

# The Russian Proletariat in Action

By Eadmonn MacAlpine

TEN DAYS THAT SHOOK THE WORLD, by John Reed, Boni and Liveright, New York, pp. 371. Price \$2.00 net.

IT IS a commonplace that great poets and artists must first die to gain recognition from the world. The comparative truth of this lies in the play of competition, petty jealousy, personal interests and the variety of weakness to which mankind is heir, upon the living personalities of the artists in question, and partly in the childish tendency to glorify the past and future while belittling the present. And so it is with the happenings of our times. The American Revolution, the exploits of the ragged, starved Continental Army; the French Revolution, the upsurge of the French people with their cry of "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity;" the Paris Commune, the swing of the down-trodden masses into action—stir the blood and make the reader sigh for the days when history was being written in letters of flame. The fall of the Bastille calls to our youth and we name it a great episode. . . . But in our own day the crash of falling thrones calls forth a whimpering protest that the dust gets into our eyes.

John Reed is one of the more fortunate of our generation—fortunate in being privileged to witness the greatest act in history and more fortunate still in being gifted with eyes impervious to the dust—while we are fortunate that he can paint in vivid words the picture that he saw. Many persons have witnessed the Russian Revolution and a few of them have been word-craftsmen, but invariably they have come back to tell of the motes within their eyes.

In his book, *Ten Days that Shook the World*, Reed is frankly a partisan of the Russian workers, peasants and soldiers. He is an avowed admirer of Lenin and Trotzky, he has a good-natured, contemptuous tolerance for the inability of the Menshevik and Right Social Revolutionary leaders and an open dislike for the policies, tactics and personalities of the spokesmen of the bourgeois parties. He senses the tragedy of Kerensky, an undertone of sympathy runs through the passage dealing with his failure—sympathy with the individual, regret for the weakness of a great figure. Reed makes no secret of where his sympathies lie. He has his finger on the pulse of the Russian masses, he feels the grandeur of their struggle, he recognizes that he is witnessing the birth of a new era, he is tolerant of their mistakes and marvels that they are so few. But though Reed is at one with the masses in their striving after new life, though he senses the immensity of the task they have undertaken, he remembers that he is to play the role of historian and concerns himself with facts. And this is the power of the book—he lets events tell their own story, and he backs the story with a mass of documentary evidence.

Among all the works written around the revolution this is the book that will live after the passions of the moment have died down; it is a history of actual happenings. A history, written not in the dry-as-dust language of the conventional historian, but in the vigorous, picturesque style of an able journalist—but nevertheless history! The living history of the world's greatest epic, written by a man who knew the great portend of the events he witnessed, who saw, beneath the confusion and turmoil of bloody revolution, the great soul of the centuries-long oppressed masses groping towards the light of a new day.

Reed presents the picture in all its confusion, he piles event upon event in breathless succession. He jumps from the council hall, where a thousand delegates debate, to the barricades, where bullet and bayonet translate debate into action. He travels to the front line trenches of the external front, visits the soldiers' Soviets and hears their deliberations, sups with the officers and learns their opinions, returns to Petrograd. . . .

In vivid paragraphs he traces the currents swirling in the various congresses, conventions and committees that were in continuous session throughout the first days of the proletarian revolution:—

"I declare the first session of the Second Congress of Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies open;"

The election of the presidium took place amid stir and moving about. Avanesov announced that by agreement of the Bolsheviks, Left Social-Revolutionaries and Menshevik Internationalists, it was decided to base the presidium upon proportionality. Several Mensheviks leaped to their feet protesting. A bearded soldier shouted at them, "Remember what you did to us Bolsheviks when we were the minority!" . . . the old Tsay-ee-kah stepped down, and in their places appeared Trotzky, Kamieniev, Lunatcharsky, Madam Kollentai, Nogin. . . . The hall rose thundering . . .

"The order of the day," said Kamieniev. . . .

But suddenly a new sound made itself heard, deeper than the tumult of the crowd, persistent, disquieting,—the dull shock of guns. People looked anxiously toward the clouded windows, and a sort of fever came over them. Martov, demanding the floor, croaked hoarsely. "The civil war is beginning, comrades! The first question must be a peaceful settlement. . . ."

A soldier announced that the All-Russian Peasants' Soviets had refused to send delegates to the Congress; he proposed that a committee be sent with a formal invitation. "Some delegates are present," he said. "I move that they be given votes."

Kharash, wearing the epaulets of a captain, passionately demanded the floor. "The political hypocrites who control this Congress," he shouted, "told us we were to settle the question of Power—and it is being settled behind our backs, before the Congress opens! Blows are being struck against the Winter Palace, and it is by such blows that the nails are being driven into the coffin of the political party which has risked such an adventure!" Uproar. Followed him Gharra: "While we are here discussing propositions of peace, there is a battle on in the streets. . . . The Socialist Revolutionaries and the Mensheviks refuse to be involved in what is happening, and call upon all public forces to resist the attempt to capture the power. . . ." Kutchin, delegate of the 12th Army and representative of the Trudoviki: "I was sent here only for information, and I am returning at once to the Front, where all the Army Committees consider that the taking of power by the Soviets, only three weeks before the Constituent Assembly, is a stab in the back of the Army and a crime against the people—" Shouts of "Lie! You Lie!" When he could be heard again, "Let's make an end of this adventure in Petrograd! I call upon all delegates to leave this hall in order to save the country and the Revolution!" As he went down the aisle in the midst of a deafening noise, people surged in upon him, threatening. Then Kintchuk, an officer with a long brown goatee, speaking suavely and persuasively: "I speak for the delegates from the Front. The Army is imperfectly represented in this Congress, and furthermore, the Army is does not consider the Congress of Soviets necessary at this time, only three weeks before the opening of the Constituent—" shouts and stamping, always growing more violent. Soldiers began to stand up all over the hall.

"Who are you speaking for? What do you represent?" they cried.

"The Central Executive Committee of the Soviet of the Fifth Army, the Second F— Regiment, the First N— Regiment, the Third S— Rifles. . . ."

"When were you elected? You represent the officers, not the soldiers. What do the soldiers say about it?" Jeers and hoots.

"We, the Front group, disclaim all responsibility for what has happened and is happening. . . ."

. . . At intervals in the almost continuous disturbance Hendekman, for the Socialist Revolutionaries, could be heard protesting against the bombardment of the Winter Palace. . . . "We are opposed to this kind of anarchy. . . ."

Scarcely had he stepped down than a young, lean-faced soldier, with flashing eyes, leaped to the platform, and dramatically lifted his hand:

"Comrades!" he cried and there was a hush. "My familia (name) is Peterson—I speak for the Second Lettish Rifles. You have heard the statements of two representatives of the Army Committees; these statements would have some value if their authors had been representatives of the Army—" Wild applause. "But they do not represent the Army—" Shaking his fist. "The Twelfth Army has been insisting for a long time upon the re-election of the Great Soviet and the Army Committees, but just as your own Tsay-ee-Kah, our Committee refused to call a meeting of the representatives of the masses until the end of September, so that the reactionaries could elect their own false delegates to this Congress. I tell you now, the Lettish soldiers have many times said, 'No more resolutions! No more talk! We want deeds—the Power must be in our hands! Let these impostor delegates leave the Congress! The army is not with them!'"

The hall rocked with cheering. . . .

And then he shows the currents merging into the central stream and sweeping onwards leaving futile eddies in its wake—

. . . . In the first moments of the session, stunned by the rapidity of events, startled by the sound of cannon, the delegates had hesitated. For an hour hammer-blow after hammer-blow had fallen from that tribune, welding them together but beating them down. Did they stand then alone? Was Russia rising against them? Was it true that the Army was marching on Petrograd? Then this clear-eyed young soldier had spoken, and in a flash they knew it for the truth. . . . This was the voice of the soldiers—the stirring millions of uniformed workers and peasants were men like them, and their thoughts and feelings were the same. . . .

The whole undertone of the book shows Reed's intense sympathy with the revolution. Occasionally it breaks out in lightning flashes: "Now there was all great Russia to win—and then the world! Would Russia follow and rise? And the world—what of it? Would the peoples answer and rise, a red world-tide?" "Old Russia was no more; human society flowed molten in primal heat, and from the tossing sea of flame was emerging the class struggle, stark and pitiless—and the fragile, slowly-cooling crust of new plan-

ets.—" "—I suddenly realized that the devout Russian people no longer needed priests to pray them into heaven. On earth they were building a kingdom more bright than any heaven had to offer, and for which it was a glory to die." "In the bitter dusk they tramped, men and women, their tall bayonets swaying; through streets faintly lighted and slippery with mud, between silent crowds of bourgeois, contemptuous but fearful. . . ." But he does not garnish his tale, always he returns to facts, facts from all sides. He apparently feels that they are the greatest propagandists, and only now and then does the artist break away from the artist-historian, and become the passionate painter of the "ascending soul of the people."

The whole tenor of the book shows that Reed understood the significance of the revolution, that he was able to see the great idealism of the masses beneath the horror of the bloody struggle, that he glimpsed the beauty of the new world in the midst of the ruins of the old, even as the workers, who raked the beauty of the Kremlin with their cannons, saw in the falling masonry the rise of the living beauty of human freedom and so overcame the traditions of centuries. And it is this understanding, this deep insight, that stamps truth in every line of the work. The writer tells all that he saw, he endeavors to hide nothing.

He paints the crudity of the peasant, the roughness of the worker, the hardness of the soldier. He uses the language of the people, he portrays their inability to understand the fine points of theory and at the same time their firm grasp of fundamentals,—the reiteration of the soldier when pitted against the university student: "There are two classes, don't you see, the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, only two classes, and whoever isn't on one side is on the other." He feels no necessity to smooth over the rough places; the suspicion, the violent passions, the uncouthness—all are in the book. "And whose fault is it? your damn Kerensky, dirty bourgeois! To hell with Kerensky! We don't want him! We want Lenin." Or again: "A number of soldiers slouching at the entrance asked eager questions. A spy? A provocator? We wanted a winding stair and emerged into a great, bare room with a huge stove in the centre, and rows of cots on the floor, where about a thousand soldiers were playing cards, talking, singing and asleep. . . . I stood in the doorway, and a sudden silence ran among the groups, who turned and stared at me. Of a sudden they began to move, slowly and then with a rush, thundering, with faces full of hate. 'Comrades! Comrades!' yelled one of my guards. 'Committee! Committee!' The throng banked round me, muttering. Out of them shouldered a lean youth, wearing a red arm-band. 'Who is this?' he asked roughly. . . ."

It is evident that Reed is a journalist, he has the journalistic greed for knowledge. Everyone he meets has opinions about what is happening and he is interested in those opinions. He devotes as much space to what the cab driver thought of a particular incident as to what one of the participants felt. He jumps the reader from an all night debate, where the fate of the revolution hung in the balance, to the reactions of his bourgeois landlady, who was firmly convinced that the Bolsheviks were devils. He listens to snatches of street corner arguments, he reports stump speakers, he talks with palace footmen, who have not realized that their occupation is gone, he goes with Krylenko to swing the wavering regiments to the revolution, and he talks with the girl telephone operators.

He gets the thousand angles of the struggle and sets them down, giving the confusion of the great upheaval,—the straws blowing in the wind,—but always he keeps the order that lay underneath before the reader. He watches the straws as they whirl in the little cyclones, sometimes he follows them round till they drop to earth or are blown over the house-tops, but ever he follows the forward sweep of the wind. . . .

The book is what it purports to be—a history of a slice of the revolution. The writer knew that the events he was witnessing were transforming the world; but he concerns himself not at all with how the world liked the operation. He knew that the outside world was literally being shaken but he feels no necessity for easing the shock—nearly all the other writers have taken the world's feelings into consideration. Reed tells what happened.

This work is bound to meet with adverse comment, chiefly because people do not like the truth, but even the most hostile critic will praise the vividness and swing of the book, and the mass of documentary evidence that is appended will silence all but the most audacious. Mr. Sisson might refute the documents.

The publishers announce the early publication of another volume from Reed's pen, *Kornilov to Brest-Litovsk*, we await its appearance with impatience.