



City Research Online

City, University of London Institutional Repository

Citation: Rodgers, J. (2017). This First Draft of History Lasts. *British Journalism Review*, 28(2), pp. 48-52. doi: 10.1177/0956474817713966

This is the accepted version of the paper.

This version of the publication may differ from the final published version.

Permanent repository link: <https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/17547/>

Link to published version: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956474817713966>

Copyright: City Research Online aims to make research outputs of City, University of London available to a wider audience. Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the author(s) and/or copyright holders. URLs from City Research Online may be freely distributed and linked to.

Reuse: Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge. Provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

John Reed will always have some of the glamour of the rock star or poet who died young. He left behind a book, *Ten Days That Shook the World*, which continues to influence the way that one of the most significant events of the 20th century is understood. He was just thirty-three when, on a journey through the ruins of the Russian empire, he contracted the typhus which killed him. He was buried in the wall of the Kremlin – a rare honour for a foreigner. During my years in Russia, I never met anyone named after him – with the Russified ‘DzhonRid’ as a first name – but I heard stories of people being so called. It is not as fanciful as it sounds. In early 1992, I did meet an elderly citizen who had been born in Soviet-era Armenia, and had been given the name ‘Mels’ (Marx-Engels-Lenin-Stalin). Reed’s early death meant he never had to offer a view on what the revolution became – so never did he have to decide, or to declare publicly, whether the murderous violence of Stalin’s Soviet Union, the police state that the USSR was to become for so much of its existence, was to be justified or condemned. Today his book is still a cracking read – and a useful one for anyone covering the unpredictable political times in which we ourselves now live.

Reed influenced history, and those who made it, in a way few journalists ever have. In the introduction, Lenin wrote that he had read *Ten Days That Shook the World* ‘with never-slackening attention’. Sergei Eisenstein’s 1927 film, *October*, released to remember and to record the revolution on its tenth anniversary, used Reed’s book as a source, and borrowed its title for part of its own. In the absence of documentary footage of the actual events of the Bolsheviks’ seizure of power, it is this cinematic account which provided the 20th century with the enduring moving images of an event which was to shape it to such a great extent. Its opening sequence, in which members of a revolutionary crowd attach ropes to a statue of a tsar in order to pull it down, seems to set the standard imagery for a televised revolution long before one would be covered by the medium. Yet to someone watching *October* today, the scenes of the solid monument succumbing finally to rebellious muscles cannot but bring to mind the end of the system whose dawn *October* celebrates. For as the tsar was dragged crashing down in 1917, so was Lenin in the 1990s. In Ukraine, there was another round of goodbye Lenin in 2014 as that country found itself on the frontline of the latest historical confrontation between east and west. In between, Saddam Hussein was wrenched from many of his numerous pedestals. In the late 20th and early 21st century you could not have a revolution without television pictures of statues being pulled down. Reed may have died before the television age, but his account of 1917 inspired the great 20th century cinematographer to define the terms which television would use to break the news of future uprisings.

Reed arrived in Petrograd between revolutions. He was not there in February when the Tsar abdicated, but he was there to see the Bolsheviks seize power later that year. In his preface to *Ten Days That Shook the World*, Reed warns his reader, ‘In the struggle, my sympathies were not neutral.’ Reed did not himself come from the class which he championed. He was educated at Harvard, already determined to be a writer. Some of the titles of the poems he wrote while an undergraduate presage his involvement in the revolution. Among them are ‘October’ and ‘Aurore’. The latter was written in the first hours of New Year’s Day, 1908 – but his use of the Latin word echoes now with ‘Aurora’, the name of the Russian warship whose Bolshevik crew fired the shot that was the signal for the uprising to begin. Reed writes of encountering sailors

from the ‘*Avrora* and *Zaria Svobody*¹ – the names of the leading Bolshevik cruisers of the Baltic Fleet’ on Nevsky Prospect, Petrograd’s main street. Despite his education at an elite university, Reed had long supported left-wing causes. This engagement with the injustices of the world in which he worked as a correspondent inspired him as he sought to expose them. The First World War was arguably the most shameful chapter in the history of British international reporting. Readers at home were spared the horrors of the new century’s first taste of mechanized warfare on a massive scale. Today, the accounts of the soldier-poets, not the accounts of the reporters, are looked to for their realism. As one of the correspondents, Sir Philip Gibbs (his knighthood awarded for his part in the failure to tell the full story) later conceded, ‘There was no need for censorship of our despatches. We were our own censors.’

Reed played no part in this. As an American correspondent, Reed was bound neither by the draconian 1914 Defence of the Realm Act, nor by the jingoism of proprietors such as Lord Northcliffe, then owner of both the *Daily Mail* and *The Times*. Reed’s coverage of the First World War makes its reader sit up and take notice a century later. Taken by the Germans in 1915 on what correspondents would now call a ‘facility’ in occupied France, Reed uses the officers’ rudeness and cruelty towards conscripts to reflect more widely on the fate of soldiers in the war. ‘I should not care to live half frozen in a trench, up to my middle in water, for three or four months, because someone in authority said I ought to shoot Germans,’ he says of the conditions in which he sees the French Army fighting. The Russian Army, ‘knouted into battle for a cause they never heard of, appeals to me even less,’ he concludes of the country where he will go on to make his name.

What is striking about *Ten Days That Shook the World*, almost a century after it first appeared, is the energy which it still radiates. Knowing, as we do, what followed Reed’s blissful dawn – Stalin’s purges; the costly Soviet victory in the Second World War; the terminal economic paralysis of Marxism-Leninism – it is hard for us to share his enthusiasm to the extent to which he displays it. There is much to admire in the text, however. Reed takes pains to give his reader as detailed a political background as he can. The characteristics of the various branches of Russia’s revolutionary movement may only be of interest to the specialist historian these days, but the fact that Reed was able to describe them in the way he did speaks of an impressive command of detail. That exists alongside a peerless talent for reportage. What a combination; what a rare combination. Consider this passage about a rally of revolutionaries

The meeting took place between the gaunt brick walls of a huge unfinished building, ten thousand black-clothed men and women packed around a scaffolding draped in red, people heaped on piles of lumber and bricks, perched high up on shadowy girders, intent and thunder-voiced. Through the dull, heavy sky now and again burst the sun, flooding reddish light through the skeleton windows upon the mass of simple faces upturned to us.

No wonder Eisenstein used the book as a source. This is literary journalism as cinema, right down to the lighting effect of the sun ‘flooding reddish light’ onto the faces of the crowd. Reed knows that he is living in extraordinary times. In normal times, people do not perch high up on

¹ This ship’s name means ‘Dawn of Freedom’

the 'shadowy girders' of 'a huge unfinished building'. This is a moment of destiny: 'thunder-voiced' seems even to suggest the intervention of a Zeus-like figure, with whose support the cause cannot fail. This is further reinforced by the bursts of sunlight, appropriately 'reddish' like the revolution.

How should we judge Reed today? Can we? That he was a great writer is surely beyond dispute. He was also influential. His book has a preface from Lenin. Trotsky (who, if his *History of the Russian Revolution* is anything to go by, was a pretty good writer himself) uses him a source on the opinions of the 'diplomatic agents of the Entente' and on the 'frank confessions of the Russian bourgeois politicians'. Access does not get any better than this: when it leads a journalist to be cited by one of the main actors in the story which they are covering. Yet it is Reed's access and his attitude to the cause he is writing about which must be at the heart of how we should see him today. The 20th century historian AJP Taylor praised *Ten Days that Shook the World* as, 'not only the best account of the Bolshevik revolution, it comes near to being the best account of any revolution.' Taylor, though, was perceptive as to the nature of covering revolution, especially where foreign journalists are concerned. Of the detail which Reed purported to give of political activity at the Smolny, Taylor noted, 'Reed did not in fact know. He was a foreign journalist, though a sympathetic one, and the Bolsheviks revealed him few of their secrets.'

Taylor made a very well observed point about the lot of the foreign correspondent, especially in time of great change, or revolution. Unless the protagonists in political conflict wish to convey a specific message to a particular outside power, they may barely bother with foreign journalists whose views cannot influence those involved in the action. If they do decide to give selected information to foreign correspondents, it may also be with the intention to spin or to mislead. It is Lenin, after all, to whom the phrase 'useful idiots' – for sympathetic foreign journalists and other fellow travellers – is so often attributed. All that said, Trotsky's points seem to contradict those of Taylor. Taylor pointed out that one meeting which Reed describes – 'with Lenin fixing the rising for 7 November' – did not take place. Trotsky seemed to think Reed's account important enough to mention this, too – although in a more forgiving way, explaining that, 'work done in the heat of events, notes made in corridors, on the streets, beside camp fires, conversations and fragmentary phrases caught on the wing, and that too with the need of a translator – all these things make particular mistakes unavoidable.'

Trotsky, like Taylor, pictured perfectly the huge challenge of covering events as they happen, or shortly afterwards, without the time for reflection, the access to archives, the hindsight, which are the privileges of the historian. It is precisely the sense of place, the sense of the moment, which Reed's account still creates, and which demand that it still be read today, a century after the events it describes. Reed's great skill – even if it involved wishful thinking born of his own support for the Bolshevik cause – was understanding, even at the very time it happened, the lasting significance of what he was witnessing. This is something which eluded many policy makers, and many other journalists, at the time. This failure to grasp the new reality was to have lasting consequences for the west's relations the USSR: this upstart insurgent regime which was to become a 20th century superpower. Reed's good fortune – if an early death can really be described in those terms – was like that of the rock star killed in a car crash or as the result of a

night of alcoholic and narcotic excess. His work will forever have the burning energy of youth. It will always live in the moment when he witnessed the world being shaken, loved what he saw, and was able to use his considerable literary skill to tell the story. The complications; the disillusionment; and, sometimes, as in this case, the terror, which follow revolutions: they were left to others.

*James Rodgers is the author, most recently, of *Headlines from the Holy Land: Reporting the Israeli-Palestinian conflict* (2015). He is Leader of International Studies in the Journalism Department at City, University of London, and a former BBC correspondent in Moscow, Brussels, and Gaza.*