these foundations, he applies his principles to the solution of all questions of contemporary politics in a manner which in the west would be regarded as doctrinaire and visionary.... They have no sympathy with despotism, but they believe in the Slav race, and especially they believe in Russia, the elder brother of the Slavs. Holy Russia is to them what ideal England is to us, and their Pan-Slavonic faith anticipated in many points the spirit of ideal British imperialism.... The nearest analogy that can be found in English politics is the school of the liberal imperialists as opposed to the jack-booted imperialists of the Jingo stripe."

[18] It was an awkward analogy. Liberal imperialism certainly saw Britain as a benevolent big brother, spreading civilisation and education to the basically willing, but no significant part of the British Empire actually *asked* to be ruled that way, or invited the Europeans in. They simply had to work with what arrived. The essential philosophical component of Slavophile thought, on the other hand, was the (originally religious) notion of the commune; of *sobornost*. Its most ardent proponents viewed the cooperative organization of the Russian peasant commune as the ideal form of society: apparently inward-looking, unworldly, and composed of people who *voluntarily* surrendered personal autonomy in order to enjoy the benefits of commune and the freedom to concentrate upon higher matters. Whatever Stead's opinion, this sort of thinking (however paternalistic in intent) is inherently sympathetic to despotism because the individual actually has no choice: he actually cannot opt out or hold a disparate opinion of authority because if he does, the community itself will cease to exist. In the political realm, this type of thinking leaves little room for political development of any kind: it enshrines autocracy and stifles debate, whereas liberal imperialism at least recognizes the point at which the "civilizer's" services are no longer required by the host nation. Stead was closer to summing this philosophical difficulty up when he wrote of Olga's attitude to revolutionaries:

"The genuine Slavophile regards his revolutionary compatriot not merely with the natural indignation which the advocates of established order regard those who would turn a world upside down.... the revolutionist is not merely an enemy to society, he is also a blasphemer against the sacred mission of the nation." [19] Religiously and philosophically and practically, the Slavophile commune could not *permit* dissent to exist.

Olga Novikoff's longing for Anglo-Russian understanding apparently arose from her brother Nicholas's death in the Crimean War [20], and manifested itself in a fierce desire to make her native land understood in her (almost) adoptive one – as well as vice versa. Lodging while in Britain at Symonds Hotel on Brook Street in London, she surrounded herself with a circle of like-minded people and campaigned tirelessly in articles and through contacts on behalf of her causes. [21] She was overjoyed with Stead's pro-Russian writings, and began to correspond with the controversial young editor. It was the beginning of a lifelong friendship that "although subjected to many violent strains" was destined never to be "interrupted for a single week." [22] He described her lyrically as "a kind of Russian Lorelei, whose melodious voice lured British statesmen to their fate. Men admired her and fell in love with her but never compromised her, for even the tongue of lawless scandal never meddled with her good name. Women were jealous of her, as was inevitable, nor was it entirely without cause. Not that Madame Novikoff was to blame, for how could she help it if husbands loved to linger for an hour in the little salon where the most brilliant men and women attended her court." [23] There were obvious differences between them to account for the occasional "violent strains": Olga with her philosophical outlook naturally believed in autocracy, and she was actively anti-semitic, whereas Stead professed left-wing opinions. "In England, civilization has come from below" Olga wrote, with the geographic relativism that was characteristic of the Slavophiles, but "in Russia the process is reversed. Russia is an empire of villages. The enormous expanse of roadless territory renders spontaneous civilisation impossible" [24] Stead believed in democracy for Russia, but he argued constantly that the process of political change needed very careful handling because of Russia's history. This commonsense point of view was little appreciated in Victorian England, which prided itself on sheltering political refugees of all kinds and heard a great deal but the iniquities of the Tsarist regime. It was not uncommon for Russian terrorists to be welcomed in London as freedom fighters driven to desperation by their tyrannical government.

"Madame Novikoff," wrote Stead years later, "has always been in sharp antagonism to the revolutionary party and to the revolutionary exiles in London. This, though natural and inevitable, has often provoked criticism and excited indignation in some who find it impossible to realize that a cultured, liberal-minded citizen of the world like Madame Novikoff can be out of sympathy with the revolutionary movement that finds its last word in the bomb of the assassin." [25]

With statements like this, Stead gained a reputation as a toady to the imperial government – of which more later.

His relationship with Olga attracted snide comment from his journalistic rivals too, since he was by this time a married man, having "fallen in love three times" with Emma Wilson (the first two times he was ignored) before they finally wed in 1876. In the early days of the marriage, there may have been genuine difficulties between the two of them – over Stead's driven



Olga Novikoff, 1875

attitude to work, and indeed over his relationship with Olga. Early in 1879, reflecting upon the year past, he wrote in his diary,

“Sometimes, I felt as if I had done Emma a cruel wrong by persuading her to marry me. I have seen no woman who would have been acceptable as a wife but her, but she might have found many a more suitable husband. More like herself, I mean, living on the same plane, and not absorbed by work with a passion for seclusion. I have treated her cruelly, not willfully, but because my whole soul was charged, to the exclusion of everything else, with political subjects with which she sympathised but languidly, and at the crisis of these three years I had not time nor patience nor strength to interest her.

So it came to pass that I met another soul as surcharged with kindred thoughts, and we met and our existences mingled. But I do not wish I had married O.K. I prefer and even in the height of the first excitement I never wavered in preferring Emma as a wife, the only possible wife to me on this planet and I have repaid her how? How dark the future looks. This new year must see a change. Either it restores my wife to me, or it consummates the shipwreck of what I had fondly, passionately hoped would be a Christian home.

But my head is very bad and it is time to go to chapel, at least to get tea before going to chapel. Oh God, almighty yet loving God, help me to live without torturing those who love me.” [26]

This entry says as much about Stead’s genuine love and concern for his wife as it says about any problems they were experiencing. Certainly, they must have managed to get through these teething troubles, and through other, subsequent occasions when Stead’s eyes or feelings strayed, for they went on to have six children and remained together for the rest of their lives. Stead, ever the campaigner, has unfortunately furnished posterity with details of the birth control practices they employed to limit their family. The preferred means was strategic withdrawal, described in such excruciating clinical detail that he renders it all horribly clammy, and it’s a wonder Emma wanted to have sex with him at all!



*W. T Stead with Emma and their young family
(courtesy www.attackingthediabol.co.uk)*

In 1880 the young Stead family upped sticks and moved to London. On the back of his anti-Turkish campaign, as well as some loud lobbying for Naval rearmament, William Thomas had been offered the job of assistant editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette*. Loving his home territory in the northeast, with its compact if grimy cities and wild, castle-studded countryside, he was not especially eager to move to the capital. But Emma wanted a change; their early married life had not been smooth, and she needed a fresh start. Stead accepted the job offer. “If God needs a newspaper editor of style in London, I will serve his turn best,” he wrote with characteristic lack of modesty as he took up the post. [27] “No events since 1880 have not been influenced by WT Stead” the politician Lord Esher was to write years later [28]; and certainly this new post brought him a prominence he

might never have gained as a provincial journalist. Even in Darlington he had refused to go to work in a top hat; here in London he was to reinvent the image of both journalists and newspapers.

Stead had no time for the all-but-illegibly close-typed pages of the *Times* and other broadsheets, with their dry articles and smeared advertisements all over the front page. He introduced the blaring headline, he interviewed public figures of the day, and he tailored his writing style to appeal – so he hoped - to everyone. London was not without its scandal-sheets already: *Lloyd's newspaper* and the curiously-named *Pink 'un* kept readers in gossip, but the *Gazette* was the first respectable paper to adopt their style. Stead's pieces screamed of the “shuddering horror”, the “maelstroms of vice” of London life, adopting, as one observer pithily observes, the language of pornography even as he protested against it.[29] He gained a reputation for irresponsible rabble-rousing, much as the Salvation Army he admired and whose overwrought tactics he borrowed was blamed for actually increasing the rate of illegitimate birth in the East End by exciting an atmosphere of hysteria at its religious rallies. [30] Even his personal life and appearance played their part in his own particular cult of celebrity: he lived in Wimbledon, and early in the mornings could be seen out on the Common with his children, in a dressing gown, giving each a ride on a little donkey that he owned. One morning, very early, he received important news, and arrived in town much ahead of his usual time, wearing the dressing gown, and riding on the donkey. He was completely insensible to ridicule, except, perhaps, as one contemporary noted, “in the sense that it pleased him more to be laughed at than not noticed at all.” [31] Stead, wrote Lord Esher, who actually admired him in so many ways, was “Wild and odd...Pretty good loony!” Lord Wolseley described him as a man who “in the days of active revolution would be a serious danger. I looked at him, thinking if it might ever be my lot to have to hang or shoot him” [32] But it was not just stuffy establishment figures who saw him this way: George Bernard Shaw came to loathe him for the style of campaigns and accused him of tasteless sensationalism. [33]

1885 was the year that ensured Stead's eternal notoriety. This was the year of his well-meaning but astonishingly ill-conceived and ill-executed attempt to assist the campaign for the age of consent to be raised.

This campaign was fired by two reforming traditions, one being the crusade against sexual immorality generally, and the other – leading to the various education acts and outlawing of child labour – being the late Victorian determination to end the exploitation of children generally. Stead got it into his head that if he could publicly prove the existence of a trade in child prostitutes, he would assist greatly.

Little needs to be said here about the prevalence of fairly overt paedophilia in Victorian society. Men such as John Ruskin – who was unable to consummate his marriage after seeing his wife's adult body, and who fell in love in his forties with the 10-year-old Rose La Touche – attracted no comment at all: they were the respectable ones. The Reverend Charles Dodgson wrote to parents for permission to photograph their pre-pubescent daughters naked, and Wilhelm von Gloeden's dubious images of entwined fisher boys as young as thirteen sold as high art to European royalty.

The disrespectable side of this grubby preoccupation was the flourishing cross-channel trade in virgins. All these men lived with the paradox that it was the innocence of little

children that attracted them sexually, but whereas the likes of Ruskin seem to have respected that innocence in deed if not in thought, others had fewer scruples. Small girls were sold by their parents or even kidnapped, and hurried away to brothels in Brussels or Paris, where the brothel-keepers had means of ensuring that their “virginity” was lost many times over.[34]

Stead railed against this and against sexual hypocrisy in general.

“If Oscar Wilde”, he wrote later, “instead of indulging in dirty tricks of indecent familiarity with boys and men, had ruined the lives of half a dozen innocent simpletons of girls, or had broken up the home of his friend by corrupting his friend's wife, no one could have laid a finger upon him. The male is sacrosanct: the female is fair game. To have burdened society with a dozen bastards, to have destroyed a happy home by his lawless lust—of these things the criminal law takes no account. But let him act indecently to a young rascal who is very well able to take care of himself, and who can by no possibility bring a child into the world as the result of his corruption, then judges can hardly contain themselves from indignation when inflicting the maximum sentence the law allows.” [35]

In the interests of correcting these sorts of things, Stead was about to invent that staple of modern tabloid journalism: the set-up. He made contact with a woman named Rebecca Jarrett, who once been a child prostitute and who agreed to pose as a procuress. Rebecca went about obtaining a thirteen-year-old named Eliza Armstrong, who was brought by her willing mother to a place of mutual convenience, and taken from there to some Soho rooms in which Stead was waiting. What Stead and Jarrett had omitted to do was pretend to Mrs Armstrong that they wanted Eliza as a child prostitute: they had persuaded her that the girl was to go into service as a maid, so the poor mother’s willing complicity was not nearly so damning as Stead would paint it to be. At the boarding house, the journalist ostentatiously ordered champagne, partly so that the landlady when she brought it would get a good view of Eliza and see how young she was, and partly because he imagined this was what a roué would do. He also equipped himself with a large cigar and thus attired walked into the room where the girl lay chloroformed. Unfortunately for Stead, Eliza woke up as he came in, and experienced some distress, thinking she was genuinely about to be violated. He retreated hastily, leaving Rebecca to take Eliza to a midwife for examination (to prove that his intentions had been honorable) and then ship her off to Paris for a holiday. [36]

Stead proceeded to write up the experience, trailing it ostentatiously and self-righteously before he did so:

“All those who are squeamish, all those who are prudish, all those who prefer to live in a fool’s paradise of imaginary innocence and purity, selfishly oblivious of the horrible realities which torment those whose lives are passed in the London Inferno, will do well not to read the *Pall Mall Gazette* of Monday and the three following days.”[37]

He wrote up his tale with a few details altered, changing Eliza’s name to protect her, but presenting her mother as an alcoholic for nothing more than increased dramatic affect. The newsagent WH Smiths considerably banned the *Gazette* from its shelves, thereby adding to Stead’s fame and controversy. [38]

Mrs Armstrong, reading the story, went to a rival newspaper (the scurrilous tabloid *Lloyd’s*) and from there to Marylebone Police Station, complaining that Stead and accomplices had obtained her daughter under false pretences.

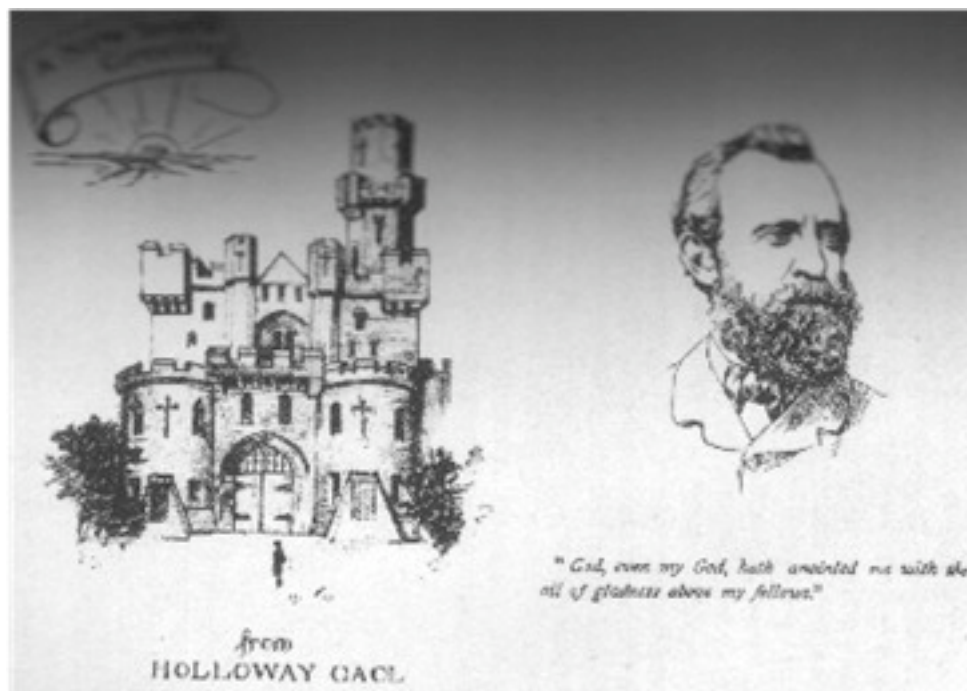
Rebecca Jarrett and the midwife got six months for abduction; Stead despite being behind it all was sentenced to just three. [39] Hysterical prayers and telegrammes of protest burst forth from his disciples.

Stead, though, massively enjoyed his time in prison, of course. After just one day in uniform he was permitted to wear his own clothes and was given an armchair, a fire, a



Stead, proud to be a jailbird

writing desk and other little luxuries. Yet he would write numerous florid accounts of that first day, and he could talk about the experience for the rest of his life and in the most curious circumstances: in 1905 during his interview with Nicholas II he harked back to his days as a gaolbird, the “best of his life”. [40] He was also able to claim credit for the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, which raised the age of consent from twelve to sixteen and made procurement a criminal offence. In reality it probably had very little to do with him, but each November 10th thereafter (the anniversary of the day he went to prison) he boarded his commuter train at Wimbledon, got off at Waterloo and walked across the Bridge to work attired in his prison suit covered with arrows. [41]



His unrepentant New Year card from Holloway: "God hath anointed me with the oil of gladness above my fellows"

Around this time, Stead claims, Tsar Alexander III became a subscriber to the *Pall Mall Gazette* at the recommendation of Olga Novikoff. He was interested mainly in reading Olga's and Stead's pro-Russian pieces of course, but the first thing he saw was the Eliza articles, later to be re-printed in pamphlet form as "The maiden tribute of the Modern Babylon." These he apparently thought were an excellent thing; Stead was off on a good footing with him. [42]

Important people in Alexander's circle understood the power of the foreign press as a shaper of public opinion. Konstantin Pobedonostev, his former tutor and notorious right-wing adviser, was very conscious of the need to improve Russia's image abroad. He might believe in strict shackling of his country's own press, but he recognized the need to deal with the states which permitted freer journalism. [43]



Pobedonostsev, the éminence grise of Alexander III's reign, lampooned in the press as a cadaverous bat

When Stead began lobbying to interview the Tsar, he had a strange and powerful ally in the form of this statesman, not least because Pobedonostsev was also a friend of Olga's of many years' standing, having met her originally at Elena Pavlovna's salons. In 1888, the journalist set off for St Petersburg, determined to get his personal audience. He was accompanied inevitably by Olga, and pursued by the enigmatic figure of Maud Gonne.

Maud, who was then in her very early twenties, achieved eventual notoriety as an Irish nationalist and as the muse and unrequited love of WB Yeats, but her mission to Russia was apparently as an agent of the French right, carrying documents that made overtures to Russia and simultaneously aiming to forestall whatever it was they imagined Stead was up to on England's behalf. [44] It was an interesting time in foreign relations. Since 1879, Russia had been slowly detaching herself from the Dreikaiserbund, or Three Emperors' League, which held her in a mutual assurance pact with Germany and Austria, the remaining conservative great powers. The purpose of the Dreikaiserbund was to prevent revolution and insure against aggressive reaction by the aggrieved French Republic, the loser in the War that had united Germany. Russia's main difficulty with the pact – which in 1881 solidified into a full alliance between Austria and Germany – was her own rivalry with Austria over the Balkans. Alexander III was less and less well-disposed towards Germany too. He was irritated to begin with by the attitude of the Crown Prince Frederick and his wife Victoria (the British Princess Royal) to his own interference in Bulgaria, and feared a Germany with them on the throne. Their son William by contrast had started well with the Tsar, currying favour at every turn and bad-mouthing his parents in indiscreet private correspondence [45]. By 1888, however, things were changing. Although Crown Prince Frederick ascended the throne mortally ill with throat cancer, Alexander no longer looked forward to the reign of his son with any great optimism. William had grown close to the infamous “war party” of his friend Count Waldersee, who advocated a swift pre-emptive war against France to prevent the latter from seeking revenge for the Franco-Prussian War. Waldersee was in no sense well-disposed towards Russia either. At this point in time, politicians on the far right

“Revanchiste” fringe of French politics, whose main aim was an alliance that would help them have revenge on Germany, began to feel that they had a receptive audience in the Tsar. They feared England trying the same thing, however, because cross-Channel relations were far from 100% smooth and each nation still viewed the other more as rival than as potential friend. Hence General Boulanger’s – the French War Minister’s - covert approaches through Maud Gonne, and hence too his fear that Stead was playing a similar game for England.

Young Maud’s accomplice – in fact her ring-leader and mentor - was the infamous “Princess from St Petersburg”, the spy, memoirist, and prolific society gossip Catherine Radziwill. Best known for indiscreet biographies of living royalty, Catherine also had side-lines in forgery and stalking. Her obsessive involvement with Stead’s friend Cecil Rhodes, whose rejection of her resulted in attempted blackmail and eventually in a prison sentence for Catherine, was only one aspect of a colourful private life that encompassed several marriages, children, residence in a variety of countries, and intimate friendships with some of the royalty she vilified. She was genuinely close to the unfortunate Empress Frederick of Germany – Victoria Princess Royal of England – and fond of both Alexander III and his consort Marie.

In 1888 she was on the run from Berlin; one of her books had shed such indiscreet light on politics and society there that she felt it best to hide herself from Bismarck for a while. [46] She and Maud carried the French documents sewn into their clothes. This and what followed all sounds ludicrously cloak and dagger; a mixture as Brian Roberts observes of “high politics and low comedy” [47], but it is described in four separate sets of memoirs (Stead’s, Gonne’s, Novikoff’s and Radziwill’s) so cannot be dismissed as simply the product of Stead’s wild imagination!



Princess Catherine Radziwill

In Petersburg, settling into the famous Grand Hotel Europe, he found himself courted by both the spies, Maud paying him particular attention. With his eye for women, he mistook her intentions and wrote her a compromising letter. For the time being, Olga simply watched proceedings intently. [48]

Stead found that other people were bent on frustrating his mission too: the British Ambassador, Robert Morier, thought him a lunatic and was not particularly keen on letting him near the Tsar – or so Stead claimed in his retrospective description of how he overcame every obstacle. Sniffily, Morier referred to the *Gazette* as “an indispensable daily record of the temperature in that lunatic asylum to which my country is reduced”, and his wife sighed, “Poor Stead; he imagines he is going to be received by the Emperor...and what is more absurd, he imagines that the emperor will talk to him about politics!” [49] Such qualms, if they existed, were well-founded, though, because Alexander III was noted for his secrecy and – in any case – no monarch had ever been

known to give an interview to a newspaper. Morier was active behind the scenes too, painting Stead to Peobedonotsev as a being a man in favour of Irish Home Rule, a gaol bird and nuisance. Stead sent the ambassador a pamphlet, and was promptly invited to dinner – a meal at which they actually came to some sort of tentative position of mutual respect. And so through the persistent lobbying of Olga, her brother General Kireiev, the Emperor's friend General Richter and Peobedonostev himself, Stead got his invitation to Gatchina.

“General Richter left the room as soon as he had presented me, and I found myself face to face with the Emperor,” Stead recalled, “I had been told he would see me for a few minutes before lunch, and I was afterwards informed the Tsar had said he would merely make a few conventional remarks and then dismiss me in order to join his family at lunch.” [50]

To get Alexander's attention, the journalist opened the interview in typically dramatic style, declaring that he felt he should kneel before the Tsar in penance for what his country's – and specifically Disraeli's – attitude to the Turkish War. Alexander though kept things cool by talking instead about Olga Novikoff and how good he thought her articles in the *Gazette* were. Stead tried another tack. He commented that everyone in Britain accused him of being the Emperor's mouthpiece, and wheedled audaciously that since this was already the case Alexander could at least give him the ammunition to defend himself! [51] And, to the world's subsequent amazement, Alexander began to talk. He held forth on foreign policy and his peaceful intentions towards the world in general and England in particular for quite some time, until Stead – recalling that he had been warned that the Emperor was about to go to lunch and he shouldn't keep him too long – decided tactfully to withdraw. That of course was a breach of etiquette: only the Emperor had the right to terminate the interview! Alexander, though surprised, seems not to have been annoyed; he assured the journalist that in future he might approach the War Minister Giers for information on any point of foreign policy. Stead was so impressed and overwhelmed that he erupted into gush.

“ ‘When I think of the calumnies and insults heaped upon you in our press,’ ” he raved, as if the interview provided him with sufficient ammunition to refute all of them, “I cannot but feel that it would be only natural if you were to lose your temper. And if you did lose your temper, half a million men would find a bloody grave before you had regained it.”

“You need not be afraid,” said the Emperor, “I shall not lose my temper. There will be no war. I shall answer for peace...if England, Russia and Germany stand together, the peace of the world is assured.” [52]

Stead was thrilled with the whole experience; he was gushingly to describe Alexander as a giant of moral and diplomatic courage. “The Emperor does not seem bowed down or crushed beneath the imperial load...he stands erect and joyous; cheerful, without bravado, with the simple open face of a man who has preserved amid all the affairs of State the heart of a little child...Not by his own will or of his own choice was he called to this perilous post, from which he can only be relieved by death. Until he is relieved he will hold it, often painfully conscious of his own shortcomings, but nevertheless doing his duty as best he can, according to his lights, and leaving the rest to God...The Emperor has a horror of war...it is his ambition not to be a great sovereign but to be a sovereign of a great people, whose reign was unstained by a single war...He is the

natural ally, alike by constitution and by conviction, of any power that honestly seeks to maintain the peace” [53]

After his interview triumph Stead returned to the hotel, where he came back to earth with a bump. A scene was awaiting: Olga had confronted Maud Gonne and had apparently



Maud Gonne

while her back was turned stolen Stead’s silly letter from the girl’s desk. In his room she read parts of it aloud to him; he took umbrage and accused them both of mocking him. Maud and Radziwill in the meantime delivered their French papers to Peobedonotsev. [54] Stalemate, diplomatically, perhaps; none of these people officially represented a government anyway. All, though, were to claim great and far-reaching results for their respective missions, with Stead believing he had thawed the Tsar’s attitude to Britain, and Radziwill claiming that her own work had laid the ground for the Franco-Russian Alliance of 1893. Oddly enough, Radziwill and Stead went on to become great friends.

Olga and Stead had a further falling-out when after returning to England he produced a book about his impressions from the trip: “*The truth about Russia.*” It was broadly favourable, but it was no whitewash: he described the Tsar as a man in the most glowing terms, but took issue with Alexander’s – and Pobedonostsev’s - religious persecutions. Olga responded in true nationalist mode: “Our country being organically united with the Church – hence the name ‘Holy Russia’ – everything attacking the church attacks the very essence of that country” [55] She sent him ranting messages, demanding that he take out three-quarters of the book or forfeit her friendship. The book was banned in Russia, then promptly unbanned, apparently at the orders of the Tsar, and Stead and Olga somehow remained friends anyway. This may have owed something to his stance during subsequent anti-Russian outbreaks in British public opinion.

In 1890, Stead left the *Pall Mall Gazette* that had made his name. An old school friend, George Newnes, had set up a rival newspaper, *Tit bits*, and was outselling him. Stead decided that the time had come to launch his own organ, and the result was the *Review of reviews*, a periodical somewhere between a newspaper and a magazine in format, which eventually grew to encompass three continents: there were American and Australian editions as well as the British one. It carried essays and reflections on the issues of the day rather than news stories per se.

In that same year, much of the educated press began a real campaign against the Russian Empire's attitude to and treatment of the Jews. There was a huge public meeting at the Guildhall on December 10th 1890, the latest of a series going back as far as 1840, though the earliest ones had not been directed specifically at Russia. The 1890 meeting, attended by many prominent politicians and churchmen, was noted for stirring speeches quoted in the press and passed the following resolution:

"That in the opinion of this meeting the renewed sufferings of the Jews in Russia from the operation of severe and exceptional edicts and disabilities are deeply to be deplored, and that in this last decade of the nineteenth century religious liberty is a principle which should be recognized by every Christian community as among the natural human rights." [56]

Olga Novikoff was predictably furious. She dashed off a number of angry articles about the Jewish question and how misunderstood Russia was on this. The Jewish issue, she declared, was not religious but social (as if that excused the Emperor's attitude in some way). It was not the practice of Judaism that was the problem, but the Jewish exploitation of the innocent Russian peasant. Englishmen ought to understand this, she added, for they dealt with the same difficulties in India. In retaliation, she explained, excusing pogroms, "the most innocent agriculturists in India have repeatedly attacked the Hindoo money-lenders exactly as our peasants attacked our Jews." [57] She went wild over the Guildhall meeting, raving that the participants ought to equip themselves with facts, and said that Britain would get hundreds of Jewish immigrants as a result of its lax attitude.

The meeting sent a "Memorial" on the topic of Jewish rights to Emperor Alexander, who returned it unopened.

Stead was worried about the mood of open confrontation, arguing that this would just antagonise the Tsar and was unlikely to render him more reasonable: "If Russia were a stupid well-meaning sheep which had unintentionally sat down upon a poor innocent Jew it might be safe to pull its ears; but if Russia be a savage carnivore which has prostrated the Jew in order to maul him, it is the worst possible policy to aggravate the bear by twisting his tail." - [58] Some of Stead's later writings, though, hint at his belief in the myth that all Russian revolutionaries were Jewish, so it difficult to see him as completely objective on this.

His Russian campaigns were far from being the only thing that got Stead excited at this time. He was implicated in the notorious "Bloody Sunday" incident of 1887, when a striking dockers' meeting on Trafalgar Square was broken up most violently by the police. Stead's many enemies – including Bernard Shaw, who spoke at the meeting – blamed him for much of this, claiming that the event had been poorly and provocatively organized by left-leaning members of the press. In 1892 he went to the United States, and on return produced a wild pamphlet entitled, "*If Christ came to Chicago*" – all about the sin and deprivation he had encountered there. Thenceforth he was to spend a great deal of time in the US campaigning in various ways and promoting his work. He also involved himself (with his friend Sir Arthur Conan Doyle) in advertising a quack medicine that they hoped would prove to be a cure for cancer. Another friend was the controversial imperialist Cecil Rhodes, though in time they fell out nastily over the Boer War, which Stead and other liberals loathed. That war saw the invention of concentration

camps and the genocide by British troops of impoverished Afrikaaner farmers and their families, and it scandalized even the representatives of absolute monarchies.

In 1894 Stead's patron Alexander III died at the early age of forty-nine from kidney problems compounded by alcoholism. The journalist eyed new Tsar Nicholas II with uncertainty, and the piece he wrote about him for the *Review of reviews* – declaring that the young Emperor's favourite authors were RL Stevenson, Jules Verne, Walter Scott, Shakespeare, Lamartine and Victor Hugo, and that he had a humorous prejudice against the Germans – seems to be based on previously published articles by Nicholas's French tutor Lanson [59]. This suggests that Stead did not know the new Emperor at all well. There were even negative comments: the young Tsar was reputed to have jumped out of his skin when he heard a soda siphon burst in Madras during his tour of the Far East, and to have pointed a gun at a Polish Jew. Stead concluded that he was a "plodding, not brilliant student", but that his mind was open. Of the new Empress, Stead had better things to say: as always, he was prepared to think the best of a woman. He reported that she was interested in ordinary peoples' welfare, and that her tutor Margaret Jackson had selected men from Darmstadt University to teach her intellectually demanding topics. [60]

Two years later, Stead returned to Russia to talk to this Tsar. He traveled first to St Petersburg, where he interviewed "down to the ground" (his own words) everyone whose opinion counted on the Russian or world stage. "It is no small test of the urbanity and courtesy and hospitality of the Russians that they bore my enquiries so patiently and entertained me with a cordiality and generosity that could hardly have been exceeded if I had been a accredited envoy from an allied state" he remembered [61]. He spent lots of time with Pobedonostev, for although the elder statesman had facilitated his meeting with Alexander III, they do not appear to have met personally in 1888. The two, Stead's son recalled later, conversed in German and "got on famously", with the dour minister teasing Stead for describing him as "Torquemada" in the British press. [62]

Pobedonostev, the architect of Russia's public relations campaigns, could hardly afford any moments of sourness with the whole world looking on!



Konstantin Pobedonostsev, painted by Serov

Stead also made the acquaintance of fellow newspaper editor Esper Ukhtomskii, then believed to be the Emperor's boon companion. Ukhtomskii was an oriental scholar, a man whose positive attitude to Asia seems to have impressed the journalist very much. In later years he was to argue everywhere he could that Nicholas shared these anti-imperial views.

From the capital, Stead proceeded to Moscow to look at the pictures of his friend the artist Vassili Vereshagin, which he considered the “finest argument against war ever put on canvas”. [63] It was snowing lightly, but from there he went on to the Crimea, to the “smiling Italian sky” and thus to Livadia, to the gloomy wooden palace where the previous Emperor had died. There he met with Nicholas II and was infatuated well beyond what he had been over Alexander.

“He is extremely sympathetic; one of the most charming persons to talk to,” gushed Stead’s account of the interview. “He is as quick as a needle, and quite as bright. Exceptional rapidity of perception is united with a remarkable memory and a very wide grasp of an immense range of facts... The bright, clear blue eye, the quick, sympathetic change of features, the merry laugh, even his curious little expressive shrug of shoulders, are all glimpses of a character not often found unspoiled by power.” [64]

Back in England, Stead’s words fell upon stony ground in certain quarters. The ever-cynical Russian émigré community now had its own newspaper, the *Anglo-Russian*, London-based and providing serious comment on political events, mixed with odd pieces of genuine insider knowledge from Petersburg society of the activities of those in power. The editor, Jaakoff Prelooker, was a political exile himself, and he had no time for westerners besotted by superficialities.

“He came, he saw – and was conquered!” Prelooker sneered at Stead’s article. “All other mortals go to the Russian villages, look on the emaciated and starving people, on their hovels and cattle, and form, accordingly, their opinion about the excellencies and paternal goodness of the great autocratic ruler. But Mr Stead is no ordinary mortal... He hurried straight from Moscow to Sebastopol, and there direct into the preserve of the Tsar himself, to look at his face, to listen to his voice, and there to observe his stately movements. And lo! He beheld the real man... the like of whom the world has never known before and probably shall never know again!” Prelooker went on sarcastically to urge children to buy a copy of the interview, advising that they “Study it, learn it by heart, put it under your pillow when you go to bed, and it will do good to your youthful souls!” [65]

Stead responded by suppressing the title of a Prelooker article criticising the Russian government when he cited and argued with the article in the *Review*.

“Mr Stead’s inexplicable loyalty to the governing power of Russia,” was blamed for this, and Prelooker wondered “how much further Mr Stead will go in his anxiety to stay on good terms with Mme. Novikoff.”! [66]

Stead’s latest crusade was the anti-war movement, and the coincidence of his opinions with the Tsar’s partially explains his ardour for Nicholas. Olga Novikoff was inevitably the first person who had suggested – in 1894 – that Stead become a peace campaigner. The organized peace movement was by then almost a century old, having its origins in the religious and humanitarian response to the carnage of the Napoleonic War, and resulting in early calls for the recognition of universal human rights. Stead has to be seen as part of this tradition. By around 1890, however, another, practical consideration had come into play. Slowly but surely the idea was gaining ground in Europe and the US that the ceaseless build-up of arms was impoverishing modern states, and that the next major conflict was likely to ruin them. It was this as much as moral and religious considerations that drove the Russian campaigner Jean de Bloch to write his famous treatise “*The future*

war” in 1892, using facts and figures to demonstrate why war was now unwinnable. By 1894, even the Kaiser was talking disarmament – the Reichstag having declined to vote him any more soldiers.

Tsar Nicholas II joined this campaign as soon as he ascended the throne, perhaps partially for religious reasons, but certainly for practical ones, being worried over Russia’s relative weakness. In 1898 he issued the so-called Russian Rescript calling for an international conference, which would talk about means of ensuring peace between nations. This was met with apathy and even cynicism in Stead’s homeland, with many suggesting that Russia hoped to get other nations to disarm while she herself built up her defenses on the sly. At best, people thought she was simply buying time until the Trans-Siberian Railway was complete and full financial attention could be turned to the armed forces again. The Russian government was “very depressed” by this response, a friend in Petersburg assured Stead. “Everything depends on your campaign!” [67] Stead swung into action. His idea was to organize a Peace Crusade which would cross Europe on foot, starting from London and ending up in Petersburg. But the Kaiser stymied their passage through Germany, apparently fearing that hordes of vengeful French nationalists would take advantage of the opportunity to invade Prussia hidden behind the journalistic coat tails. Stead, fuming, proceeded to The Hague where the Conference was to be held, duly penning his own assessment of the possibilities for successful disarmament, “*The United States of Europe on the eve of the parliament of Peace*,” a massive tome in several volumes, all about the political divisions between European nations. He was an early advocate of a European economic or political union, based as his title suggested on the federal system in the States – or in the German Empire. It was hard, Stead argued, for federated states to lift their swords against one another.

In the end the Conference went ahead after all, though Stead’s newspaper campaigns may have had little to do with this. It was attended by representatives of the United States, Austria, Belgium, Denmark, England, France, Germany, Italy, Persia, Portugal, Rumania, Russia, Siam, Spain, Sweden, Norway, Japan and the Netherlands. Whatever its original intention, this conference contented itself with discussing not full disarmament but the slowing of the arms race. This did not get very far, but those present did ratify a Convention on the conduct of land warfare, and establish a Permanent Court of Arbitration to which future disputes might be referred. This was the very first global mechanism for the settlement of international disputes.

In 1907 the second Conference took place at the instigation of the Tsar and President Roosevelt, and every year thereafter, the press mogul Stead organized a month-long Peace Pilgrimage, traveling to foreign capitals as he’d planned in 1898 and putting so much of his own money into the work that his friends feared he’d bankrupt himself and set up a fund to support his unfortunate family in the event! [68]

Stead was nominated as a result of these campaigns for the new Nobel Peace Prize; but he never won it. Instead he was awarded the booby prize: he got to oversee the building of the red brick, turreted Peace Palace in The Hague, still even today the permanent seat of the Court of Arbitration. All this meant in practice was that he had to negotiate with squabbling contractors, who made his life a misery [69].

In September 1905 Stead returned to Russia to intercede with the Tsar and with society over the nascent revolution. In August of that year, in response to months of unrest, Nicholas had agreed to convoke a Duma with seriously limited powers. The whole of the Russian left – and, in principle, Stead too - wanted more; they argued for full liberty of the press and association, universal suffrage and something equivalent to the law of *Habeas corpus* guaranteeing no imprisonment without charge. At the same time, Stead had a notion that Nicholas was an inherently reasonable man on the side of liberalism but was held back simply by his advisers and his own caution. He firmly believed that his own intervention could persuade the Tsar to grant all these rights, and could assist in reconciling the misunderstood monarch with his misunderstanding people. It was a mammoth task he set himself, and one that was to incite derision on practically all sides.

Holding his personal belief in female wisdom, he went first to the Dowager Empress and reasoned with her until he felt he had her on his side. In fact he *did* have her on his side, but whether he was responsible for convincing her is a moot point. Even she, the widow of the reactionary Alexander III, had realized that unless Nicholas modified his stance, there was a real possibility of revolution. [70] After that, Stead set out for Peterhof on the train, meeting Nicholas in the study at the Lower Dacha, where he cajoled him for several hours.

WT Stead had a particular interviewing peculiarity: he never took notes. This fact, combined with his talent for self-dramatisation, makes it tempting to wonder whether some of his remembered conversations were a product of his own imagination. Yet, where Nicholas is concerned, Stead's memory for the tiniest detail is so consistent with others' impressions of the Tsar that it lends credibility to his whole unusual technique. He noted the Tsar's non-committal style, telling himself that Nicholas would acquiesce to his wishes later when he'd time to think. This very self-deception is typical of Stead (after all, there was an element of self-deception involved in his interest in sleaze), and lends further credibility to the account: everyone who knew Nicholas well regarded his non-committal attitude as a very bad sign: it meant that he would do as he pleased whatever but was too polite to say so. Stead simply didn't pick this up, and he recorded the gesture with naïve optimism.

His description of the Empress is tellingly characteristic too;

Alexandra came into the study for a short while, and offered her hand to be kissed “as if she thought I was going to bite it.” [71]

In the corridor outside, the infant heir Alexei was heard to cry as his nanny carried him past. Nicholas and Alexandra talked about their children's lessons (given by the Empress herself) and their games, well aware that much of this idyllic family picture would find its way into the British press.



Nicholas II as family man at Peterhof in 1905, with his son Alexei

Nicholas, raised by Pobedonostev and Alexander III, had a clear understanding of the importance of public image. He went on to grant Stead all sorts of rights to publish freely and address public meetings; rights that certainly were not to be accorded to the journalist's Russian colleagues.

Thus Stead remained in Russia for many weeks, speaking to politicians and writers, attending provincial rallies and generally managing to antagonize practically everyone he encountered. Educated opinion felt patronized; here was an aging foreigner who had barely visited the country before, who didn't speak the language, lecturing to them on the necessity to compromise and meet the Tsar – who they regarded as blood-drenched tyrant – halfway. Stead's enemies unleashed a torrent of sarcasm, with the words of Vladimir Kuzmin-Karavayev in the journal *Rus* being fairly typical.

“The Russian people, and our government's highest-placed representatives, are as little children who have fallen out and are too stubborn to make up... Stead it appears has read an English translation of the law of 6th August [establishing the Duma] and is now keen to explain that we, having read the original, have not fully grasped the intricacies of its central themes.” [72]

Part of the problem was that Stead was telling people who understood it as well as he did the history of the English parliamentary system, lecturing them that since England's parliament had developed gradually, their own should too. Would-be parliamentarians did not particularly appreciate being told that they should be contented for now with the same system as the English had enjoyed six hundred years before!

One particular cause celebre at the time of the visit was the imprisonment without trial of the liberal historian Paul Miliukov. Stead, aware of the damage this was doing the government, campaigned for his release, interceding with the Interior Minister (and police chief) General Trepov on his behalf. Miliukov was released, and Stead duly claimed credit, adding that this demonstrated Trepov's good intentions. Both Miliukov and Trepov responded by denying his role, agreeing with one another that the release was nothing more than the result of due legal process. “I have the impression,” Miliukov wrote, “that Mr Stead tends to interpret my release too optimistically and to see it as an indication of a bright future.” [73] Nothing discouraged, Stead continued to bustle around Russia, meeting Tolstoy, and producing articles for Russian newspapers. One such article appeared in *The Moscow Gazette*, edited in 1905-6 by Vladimir Gringmuth, who founded the Monarchical party – otherwise known as the fanatically right-wing Black Hundreds. From 1906, the Hundreds and their soulmates the Union of the Russian People, busied themselves with organizing pogroms and other forms of retaliation against those they deemed responsible for the 1905 revolution. Olga Novikoff, though she had no personal liking or sympathy for the current Tsar or his wife, had ardently declared herself a Black Hundred, and thus Stead insisted on viewing this noxious party as “the first attempt on the part of the conservatives of Russia to do their proper share in maintaining the stability of the state and the authority of the Tsar.” [74]. Others, less blinkered, heaped opprobrium on him for even writing in a paper devoted to this cause. [75]. The British

journalist Carl Joubert, who authored a number of books – of variable accuracy – about the regime and the Emperor, unleashed a veritable cascade of sarcastic scorn.

“There is a crook in the brain of a certain class of people which prevents them from viewing men and things in their true perspective. To them, a celebrity must needs be possessed of certain virtues...is a being to be approached with reverent awe...is something more than a man. To secure a few minutes conversation with a celebrity is a privilege which entitles them to speak of him as “My friend, the High Muck-a-Muck”...It is a curious development of cerebral atrophy, and it is very prevalent at the present day. One of the symptoms of the disease is the desire of the afflicted person to advertise himself to the world as a sufferer. He will clamber up onto a public platform or rush into print in the columns of the newspapers in order to announce to the world that he is a crank and faddist and incapable of unprejudiced judgment. Foremost amongst the ranks of those who suffer this distressing malady in our own country is Mr. W. T. Stead. The disease in his case has reached such an acute stage that he finds it necessary to edit a periodical of his own, in order that he might convince the world of his infirmity. Mr Stead’s pet celebrity is Nicholas Alexandrovich. He has spoken to him on three occasions, and he has the inestimable privilege of corresponding with him. Therefore Mr Stead is fully qualified to speak with authority on the character of Nicholas as a man and a monarch.” [76]

Joubert took issue above all with his enemy’s insistence on dwelling on Nicholas’s philosophical preoccupations. To Stead, this must have been a means of showing the good intentions of the man and attempting to explain why people should trust him and give him the benefit of a certain amount of doubt. To Joubert, all of it was less important than the Emperor’s actual actions.

“He is,” wrote Stead, “a modern man imbed with the most advanced humanitarian and philanthropic ideas of his time...His chief fault was an indisposition born of the temperament of an Imperial Hamlet to put forth his authority and assert his right to control the affairs of the Empire over which he reigned. [But he is still] the man who told me that the burden of the imperial crown was so heavy he would not inflict it on his worst enemy, the author of the Peace Conference, and the philosophic opponent of the domination of Asiatics by Europeans” [77]

Joubert took this assertion by assertion, pointing out that the man who apparently found the burden of the crown so heavy was clinging to the autocracy with the tenacity of a leech; that the monarch who started the Peace Conference had waged the most vicious war in modern history (as he wrote, the Russo-Japanese), and that the man who opposed the domination of Asia by Europeans was responsible for the attempted annexation of the Chinese province of Manchuria. Thus, concluded Joubert with well-aimed sarcasm, the Emperor’s opposition to imperialism in Asia had indeed to be considered “purely philosophic”. [78] He went on to carefully tear apart Stead’s notion that the Emperor’s benevolent intentions were solely frustrated by those around him:

“Since Mr Stead is the champion in this country of Nicholas Alexandrovich, and his personal friend; since he knows him to be intelligent, well-informed, humane, philanthropic, modest, well-meaning, and I know not what else – therefore I challenge Mr Stead to name one single public act which he has done during the ten years of his reign as Tsar of Russia which has been of real benefit to his people. Mr Stead owes it to his friend and to the world to tell what he knows of Nicholas’s good actions.” [79]

And thus the sparring in the press and in related books continued for the rest of Stead's natural life.

On October 17 1905, the Tsar published his second Duma manifesto, and Stead felt his faith vindicated at last. The new law promised that

1. Fundamental civil freedoms will be granted to the population, including real personal inviolability, freedom of conscience, speech, assembly and association.
2. Participation in the Duma will be granted to those classes of the population which are at present deprived of voting powers, insofar as is possible in the short period before the convocation of the Duma, and this will lead to the development of a universal franchise. There will be no delay to the Duma elect already been organized.
3. It is established as an unshakeable rule that no law can come into force without its approval by the State Duma and representatives of the people will be given the opportunity to take real part in the supervision of the legality of government bodies. [80]

On the face of things, it must have appeared that Stead had been right all along: Nicholas needed only courage to help him act as a good constitutional monarch with trust in his people.

Nicholas had no real intention of doing anything of the kind; the concessions had been wrung from him with great reluctance, and before the Duma even met he began to renege on his promise and strip it of its powers. In 1906 he told a friend, "I believe Russia can run for twenty years more without a parliament, and I intend to do all I can to guide my country back to where we were before the October manifesto." [81]

Stead, luckily, did not live to see what became of the man and the regime whose cause he so ardently championed.

One further major project remained, in addition to his on-going activities as peace campaigner and journalist: he was charged with editing (and in practice this meant pretty much writing) a two-volume memoir of Olga Novikoff's career as Russia's champion in the UK. Called "*The MP for Russia*" the book was to bring him into contact with one of the several colleagues who left a personal memoir of Stead himself. This was Kathleen Harper, who worked as his secretary on "M.P.", but who also shared his (and Olga's) fascination with spiritualism. Stead traced his own interest to a "curious prediction" made at a séance he happened to attend in 1881, but it rather "languished" until Olga insistently introduced him to the renowned Madame Blavatsky [82].



Born Elena Petrovna Hahn (or Gan) in 1831, Blavatsky was a cousin of the statesman Sergei Witte and the wife (for three months only) of a Ukrainian provincial governor. Stead freely admitted that her well-connected, Russian background did much to endear her to him; taken at face value on her own merits, she was rather odd. Even Stead, who liked her, found her brusque and mannish; other people were of the frank opinion that she was a liar and a fake. Her claim to have visited Tibet attracted particular derision: few believed that so stout a woman could have scaled the many mountains she claimed to have climbed in her quest for spiritual knowledge! She also scandalized Victorian morality by living openly with a succession of men, some of whom were married to other people.

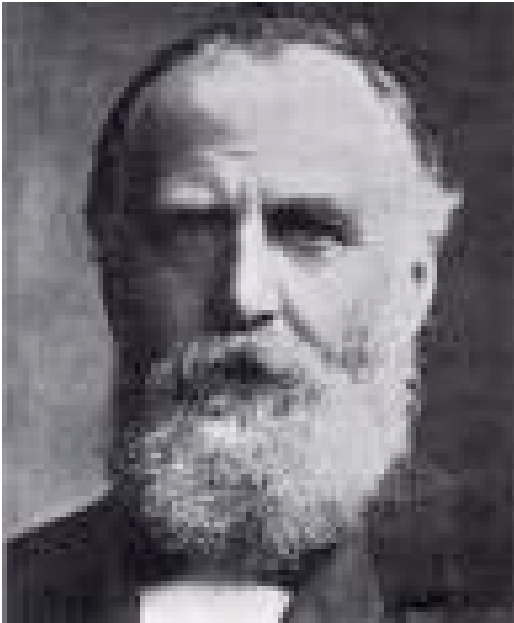
After many semi-apocryphal youthful adventures traveling in North Africa, Turkey and the Balkans, surviving shipwrecks and experimenting with hashish, Helena Blavatsky wound up in New York, where in 1875 she founded the Theosophical Society with her current lover, a Colonel Olcott. Further branches followed in India (where it was especially popular), London and Paris. Ostensibly devoted to religious understanding and exploration (Olcott's speciality), the Society became associated in the public mind with spiritualism above all (Blavatsky's particular preoccupation). A series of law suits and allegations about faked psychic phenomena inevitably followed [83]. Even Blavatsky's confession that many of her séances were indeed faked failed to dampen interest in them, however; table-turning was big business in late Victorian Europe.

Olga Novikoff was not the only one of Stead's friends who was involved in this sort of thing: Arthur Conan Doyle, his co-worker in the cancer medicine story, spent a great deal of time on psychic investigations. Then there was Annie Besant, the birth control pioneer and prison reform worker, who knew Stead from his social campaigns, and who went on to lead the "Esoteric section" of the Society after Madame Blavatsky's death.

Stead began to attend séances on a regular basis; soon, he was “channeling” spirits himself, his most usual contact being a young female journalist named Julia Ames who had died tragically early in a promising career. He had other contacts too, though, including, during the period of writing “MP for Russia”, one named “Catherine” who sometimes spoke to him directly, but often used Kathleen Harper as a medium. She held forth always on Russian-related topics and slowly he began to consider the possibility that he talking to the shade of Catherine the Great. For a while he was cautious about her opinions, telling Harper,

“My chief objection or difficulty is that these ideas are all my ideas. She may have given them to me long ago. But the sceptic would say that they are stained glass and that I impute to Catherine only my own notions. You might ask her about this and see what she says.” [84]

In time however he grew bolder, and eventually submitted an article to the periodical *Contemporary review* in which he delineated “Catherine’s” opinion that all Slavic countries should unite as a federal “Slavonia”. He even attempted to sign her name to it; the editor though forced him to use his own instead.



W.T.Stead in later life

Stead’s psychical dabblings (he also wrote a number of books of ghost stories) were the chief reason why a lot of people who otherwise respected his views began to think he was mad. Another contributing factor – in addition to his wild personal and literary style - was his tendency to contradict himself freely. The social liberal who apologized for the Black Hundreds was also the ardent peace campaigner who threw his weight behind First Sea Lord “Jackie” Fisher’s demands for naval re-armament, thereby saddling Britain with a defense budget she could ill-afford and contributing to the ludicrous battleship race against Germany.

In 1912, Stead had been invited address a congress on “Universal Peace” in New York. Inevitably, he aimed to kill several birds with one stone, and thus planned his trip so he

could travel on the new celebrated liner, the “unsinkable” *Titanic*. It was a stunningly appropriate end to a phenomenal career, one which ensured him – even supposing his career itself had not – grand personal memorials in Central Park New York, and on London’s Embankment. His name was in all the headline lists of victims, there alongside those of Astor, Guggenheim and Vanderbilt, the millionaires who lost their lives the same day.

But even the frozen waters of the North Atlantic failed to silence William Thomas Stead. In the months following his death, he relayed full reports of all that had passed to his daughter Estelle and others sharing his interest in spirit returns.

“A moment’s anguish; the thought of loved ones at home, the horror of the situation overwhelming me, and surrounded by the cries of the helpless drowning creatures, I passed into unconsciousness. To tell you of the transports of joy when I awoke to what was awaiting me is beyond mortal words....It seemed as if a whole phalanx of angels and friends were ready to welcome me. Scenes of delight opened on my vision, and the reality and the magnificence of the whole almost bewildered me.” [85]

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Particular thanks to Grace Eckley of *NewsStead* magazine.

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Source notes:

- [1] Stead, E. W. *My father*, p. 4
- [2] Jones, V. P. *Saint or sensationalist* p. 1
- [3] Whyte, F. *Life of WT Stead*, no page reference, quoted at www.attackingthedevil.co.uk
- [4] *Review of reviews*, June 1895
- [5] Stead, E. W., op. cit p. 15
- [6] *ibid.*, p. 17
- [7] Harper, E. K. *Stead the man*, p. 2
- [8] Jones, op. cit. p. 11
- [9] Watson, A. *A newspaperman’s memories*, p. 67
- [10] Jones, op. cit. p. 55
- [11] Stead, E. W., op. cit. p. 71
- [12] Jones, op. cit. p. 11
- [13] Shannon, R. *Gladstone, heroic minister*, p. 450
- [14] Jones, op. cit. p. 55
- [15] *Almanach de St Petersburg, 1910*.
- [16] Stead, W. T., *M.P. for Russia*, Vol. 1, p. 22
- [17] *ibid.*, p. 37
- [18] *ibid.*, p. 23
- [19] *ibid.*
- [20] *ibid*, Vol. 2, p. 444

- [21] Stead, E. W., op. cit. p. 71
- [22] *ibid.*, p. 62
- [23] Stead, W. T. *MP for Russia*, vol. 1, p. 2
- [24] *ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 301
- [25] *ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 22
- [26] Stead's diary, 5 January 1879, cited in Scott, J. W. Robertson, *Life and death of a newspaper* p. 107-8
- [27] Pearsall, R., *Worm in the bud*, p. 298
- [28] Jones, op. cit. p. 35
- [29] Pearsall, op. cit. p. 302
- [30] *ibid.*, p. 229
- [31] Watson, op. cit. p. 66-7
- [32] Pearsall, op. cit. p. 305
- [33] Jones, op. cit. p. 35
- [34] Pearsall, op.cit. p. 297
- [35] *Review of reviews*, June 1895
- [36] Pearsall, op. cit., p. 300
- [37] *Pall Mall Gazette*, July 4th 1885, cited in *ibid.* p. 301
- [38] *ibid.* p. 302
- [39] *ibid.* p. 303
- [40] Baylen, J. *The Tsar's lecturer-general*, p. 51
- [41] Pearsall, op.cit. p. 304
- [42] Stead, W. T. *MP for Russia*, vol. 2, p. 236
- [43] Byrnes, R. F. *Pobedonostsev. His life and thought*, p. 126
- [44] Jones, op. cit., p. 53
- [45] Rohl, JCG. *Young Wilhelm*, p. 424-435
- [46] Roberts, B. *Cecil Rhodes and the princess*, p. 132
- [47] *ibid.*
- [48] *ibid.*, p. 133
- [49] Stead, W. T. *MP for Russia*, Vol. 2, p. 242
- [50] *ibid.*, p 243
- [51] *ibid.* p. 246
- [52] *ibid.* p. 247
- [53] Stead, W. T. *Truth about Russia*. p. 124-5
- [54] Roberts, op. cit. p. 133
- [55] Stead, W. T. *MP for Russia*, vol. 2, p. 250
- [56] www.jewishencyclopedia.com
- [57] Stead, W. T. *MP for Russia*, vol. 2, p. 282
- [58] *ibid.* p. 286
- [59] I've coincidentally compared the *Review of reviews* article of May 1896 with the pieces by Lanson appearing in the French press the same year
- [60] *Review of reviews*, May 1896
- [61] quoted *ibid.*, Nov. 1st 1913 in an article "My father" by Stead's son Henry
- [62] *ibid.*
- [63] *ibid.*
- [64] *ibid.*, November 8th, 1898

- [65] *Anglo-Russian*, no. 6, vol. 2, December 1898
- [66] *ibid.* no. 4, vol. 2, Nov. 1898
- [67] Stead, W.T. *MP for Russia*, vol. 2, p. 406
- [68] Jones, op. cit. p. 77
- [69] *ibid.*
- [70] Baylen, op. cit. p. 38
- [71] *ibid.* p. 76
- [72] Cited in *NewsStead*, no. 15, Fall 1999
- [73] *Sankt Peterburgskii Vedemosti*, 30th September 1905, cited in *NewsStead*, no. 19, Fall 2001
- [74] Stead, W.T. *MP for Russia*, vol. 2, p. 350
- [75] Jones, op. cit. p. 77
- [76] Joubert, Carl. *Truth about the Tsar*, p. 233-4
- [77] *Review of Reviews*, August 1904
- [78] Joubert, op. cit. p. 236-7
- [79] *ibid.* . 237
- [80] *Polnoe sobranie zakonov Rossiiskoi Imperii*, 3rd series, vol. XXV/I, no. 26803
- [81] Durland, K. *Red reign*, p. 79
- [82] Stead. W.T. *MP for Russia*, vol. 1, p. 130
- [83] *Encyclopedia of the unexplained* entries on Blavatsky and the Theosophical Society
- [84] Harker, E.K. *Stead the man*, p. 111
- [85] Coates, J. *Has W.T. Stead returned?* p. 54

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 Golden, Colorado; ISSN 1080-1731]
Review of reviews (various issues)

Websites:

www.jewishencyclopedia.com

There are innumerable sites about WT Stead. Of these, the most informative is the wonderful, scholarly www.attackingthedevil.co.uk, which includes a vast number of full-text articles and books on Stead's life and career, and has links to further sources of information, including the full listings by the National Register of Archives of UK archives holding Stead's personal papers.

NewsStead's site is www.newsstead.itgo.com

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