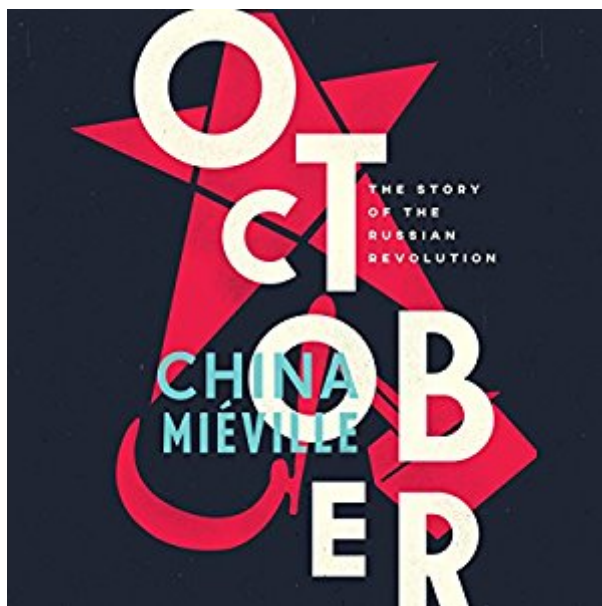


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October: The Story Of The Russian Revolution



Synopsis

The renowned fantasy and science fiction writer China Mieville has long been inspired by the ideals of the Russian Revolution, and here, on the centenary of the revolution, he provides his own distinctive take on its history. In February 1917, in the midst of bloody war, Russia was still an autocratic monarchy: nine months later it became the first socialist state in world history. How did this unimaginable transformation take place? How was a ravaged and backward country, swept up in a desperately unpopular war, rocked by not one but two revolutions? This is the story of the extraordinary months between those upheavals, in February and October, of the forces and individuals who made 1917 so epochal a year, of their intrigues, negotiations, conflicts and catastrophes. From familiar names like Lenin and Trotsky to their opponents Kornilov and Kerensky; from the byzantine squabbles of urban activists to the remotest villages of a sprawling empire; from the revolutionary railroad Sublime to the ciphers and static of coup by telegram; from grand sweep to forgotten detail. Historians have debated the revolution for 100 years, its portents and possibilities: the mass of literature can be daunting. But here is a book for those new to the events, told not only in their historical import but in all their passion and drama and strangeness. Because as well as a political event of profound and ongoing consequence, Mieville reveals the Russian Revolution as a breathtaking story.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This book is magnificent. It tells the story of the revolution with an approach which is both general,

and honing in on hyper specific stories within the revolution that really works to create a stunning narrative progress for the revolution. As far as general introductions to the subject go, this is almost unbeatable, and is an excellent book for the centenary of the revolution.

Mieville moves effortlessly to nonfiction

Known for his post-modern fantasy and science-fiction, China Miéville enriches these genres with his expertise in international relations and critical legal studies. Educated at Cambridge and the London School of Economics, he argues in the 2005 adaptation of his doctoral thesis: "The attempt to replace war and inequality with law is not merely utopian but is precisely self-defeating. A world structured around international law cannot but be one of imperialist violence. The chaotic and bloody world around us is the rule of law." Recently a very unsuccessful Socialist Workers Party candidate for the House of Commons, he has since helped to found the anti-capitalist "red-green" Left Unity party. His biographical data assist the reader of this version of the Russian Revolution. Although a fellow-traveler alongside many of those whose tales he retells, Miéville sustains a detached stance, if an implicitly radical affinity, for the rebels and malcontents within the nine months of 1917 he explores. He offers the pre-history of that year, especially the anti-tsarist tumult in 1905. That earlier October, Moscow's print-workers started a strike. The reason? Having been paid by the letter, the typesetters demanded added remuneration for punctuation. Massive unrest spread. Debating such resistance, Bolsheviks agreed that the time for a socialist uprising led by proletariat and peasantry remained premature. Their semi-rivals the Mensheviks counter that a democratic and capitalist insurgency is acceptable, given the need of the bourgeoisie to guide under-prepared factions in a backward land. Miéville commences his chronology of the pivotal year in February of a century ago, in the former St. Petersburg. The imperial capital witnesses its mill-workers rallying. They turn to meet Cossack cavalry facing off against. then letting through, thousands of marchers again on strike. The horsemen stay still as protesters duck under their mounts. "Rarely have skills imparted by reaction been so exquisitely deployed against it." With so many of the military turned against their royal commander, by March the Mensheviks are in charge. Under Alexander Kerensky, the moderate leftists struggle to keep order. Vladimir Lenin returns from exile to incite a new "second stage" revision of his earlier opinion that the revolution could wait. He regards Russia as ripe for leadership by the workers allied with the poorest peasants. Rejecting collaboration with the Mensheviks, the Bolsheviks edge towards the seizure of the councils, the soviets, established by the proles and farmers. They want power now. However, triumph will not

hurry itself. The First All-Russian Congress of Peasants' Soviets convenes during May in Petrograd. Out of 1200 delegates, nine are Bolshevik and 14 affiliated. Urged on by Lenin and his comrades, their numbers will soon balloon. But others contend against them for a share of the action. Anarchists attempt to occupy a right-wing press. Not amused, the authorities push them aside. "Up with these anarchists, they decided, they would not put." A rare glimmer of levity lightens the recital of figures and the recording of events that may sink heavily, for this is quite a dense story. While Miñville provides a glossary of key characters and an annotated reading guide, keeping the zemstov straight from the Trudovski remains a challenge for any novice inquirer unfamiliar with this milieu. To his credit, Miñville patiently lists the constantly warping factions and their fleeting moments of notoriety. Still, the pace of change occurs so rapidly that it requires very steady attention. By July, the Kerensky government weakens. Bolsheviks bicker. Hearing armed masses approaching, someone "in the room gasped: 'Without the sanction of the Central Committee?'" Miñville remarks on the gap between party and populace: "How easy to forget that people do not need or await permission to move." This showdown nudged the Bolsheviks against the soviets, now dismissed as counter-revolutionary. Although they numbered 8000, a tenth of the Menshevik ranks, momentum was theirs. Under Lenin and Leon Trotsky, they sought "direct seizure of power by workers and the party." August witnesses Kerensky despairing. "I want to take the middle road, but no one will help me." A right-wing military coup fizzled. September opens as the Petrograd Soviet finally adopts the Bolshevik militancy as a socialist wedge against the Provisional Government of the Mensheviks and their wavering allies. But this policy is rejected by a pro-Kerensky committee. Worsened by insistent opposition to Russia's entanglement in the Great War, troops desert and mutiny, filling the cadres of radicalized Bolsheviks back in Petrograd. Europe itself appears to tip towards the long-anticipated socialist revolution. German's kaiser totters towards chaos. Lenin reckons the time to act has arrived. The titular month starts with Lenin returned from his flight to Finland. Disguised in a grey wig, he enters crime-riddled Petrograd. The last bastion between the Eastern front and it having been abandoned, those within the tense capital prepare for second overthrow of a Russian regime that year. "Upheaval was traced over a regular city dusk." Strollers continue; gunfire peppers cold air nearby. Over an attenuated 26th of the Julian calendar (November 5th by the Gregorian reckoning superseding it the following year), Miñville depicts not a dramatic raid by eager recruits on the Winter Palace, but a stultifying endgame. Shots from a naval vessel meet with little response from cadres on the ground. Inside the grandiose redoubt: "Men skirmished in stairwells. Any creak on the floorboards might be the revolution." The victors find a dim dawn, with a hint of lightening above. In a necessary epilogue, China Miñville charts the trajectory of the

Bolshevik overthrow. While never diminishing the human costs of the Soviet triumph, he insists upon a balanced tally of the progress achieved for millions, in a dim but persistent era of advancement away from serfdom and bigotry, oppression and submission. "Twilight, even remembered twilight, is better than no light at all. It would be equally absurd to say that there is nothing we can learn from the revolution. To deny that the *summer* of October can be ours, and that it need not be always followed by night." At the close of Miéville's narrative quest, he considers the metaphor and fact of 1917 as a "revolution of trains." He aptly concludes: "The question for history is not only who should be driving the train, but where."

The audience for this book is more people interested in politics, history, Russia, and Marxism rather than the average reader of Mieville's fiction (I personally fit in both boxes). It's a very well researched and told story of the revolution, and a particularly good telling for those people who do not already have detailed knowledge of the characters and events. Additionally, Mieville manages to subvert a lot of the common narratives of the revolution. Lenin appears throughout the book, but his agency here is (rightly) downplayed. Instead, the revolution appears to be the product of acts of circumstance and fortune, along with various soldiers' brigades who prove irrepressible. Indeed, one of the most interesting dynamics here is between the Bolsheviks and the soldiers they represent. Who is really leading who? Furthermore, we see how the Bolsheviks are internally fractured. This is not a one-man, or one-party show, but a messy complex of actors. Lastly, the book is a slow burn and by necessity involves a lot of exposition (of characters, of groups, of committees). It really picks up midway, when Kornilov's army threatens to destroy the revolution, and peaks in the final chapter when events poise on a knife's edge. The reader's persistence really pays off. Actually, I'm in awe of Mieville's ability to translate his research and the ungodly mess of characters and events into a highly readable book.

I wasn't sure whether or not I was interested in this book and probably wouldn't have tried it were it not written by Mieville. I read his "The City and the City" when it first came out and thought it was brilliant. I read "Perdido Street Station" and thought it very good, but haven't yet had the commitment to read the rest of the trilogy. I frankly think that Mieville is more compelling when he limits the size of his novels. I'm not sure how to review this. Because I have only the typical person's understanding of the events leading up to the Russian events at the end of WW I and past, I can't comment on accuracy, though given M's reputation and writing, I assume he did his research. "October" is a compelling read even though one knows how it ends, in the way that

something about the Titanic would be. At times it felt like more detail than I wanted, and at times I grew weary at the maelstrom of events, but I kept reading, caught whether or not I wanted to be.

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