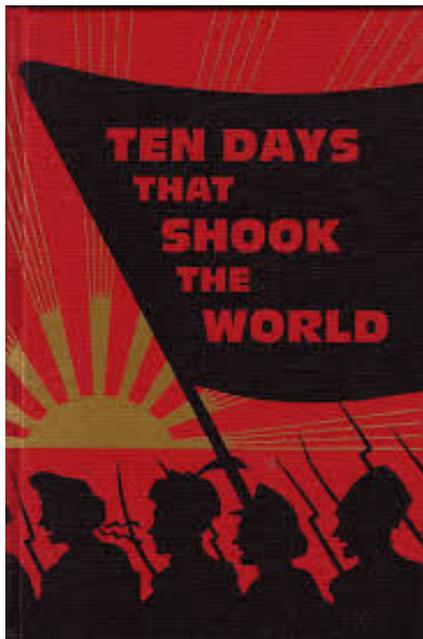


Review: John Reed, *Ten Days That Shook the World*

Barney Doherty



John Reed, *Ten Days That Shook the World*

The centenary of the Russian Revolution in 1917 is obviously significant for Marxists. This year will see attempts to misrepresent the revolution or questions its democratic nature or political necessity.

Revolutionary socialists, therefore, must study the event themselves and understand how it happened and what its significance was. A good place to start is with John Reed's *Ten Days That Shook the World*. In this book, Reed gives a first-hand journalistic account of the revolution as it unfolded around him.

Reed was a socialist activist and journalist from the US who was covering the October Revolution for the magazine 'The Masses'. From his collection of primary documents and transcripts of speeches and debates he attended, Reed constructs an overview of the developing political landscape and brings the reader through the rapidly moving events with impressive clarity.

Reed's powerful writing style brilliantly captures the excitement and spirit of the revolutionary period from the streets of St. Petersburg to the rapturous halls of the Congress of Soviets. While he maintained that the book 'does not pretend to be any-

thing but a detailed account' of the revolution, amongst its pages are counters to the common criticism of the revolution as well as several important lessons for revolutionaries today.

Immediately in *Ten Days That Shook the World*, Reed reveals how Russian society was in a flux. Ideas were being debated on street corners and in large halls, all of Russia, he writes, 'was learning to read politics, economics, history because people wanted to know.' The masses were not passive spectators of the political discussion but were energetic participants.

Reed commented that by October the period of the February Revolution seemed conservative by comparison. Russian politics 'swung bodily to the Left' as the masses grew in confidence and changed the parameters of political discourse, 'until the Cadets were outlawed as 'enemies of the people', Kerensky became a 'counter-revolutionist', the 'middle' Socialist leaders... were too reactionary for their following'. (p. 36)

The revolution in October was part of a wider process of human liberation, as people were actively involved in consciously shaping their society. The levels of engagement were so high in fact Reed asked, with 'such a deluge of high and hot thoughts that surely Russia would never again be dumb!' (p.137) Lenin described revolutions as 'festivals of the oppressed and the exploited' and this description certainly matches the events from Reed's account.

The mass participation involved contradicts the most common criticism of the revolution, that it was an undemocratic coup orchestrated by Lenin and the Bolsheviks. This critique usually contends that the Provisional Government led by Kerensky had the only democratic mandate. From reading *Ten Days That Shook the World*, however, one understands the flourishing of democracy that had taken place.

The revolution gave power to the Soviets which were 'the direct representatives of millions on millions of common workers,

soldiers, peasants'. (p. 36) The Bolshevik call for 'all power to the Soviets' was not a negation but an extension of democracy, as it gave direct authority to the masses in both the political and crucially the economic sphere.

Reed's account is filled with descriptions of this radical democracy or 'people power' in action. 'Everywhere the same thing happened. The common soldiers and the industrial workers supported the Soviets by a vast majority.' (p. 147) The existence of soviets in factories and barracks meant that the masses were truly involved in the organising their lives. The revolution grew from the immediate and 'moderate' demands of the masses for land, bread and peace.

Reed's sympathies were with the proletariat; nevertheless his book recognises the deep divide in the society and brilliantly demonstrates the effect that counter-revolutionary forces can have at the pivotal times. New formations such as the Committee of Salvation were set up to confront the influence of the Soviets.

Nothing could be more striking than the contrast between this [Committee of Salvation] and the Congress of Soviets. There, great masses of shabby soldiers, grimy workmen, peasants - poor men, bent and scarred in the brute struggle for existence; here the Menshevik and Socialist Revolutionary leaders... rubbed shoulders with Cadets... with journalists, students, intellectuals. This Duma crowd was well fed, well dressed; I did not see more than three proletarians among them all. (p. 123)

These class contradictions explain the reason why most other political parties were not supportive of the October Revolution. Reed quotes Trotsky who pointed out that these 'parties which march against us... are isolated, and for ever cut off from the proletariat!' (p. 141)

This is at the core of the book, Reed points out that the revolution was not won by the Bolsheviks but by the people. 'This

was *their* battle, for *their* world; the officers in command were elected by *them*... the anonymous hordes of the people... rose like a tide and poured over the enemy' claiming power for themselves. (p. 201)

Class interests are magnified in a revolution. Many who were active in the February Revolution, turned against the movement and sided with reactionary forces as the workers got closer to gaining power. These lessons are vital for future struggles, it is important to know the limits of political ideologies.

The revolution shown in *Ten Days That Shook the World* is not an idealised representation. It was not created by the Bolsheviks, as Reed wrote it 'had not come as they expected it would come, nor as the intelligentsia desired it; but it had come - rough, strong, impatient of formulas, contemptuous of sentimentalism; real' (p. 134)

This 'real' revolution threw everything in the air. It was certainly not guaranteed that the Bolsheviks would win the majority to their side. From the collapse of the status quo emerged various ideological positions. Workers could be pulled by many competing ideas. As Reed eloquently explained 'Old Russia was no more; human society flowed molten in primal heat, and from the tossing sea of flame was emerging the class struggle.' (p. 147)

The strength of the Bolsheviks was their ability to react to the revolutionary moment and offer a leadership which was critical. After months of struggle and principled campaigning the popular call for 'land, bread and peace' and 'All power to the Soviets' culminated in support for the revolution and the Bolsheviks. The revolutionary period was a learning process in which the masses developed a new consciousness and fought for a new type of society, a socialist one. The Bolsheviks remained principled in their campaign to support the emancipation of the working class.

So plunged the Bolsheviks ahead, irresistible, overruling hesitation and opposition - the only people in Russia who had a definite programme of action

while others talked for eight long months. (p. 137)

As Irish revolutionaries in 2017 it is obvious that the conditions we organise in are vastly different to those of Russia in 1917. This does not mean though that we should ignore the lessons that were hard-learned through struggle by the Russian revolutionaries.

Ten Days That Shook the World captures vividly that in times of revolutionary movements society is in huge fluctuation and from this breeds a multitude of ideas. The book demonstrated the need for a revolutionary party to offer leadership. That party though, like the Bolsheviks, must be rooted in movements and struggle to build the confidence of the working class.

Not by compromise with the propertied classes, or with the political leaders; not by concilia-

tion the old Government mechanism, did the Bolsheviki conquer the power. Nor by the organised violence of a small clique. If the masses all over Russia had not been ready for insurrection it must have failed. The only reason for Bolshevik success lay in their accomplishing the vast and simple desires of the most profound strata of the people, calling them to the work of tearing down and destroying the old and afterwards, in the smoke of falling ruins, cooperating with them to erect the framework of the new. (p.254)

The simple and most powerful lesson from *Ten Days That Shook the World* is that it is only through the revolutionary self-emancipation of the working class that a true socialist alternative can emerge.