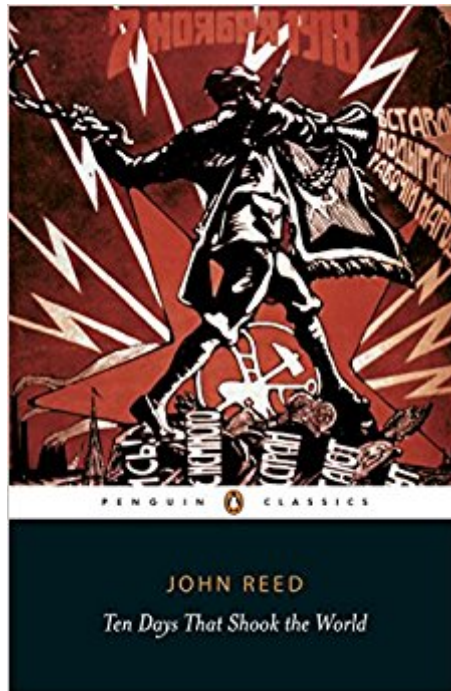




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# Ten Days That Shook The World (Penguin Classics)



## Synopsis

An impassioned firsthand account of the Russian Revolution, which celebrates its 100th anniversary in March 2017. An American journalist and revolutionary writer, John Reed became a close friend of Lenin and was an eyewitness to the 1917 revolution in Russia. *Ten Days That Shook the World* is Reed's extraordinary record of that event. Writing in the first flush of revolutionary enthusiasm, he gives a gripping account of the events in Petrograd in November 1917, when Lenin and the Bolsheviks finally seized power. Containing verbatim reports both of speeches by leaders and of the chance comments of bystanders, and set against an idealized backdrop of soldiers, sailors, peasants, and the proletariat uniting to throw off oppression, Reed's account is the product of passionate involvement and remains an unsurpassed classic of reporting. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

John Reed (1887-1920) American journalist and poet-adventurer whose colourful life as a revolutionary writer ended in Russia but made him the hero of a generation of radical intellectuals. Reed became a close friend of V. I. Lenin and was an eyewitness to the 1917 October revolution. He recorded this historical event in his best-known book *Ten Days That Shook the World* (1920).

Reed is buried with other Bolshevik heroes beside the Kremlin wall. Vladimir Lenin was born in 1870 and was one of the most influential figures of the 20th century. He became a revolutionary, a communist politician, the principal leader of the October Revolution, the first head of the Russian Soviet Socialist Republic and, from 1922, the first *de facto* leader of the Soviet Union. He wrote *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* while in exile in Switzerland during the First World War.

See my review for Louise Bryant's "Six Months in Red Russia" (which --surely-- got the title wrong with "Six Red Months in Russia").

This is from George Orwell's proposed preface to "Animal Farm": "At the death of John Reed, the author of 'Ten Days that Shook the World' -- a first-hand account of the early days of the Russian Revolution -- the copyright of the book passed into the hands of the British Communist Party, to whom I believe Reed had bequeathed it. Some years later the British Communists, having destroyed the original edition of the book as completely as they could, issued a garbled version from which they had eliminated mentions of Trotsky and also omitted the introduction written by Lenin." Don't worry, though. This Penguin Classics edition is the version of Reed's book as originally issued, with all the Trotsky references and even Lenin's preface intact.

As a piece of writing, this book is excellent. I wish I could write as well as Reed does in this book. Reed was obviously a very good journalist and that stands out in this book, even if his fervent bias toward the Bolsheviks is evident. The book covers the weeks after the November 1917 Bolshevik seizure of power but also devotes some coverage to the events leading up to that revolution. The immediate background to that revolution was the revolution of March 1917. The latter revolution overthrew the Czar and set up a provisional government for Russia. The March revolution also saw the rise of the Soviets, local councils of workers, peasants and soldiers established in virtually every locality in Russia. National bodies for the different types of Soviets (workers, soldiers, etc.) existed as did a general Congress of Soviets. The Soviets existed alongside other local government bodies--Zemstvos and Dumas--that were created during the Czar's time. The Russian masses--overwhelmingly peasants--wanted the redistribution of feudal land to themselves and the ending of Russia's involvement in World War I. Russia's involvement in World War I drained Russia's resources to such an extent that the country was on the verge of complete collapse. But the provisional government insisted on carrying on Russia's involvement in the war, as food

shortages, death of soldiers and chaos reached catastrophic levels. After a few months, the provisional government fell under the influence of moderate socialists who believed that not only did Russia need to continue its involvement in World War one but that the country was not ready for a socialist revolution. In accordance with their understanding of Marxist theory, they believed Russia first needed to transform itself from a largely agrarian economy and feudal despotism to an advanced bourgeois economy and democracy before any socialist revolution could take place. The socialists in the provisional government governed in coalition with bourgeois elements who blocked the implementation of the March revolution's stated goals, including the distribution of feudal lands to peasant ownership. The Bolsheviks decided to seize power from the provisional government in November 1917, calling a new general congress of Soviets, which backed the Party's decision. Unlike the moderate socialists in the provisional government, the Bolsheviks promised an immediate socialist revolution. They promised that workers and peasants would directly control the economic life of the country through the soviets. They promised that Russia would withdrawal from World War I, that feudal land would be redistributed to the peasants and that economic oppression would end in the country. Reed uses superb power of description to describe the initial weeks of the revolution. He describes the tension as the Bolsheviks had to do battle with anti-Bolshevik military forces, including that assembled by Kerensky, the Menshevik socialist who was the last head of the provisional government. He describes the undercurrent of panic as Bolshevik officials tried to figure out how to run the levers of government. Reed does provide large space for the point of view of anti-Bolshevik elements. Many proclamations of the opposition are included in the book's appendix. One of the interesting issues discussed in the book is the views on freedom of the press of the Bolsheviks and the critics of those views in the 2nd All Russian Congress of Soviets. The implication of the book is that the poor majority of Russians were on the side of the Bolsheviks. One can understand how this would be true. The Bolsheviks promised that Russia's economy would be managed directly by workers and peasants through the soviets. As presented in this book, the libertarian socialist rhetoric of the Bolsheviks is inspiring. However, this inspiration is dampened by the knowledge that the Bolsheviks discarded libertarian socialist principles not long after the timeframe covered by this book. They set up a highly centralized dictatorship over economic and political life while depriving the soviets of real power. They justified the imposition of this dictatorship on national security grounds (the civil war, the invasion of the imperialist countries, etc.) as well as the notion that genuine socialist democracy could not survive in Russia without the security provided by socialist revolutions in Western Europe. The debate between anarchists and Leninists over the events of 1917-23 in Russia is certainly very interesting. Reed apparently had no

substantial disagreement with the establishment of the Bolshevik dictatorship. He kept working for the Bolsheviks until he died of Typhus in Russia in 1920 and was buried at the Kremlin wall. One wonders if Reed, had he lived, would have gone along with Stalin's dictatorship, followed Trotsky or perhaps abandoned radical leftist politics altogether and become pro-capitalist.

As the title suggests, John Reed's account of the October revolution is unabashedly pro-Bolshevik. I suppose that makes it useful to a variety of different people. People who want to portray rank and file communists as dupes will find plenty of ammunition. On the other hand people who sympathize with communism will be able to contrast the idealism of the old Bolsheviks with the cynical cruelty of the Stalin regime. It can be read either way \*with the benefit of hindsight.\* To me the important thing about a book like this is that it can and should be read without that hindsight. Marx couldn't have possibly known, in the 1870's, how his magnum opus would be used to justify the crimes of the Stalin regime in the 1930s, nor could Reed have known that in the 1910's, any more than you or I or anyone else can know what will happen tomorrow or the day after. People had to do the best they had with limited information - obviously in this case a lot of people got a lot of things wrong. If we want to move the grounds of discussion out of the realm of politics and ideology, where all kinds of childish sophistry can masquerade as profound thinking, and into the grounds of history, where real conversation is still possible, we have to make allowances for the limitations of the human condition. Neither people who were for or against communism could have possibly known the future. As it turned out the people who were for it had to go on the record as having made a serious blunder, while people who were against it got to switch their line after the fact and pretend they had always known. At least for me, this book is a corrective to that kind of thinking. It gives a great deal of insight into what at least one early Bolshevik supporter was thinking, and how he saw the events of the revolution as they unfolded. It also shows how the Bolsheviks got into power in the first place, and how they were able to rally popular support at a time when they still needed it. There's nothing like a first hand account, if you want to understand the past. His portrayal of a city in chaos is also compelling. There isn't a great deal of intellectual content here, apart from the bare facts that he reports, but that's to be expected. We're already far too familiar with the main lines of argument, so it's not likely to be missed. If anything, what stands out about this book is the narrator's almost childish enthusiasm. He really thought he was standing on the cusp of a new epoch in world history. In a way he was, I suppose - though hardly the kind of epoch he had in mind. In any case I do recommend this book. People who think its fun to beat the dead horse of communism (or try to resurrect it) will find plenty to get excited about. More thoughtful people, who want to understand the

actual events of 1917, will also find their efforts rewarded. Everybody wins.

Confessedly a partisan narrative, "Ten Days That Shook the World" nevertheless is, and always will be, unusually valuable because Reed is an A1 reporter who has a narrative style that is as rare as it is vivid. The book is valuable not only for the finely written and fully documented history of the rise and fall of Kerensky, and the coming in of the Soviet regime of Communist Socialism, but also because of the clear exposition Reed gives of the differences in political theory championed by the many factions and the unprecedented collection of official documents which he accumulated and that are reproduced in the form of appendices.

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