

Ten Days That Shook the World

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Reed was a groupie. A revolutionary groupie. A young American excited by heroic politics. He had reported from the revolution in Mexico, which had greatly excited him. Here in Petrograd a few years later was another opportunity. His book is overflowing with enthusiasm, even the title can hardly contain itself., bubbling over in heady hyperbole.

The action takes place over a time significantly longer than ten days, and the ten days which ostensibly constituted the core of the events are not particularly well delineated. In fact this is typical of the book, which is fat on confusion and lean on instruction. What is really going on? There is always a point of view, where the author happens to be at the moment, but there is no overview, no analysis, just impressions. In short it is a quintessential eye-witness account. Eyewitness accounts are supposed to be particularly true. Pure, unmediated experience, telling 'how things really were'. Not construction but direct sense data. Such a view is of course naive. Eye-witnesses tell us little about what is going on, in fact for people at the time and place, there is little understanding of a larger picture. Understanding comes later, when the past is in the words of Collingwood reconstructed in the present. But eye-witness accounts are not worthless either, they constitute evidence. They need to be interpreted, they are like shards of pottery, that do not make sense in isolation, but which can be interrogated and supply answers.

Reed's account at the time elicited admiration. Lenin had it translated into Russian and it was published in the Soviet-union. The author, who succumbed to typhoid during a later visit, was honored by being interred in the Kremlin wall, maybe the only American ever to be so singled out. Later the book was suppressed. It gave too flattering a picture of Trotsky and his central involvement in the take-over. In fact did not Trotsky play a crucial role. Stalin is mentioned only once, and then as a commissar of nationalities, his name occurring signed under a document.

Now why were the Bolsheviks able to seize power and to maintain it? The study of history has some side-effects, one being the illusion of inevitability. Did not the fate of the uprising totter, able to fall one way as the other? After all the Bolsheviks took power in Hungary, but were only able to hold on to it for a month or so. There was also an attempt in Finland, and a subsequent Civil War, during which the Whites under Mannerheim won. I recall the history lessons in elementary school. Our teacher told us that the big mistake of the March Revolution was that they wanted to continue the war, the Bolsheviks did not. There is much truth to that explanation, nothing in Reed contradicts it. On the other hand Reed contradicts little.

To make sense of the events one need to understand some commonly understood ideas at the time. The basic one was that society was divided into classes whose interests were at variance. An individual was identified with a class, or at least his or her interests were identified with those of a class. In particular one could speak about collective wills, and thus an individual could see himself as manifesting it. This is an idea that in some form

or another permeates any kind of politics, and lead to the thorny issues of representation and representative Government. One may either take a formal view and assume that such collective wills only make sense if expressed through political institutions, preferably democratic ones. Thus by fiat, the result of an election defines the will of the majority, it does not exist by itself. Another view would be the Platonic, although many would take exception to such a label. There is a collective will, and it is a matter of interpreting it and make it express itself. Without such convictions you could hardly be a revolutionary.

Of course there are classes and classes. There are the bad classes, the reactionaries, the capitalists, the bourgeois (often pre-fixed by petty). They make up the one of the oppressors, a rather thin layer of privileged individuals. It is no surprise that most of the revolutionaries stemmed from this layer of society. There are also the good classes, the majority, the meek who will eventually inherit the earth. They are not educated and far worse lacking in proper class-consciousness. Left to themselves they constitute but inert masses, they need to be led by more enlightened people in order to raise their consciousness and express their intrinsic will. Words like the proletariat and the masses are used, terms which constitute strange mixtures of the despicable and the holy. In modern capitalistic societies the masses may still be despicable, but they are hardly holy. They form the mass which instead of supplying the labor on which capitalism rests, acts as the consumers without which its wheel would not care to turn. Thus revolutionary rhetoric strikes us now as somewhat quaint. It had a revival in the 60's and 70's, but that was mostly nostalgia.

Now why did the Bolsheviks triumph? There was a revolution in March which did away with the Monarchy and which was spearheaded by Socialists, Kerensky being one. In fact there were a lot of Socialist parties, each vying to be more radical than the other. The Bolsheviks may have stood out as being the ones least amenable to compromise and the ones who were the most disciplined. Obviously their consistent stand had appeal and their numbers steadily grew in various representative bodies. But which bodies were the representative ones? When things are moving very quickly you cannot have elections every four years, you need to have them at least every four weeks, if not every four days. There was the Duma and there were the Soviets. The former were dominated by the more moderate parties, revolutionary no doubt, but not as revolutionary as the vanguard. 'All powers to the Soviets' were the rallying cry. A simple slogan, and one which works. Power rests ultimately on force, revolutions are seldom without blood-shedding. But there is a paradox here. Force as its most forceful is embodied in a disciplined army. But in order for an army to act as a monolithic body, there has to be loyalty. The common soldier need to identify with his officers not with his class. If this does not work anymore the army collapses. In fact the Russian armies had already collapsed fighting the Germans. Morale was low and sinking. Sinking morale has a depressing effect on morale, making the sinking go even faster. A reinforcing loop as it is called. Thus the provisional government was finding itself riding a collapsing army. Its most natural source of strength was disintegrating.

Yet, the revolutionaries faced almost insurmountable challenges. They had had a dress-rehearsal in 1904. That was the year of the failed revolution, and failure smarted so much that there was a general feeling that another chance may not be head in another generation. The Great War was what gave hope to the revolutionary spirit. The hope

being that the hopelessness of the war would spell the collapse of the capitalistic classes and spur the oppressed ones to revolt. It would hardly happen in Russia, which did not even have a sizable industrial proletariat, 80 percent of the population still being peasants, a formless undifferentiated mass, which only provoked the scorn of Marx. If revolution would occur, it would occur in the west, not in Russia. Russia was just too barbaric and undeveloped. Thus the idea that the revolutionary attempt in Russia was just to have an incendiary purpose, to inspire other efforts abroad, and those efforts when in full conflagration would also sweep up the Russians. Without this conviction in the back of their minds they probably would not have had the strength to succeed. In this respect Trotsky may have been the most outspoken, he who would for ever be brandished as the man with world revolutionary ambitions.

Now the actual taking of power is not explained by Reed. He probably did not understand it at all. He was too close to that impressionistic event to catch anything else but colorful patches. He is good at conveying atmosphere and the sense of confusion. The street-cars are still running. Crowds of people, shootings, yet life going on nevertheless. It were heady times, passionate debates, proclamations written, printed, posted on walls. People being arrested thrown in prison, shot or maybe simply released. Red Guards are everywhere. Politics need feet to walk on. They were the feet. Maybe they were the most numerous feet. Then the forces of reaction, counter-revolutionaries. Yunkers. Young officer boys, hardly out of school. Perched between the demands of heroic resistance and running home to their mothers. There was blood, but as the editors remarked very little serious fighting. People who had never carried a rifle before were now asked to shoot. Ignorant of the kick-back of a fired weapon they ended up in medical emergencies with broken jaws. How close was not the whole affair to become simply farcical. There were rampant rumors of course. That you expect. Of atrocities committed. Nothing like a juice atrocity committed by your adversaries to get the adrenalin pumping. And here he is Reed, running back and forth, excited, showing his 'propusks' to people who can neither read nor write. Was he not once put against the wall to be shot, escaping narrowly. Most of the tragedy in the world is not caused by evil, but by plain stupidity.

Workers, Peasants and Soldiers, those were the three legs on which the revolution rested. Of those the Peasant leg was the fattest, but the least interesting, at least from the view of Petrograd and Moscow. There was a program of land distribution which the Bolsheviks had plagiarized from the Revolutionary Socialists, much to the chagrin of the latter. In science you do not tolerate others to claim the rewards of your won work, but maybe politics is different, or should be. If your ideas are being implemented, that is the main thing, who takes the credit is surely secondary. Or so the Bolsheviks tried to argue. Maybe they were right, but that would surely only increase your mortification.

There was a war of the press. Lenin was for censure. To limit the freedom of the press to those who had the right opinions. After all we are engaged in a war and the free word is a most lethal weapon able to poison the minds of the masses. he argued convincingly. It would be as stupid to allow the freedom of expression as to tolerate the enemy to be arming himself to the hilt. Of course the measures against the freedom of expression was only temporary, a provisional measure to be recalled once normalcy were returned, i.e. when the power of the Bolsheviks had been consolidated. But as the French says, nothing

endures as long as the temporary measure. Some of the more idealistic revolutionaries took exception to this curtailment of the free word. After all was not the right to free expression a pillar of the Socialist Society? Such people, Lenin saw as being unfit for the real struggle. And maybe he was right. The man who is true to his lofty ideals and not a political realist ends up being ineffectual and ends up on the proverbial waste-heap of history.

The opposing armies collapsed. The Cossacks were getting cold feet. Kerensky found his popular support rapidly waning, after all those were times when a government could not expect to sit for four years, maybe for four weeks. In the end after his seizure of Petrograd was foiled he sneaked out, fleeing in the disguise of a simple sailor, rather than facing arrest and possible execution, ending up in the US where he would live until the 60's I recall. In spite of violent protests, as ineffectual as they were shrill, the Bolsheviks got the upper hand. Still how to govern. A modern society, to which even a backward autocratic Russian monarchy must be counted at the time, is a rather complicated machine to run. Did the Bolsheviks have the skills to run a government? People doubted, and those who constituted the cogs of the big governmental machine went on strike trying to bring the government down. Why did they not manage to do it? Society needs loyal cogs, without which there is total collapse. Still there were no total collapse. Maybe the inertia was just too great? And the fact that masses of people were in fact fired up by conviction. The conviction of belonging to a mass, of having an undefeatable collective will. Revolutionary fever is religious fever. Without this burning fever there would be an inevitable fizzling out. Slowly, slowly the powers of resistance were being worn down. There were setbacks. The masses drunk on their enthusiasm were liable to even more literal inebriation. They were seduced into wine-cellars drinking themselves into stupor. The whole revolution, threatened to drown itself in alcohol. Or so at least from the impressions of a Reed. Countermeasures were taken. Wine cellars broken into, their contents smashed. The pride of many an aristocrat. What a waste, exquisite wines literally going down the drain. But in a revolution it is not only eggs which are being smashed, bottles too. Yet how insignificant in the large picture, just one tiny patch of color.

The revolution meant the demotion of Petrograd. After all that capital of Peter the Great never really was part of Russia. Moscow was the heart, the Duchy of Moscow having been the core out of which Russia had formed. That was apparent to Reed who excitedly takes the train to the old capital. The trains in effect being under the care of the strong Union of Railroad workers, opposed to the Bolsheviks. Those, too had of course to be overcome, and so they were, at least sufficiently to allow Reed to go to the city as a tourist. To walk along the red square, to inspect the Kremlin, the Basilica of Vasil and other monuments for damage. What a relief that all those rumors were unfounded. Rumors which had caused the head of education - Lunacharsky to resign, aghast at all the destruction and plunder allegedly going on.

The book ends more or less in mid sentence. A continuation is being promised but would never be written. After all the author died young.