

Title: H. G. Wells and Early Soviet Science Fiction
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Abstract:

One of the most fascinating aspects of Wells's relationship with Russia is his rather outsized influence on the Soviet science fiction. In my paper, I will pay particular attention to the impact the English writer had on the pioneer of that genre in the Soviet Union, Alexander Belyaev, who extensively read Wells (both in English and in Russian translations) before he started writing his own science fantasies, including *Professor Dowell's Head* (1925) and *The Amphibian Man* (1928). Wells and Belyaev finally met during Wells's second and final trip to the Soviet Union in 1934 but not before Belyaev, in order to stay in regime's good graces, had felt compelled a year earlier to criticize Wells because of the English writer's well-publicized skepticism, dating back to the early 1920s, regarding the Soviet Union being successful in Lenin's ambitious plans for electrification of the whole country.

I will focus mainly on the influence Wells's *The Island of Dr Moreau* had on *The Amphibian Man* and on how the new Soviet reality affected Belyaev's treatment of the futuristic plot of biological experimentation on humans and animals. I will also look at the dynamic between Wells's popularity in Russia and the uneasy place that science fiction was occupying in the Soviet Union already in the 1920s and, definitely, in the 1930s, as a futuristic genre which could have a potential to be politically and ideologically "subversive." I will make an argument that science fiction was still largely tolerated in the Soviet Union under Stalin mostly because of Gorky's — and Stalin's own — relationship with Wells. But it was, of course, just barely tolerated. Belyaev himself complained in the 1930s that science fiction was a "Zolushka" of Soviet literature and revealed his frustration with the demands of practicing it in Stalin's Russia when he wrote in 1939: "The easiest thing in the world is to create a gripping science fiction novel about the class struggle. There you have contrasts, characters, tough struggles and all kinds of secrets and unexpected turns... the hardest thing for a writer is to create a gripping plot for a book that describes the classless communist society of the future, to anticipate the conflicts between the positive heroes, and guess at two or three traits of the man of the future. The task of showing the future society with all its scientific, technical, cultural, everyday, economical aspects is as important as the description of the class struggle. I chose the harder task."

Wells obviously did not have to face similar constraints, and comparing the two authors not just in terms of their writings but also their political and ideological environments at the time will hopefully shed further light on the era they lived in and on the development of science fiction both in England and the Soviet Union.