

Author of *Ten Days That Shook the World*

# 100 years since US socialist journalist John Reed's death

Sandy English, James Macdonald  
2 December 2020

Mid-October marked the 100th anniversary of the untimely death of American revolutionary socialist journalist John Reed. The author of *Ten Days That Shook the World*, a magnificent firsthand account of the Russian Revolution, Reed died in Moscow of typhus on October 17, 1920, five days shy of his 33rd birthday.

About *Ten Days That Shook the World*, V.I. Lenin, the co-leader of the 1917 October Revolution, commented in an introduction written in 1919, “Unreservedly do I recommend it [Reed’s book] to the workers of the world. Here is a book which I should like to see published in millions of copies and translated into all languages.” The book has had a special place in the hearts and minds of class-conscious workers ever since its appearance. It can still be recommended “unreservedly.”

Many people may be familiar with the name of John “Jack” Reed from the 1981 movie *Reds*, in which Warren Beatty portrayed the intrepid and principled journalist and for which Beatty won the Academy Award for best director.

What the film cannot convey, among other things, however, is the vital, muscular and poetic quality that made Reed’s writing so influential in his time and to later generations. *Reds* only hints at the full complexity of the man who, more than any American writer of his generation, followed the demands of his political conscience to their revolutionary conclusions.

John Reed was born in Portland, Oregon on October 22, 1887 into an upper-middle-class family. His mother’s father, Henry Dodge Green, was a wealthy Portland industrialist and his house a center of Portland’s genteel social gatherings.

Reed came of age during the era of the full-blown development of American capitalism. In the 30 years following the Civil War, the US emerged as a modern industrial power. The decades saw the enrichment of the infamous Robber Barons, and the US launched its first imperialist war in 1898, seizing the Philippines and Cuba from Spain.

The urban population swelled in this period, also a time of large-scale immigration, and the working class emerged as a powerful force, expressing—in a series of bitter strike struggles—its determination to fight the omnivorous ruling class.

Reed’s father, C.J. Reed, was a crusader against political corruption in Oregon, helping to take on the logging interests in his capacity as a U.S. marshal. Not having gone to college himself, C.J. was determined that Jack should attend Harvard, interceding for his son when he failed his entrance exam. Jack passed the second time. Working on and contributing to several Harvard publications, Reed honed his journalistic and editing skills. He also wrote and published a good deal of poetry and became a member of the newly formed Harvard Socialist Club.

Establishing himself in Greenwich Village in 1911, Reed was at the center of the neighborhood’s bohemian culture. The Village was home to such figures as poet Hart Crane, “scandalous” novelist Henry Miller

(who, not long before his death, describes Reed’s milieu in *Reds*) and dramatist Eugene O’Neill.

It was here, as a working writer and an editor at *The American Magazine* (founded in 1906), that Reed grappled with the challenge of earning a living under conditions where serious art does not pay the rent. For Reed, “serious art” still meant his poetry, which does not make much of an impression after more than a century, and also supplementing his income from *The American* by selling short stories, which, in some cases genially give a flavor of life at that time.

As Reed came to know Manhattan, however, its palaces and its squalor, he came to realize that something was fundamentally wrong with American society. In a later essay written in the months before his journey to Russia that would result in his witnessing the October Revolution, titled “Almost Thirty,” he would recall the political awakening of his early twenties:

On the whole, ideas alone didn’t mean much to me. I had to see. In my rambles about the city I couldn’t help but observe the ugliness of poverty and all its train of evil, the cruel inequality between rich people who had too many motor cars and poor people who didn’t have enough to eat. It didn’t come to me from books that the workers produced all the wealth of the world, which went to those who did not earn it.

Hearing of a new arts and features magazine with a decidedly socialist orientation, called *The Masses* (founded in 1911), Reed quickly introduced himself to its editor Max Eastman, who would later translate many of Leon Trotsky’s works into English, and climbed on board as both an editor and contributor.

Though the new magazine could not pay him, Reed would find his work for this important publication his most fulfilling. *The Masses* was to publish the first stories of Sherwood Anderson in 1916, later to be collected in the groundbreaking *Winesburg, Ohio*. It published works by figures such as Jack London, the novelist Floyd Dell, and the poets Carl Sandburg and Amy Lowell. Painters John Sloan, George Bellows and Pablo Picasso contributed illustrations.

By 1913, Reed would prove a more than receptive audience member when—in a Greenwich Village apartment—he met William “Big Bill” Haywood, leader of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), the left-wing syndicalist movement. Reed listened as Haywood described the developing situation in nearby Paterson, New Jersey, where silk workers were on strike and being beaten and jailed by police. Reed, perhaps for the first time, reacted to a major story not only as a journalist but as a partisan,

determined to publicize the strike and help the workers.

Soon after arriving in Paterson, a naturally defiant Reed goaded a belligerent police officer into arresting him. In the county jail, overcrowded with immigrant strikers, he befriended the workers—"gentle, alert, brave men, ennobled by something greater than themselves"—and drew out their stories. That "something greater," the class struggle, can be seen at work in the article Reed wrote for *The Masses* ("War in Paterson"), which opens:

There's war in Paterson, New Jersey. But it's a curious kind of war. All the violence is the work of one side—the mill owners. Their servants, the police, club unresisting men and women and ride down law-abiding crowds on horseback. Their paid mercenaries, armed detectives shoot and kill innocent people. Their newspapers ... publish incendiary and crime-inciting appeals to mob violence against the strike leaders ... They control absolutely the police, the press, the courts.

So moved was Reed by the condition of the silk workers that he organized a dramatic pageant, held at Madison Square Garden, in which the actual workers demonstrated their onerous work and their treatment as strikers at the hands of the police.

Reed's best known work is *Ten Days That Shook the World* (1919), but he did produce other outstanding works of reportage, one of which is his account of his experiences riding with Pancho Villa's army in the Mexican Revolution, titled *Insurgent Mexico* (1914). The compelling work immerses the reader in the harsh, violent life of *La Tropa*, Villa's army, and its camp followers.

As was the case in Paterson, Reed not only sympathized politically with the peasant revolutionaries but came quickly to admire them and want their respect, which he was proud to earn. At one point in *Insurgent Mexico*, he writes of an initiation into *La Tropa* over a bottle of *sotol*:

"Drink it," yelled the chorus as the Tropa crowded up to see. I drank it. A howl of laughter and applause went up. Fernando leaned over and gripped my hand. "Good for you, *companero!*" he bellowed, rolling with mirth ... Captain Fernando leaned over and patted my arm. "Now you are with the men (*los hombres*.) When we win the *Revolucion* it will be a government by the men,—not by the rich. We are riding over the lands of the men. They used to belong to the rich, but now they belong to me and to the *compañeros*."

The material Reed sent back to the US, published in *The Metropolitan* magazine, established him as America's foremost war correspondent. The writing was at once impressionistic and clear-eyed, imagistic and frank.

Certainly, no more stark instance of brutal oppression could have presented itself to Reed or the world than the Ludlow Massacre of April, 1914, the culminating atrocity of the protracted southern Colorado coal miners' strike of the winter of 1913-14. Reading of the massacre, Reed immediately left for Las Animas County.

There he made a detailed search of the scene of the massacre, in which National Guard militiamen rented by John D. Rockefeller's Colorado Fuel and Iron Company killed an estimated 26 miners, their wives and children, some shot with machine guns and some deliberately burned to death in tents the miners had been living in during the strike.

Reed wrote a lengthy, scathing article for *The Metropolitan*, "The Colorado War," in July 1914, which detailed the murderous violence of

the Rockefeller interests. "I got into Trinidad [Colorado, 15 miles from Ludlow] about ten days after the massacre at Ludlow," Reed wrote. Later in the article, he explained:

I went to Ludlow next day to see the Federal troops come in and the militia leave. The tent colony, or where the tent colony had been, was a great square of ghastly ruins. Stoves, pots and pans still half full of food that had been cooking that terrible morning, baby-carriages, piles of half-burned clothes, children's toys all riddled with bullets, the scorched mouths of the tent cellars, and the children's toys that we found at the bottom of the "death hole"—this was all that remained of the entire worldly possessions of 1,200 poor people. At the railroad station about fifty militiamen waited for the train—boys with the stupid, vicious faces of saloon-corner loafers. Only a few were in uniform, for many of them were mine-guards hastily mustered in. As the regulars left their train one militiaman said loudly, in the hearing of the militia officers: "I hope these red-necks kill a regular so they will go in and wipe out the whole bunch. We certainly done a good job on that tent colony."

In August of that year, the world was struck by the greatest upheaval to that point in modern times. The First World War broke out in Europe. Reed sailed to Italy as a correspondent for *The Metropolitan*. He went to France, where he attempted twice to reach the front but was arrested and turned back both times. He then went to London, where he wrote a long article on England in wartime, showing that patriotism was limited to the upper classes. *The Metropolitan* rejected the article.

In "The Traders War," written from London and published in *The Masses* in September, Reed outlined the history of the imperialist commercial rivalries between Britain, France and Germany and stated that the war was nothing more than a continuation of these conflicts. (In a noteworthy scene in *Reds*, Reed [Beatty], asked at a meeting of the Liberal Club in Portland, Oregon what he thinks "this war is about," gets to his feet and replies with one word, "Profits.")

Reed returned to France and in December made his way to Germany via Switzerland. In Berlin, he was able to conduct an interview with the revolutionary socialist Karl Liebknecht, who alone in the German Reichstag had refused to vote to fund the war. When Reed asked him about "the chances of World Revolution," "To my mind" [Liebknecht] responded serenely, "nothing else can come out of this war."

Reed and other American correspondents were able, after long delays, to secure permission to visit the German front in Northern France. Along the way they were feted by German officers and saw the horrors of trench warfare. He wrote articles on these experiences for *The Metropolitan* and returned to the US in January 1915.

Reed only stayed home a few months. By March, since he was unable to get permission to visit France again, *The Metropolitan* asked him to report on the war in Eastern Europe. With the artist Boardman Robinson, he visited Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria and Russia.

Almost half the articles he wrote, although Reed could not know this at the time, were about the final days of the tsarist empire with its drunkenness, abuse, and corruption organized into armies. In one article, "An Optimistic Pilgrimage" that still moves the reader 105 years later, Reed passes through a Jewish village near Rovno in what is now Ukraine, and observes the filth and poverty of the Jews and their oppression by the Russians. One of his guides, a Russian army officer, complains that all Jews are traitors to Russia.

The scenes from Serbia are shocking. The first country to be invaded by the Austro-Hungarian Empire in response to the assassination of its

Archduke Ferdinand in 1914, Serbia was in the middle of a typhus epidemic. Reed visited one hospital for those stricken with disease:

We entered a barrack, along whose walls cots lay touching each other, and with the feeble light of two lanterns we could see the patients writhing in their dirty blankets, five and six crowded into two beds. Some sat up, apathetically eating; others lay like the dead; still others gave short, grunting moans, or shouted suddenly in the grip of delirium.

When Reed returned from Europe in late 1915, the official political atmosphere in the US had shifted to the right: a pro-war “preparedness” campaign was underway and middle-class public opinion had become anti-German. He moved back to Greenwich Village with the woman he would marry, also from Oregon, journalist Louise Bryant. It was at this time he befriended Eugene O’Neill. Reed, O’Neill, Bryant and some of their circle wrote and performed plays in Provincetown, Massachusetts in the summer of 1916.

*The Metropolitan* refused to return him to Europe because of his antiwar views. But in the spring of 1917, two more world-shaking events occurred. In March, the Russian tsar, Nicholas II, was overthrown, and in April the United States entered the world war.

Throughout the spring and summer of 1917, Reed wrote antiwar articles for *The Masses*. By August, he had decided he had to see the revolution in Russia for himself. Reed arrived in Petrograd on September 13, just after the attempted coup against the bourgeois Provisional Government by tsarist General Lavr Kornilov. The coup melted away largely because of the Bolsheviks’ mobilization of workers and soldiers.

Through connections in New York, including Bolsheviks such as V. Volodarsky, Reed became acquainted with that party’s leaders, who were now preparing the overthrow of the Provisional Government and its replacement by a government of Soviets.

He hastened from place to place in Petrograd, saving leaflets and proclamations and documenting the positions of each party. He interviewed leaders of the frightened capitalist parties, and he saw Lenin and Trotsky give speeches to thousands of workers. Reed himself spoke to countless other Bolshevik leaders, workers, soldiers and sailors, as they applied themselves to the historical task of establishing a government of the working class. He was a witness to the Bolshevik seizure of power and was present at the famous storming of the Winter Palace, as well as the struggle afterwards by the new Soviet government against counterrevolution.

For the remainder of the year Reed remained in the new Soviet Russia. He worked for the People’s Commissariat of Foreign Affairs and was briefly appointed consul to the US. In early 1918, he had his first long discussions with Lenin and Trotsky. He left for home soon after, but was detained in Finland until April by the nationalist government.

On his return to New York, he was met on the dock by government agents who seized his papers and summoned him to court the next day. Reed was indicted under the Espionage Act for a 1917 article, published in *The Masses*, “Knit a strait-jacket for your soldier boy,” which describes what we now call post-traumatic stress disorder.

Reed took up the task of defending the revolution to an American audience in such articles as “Soviets in Action” and “The Structure of the Soviet State” published in *The Liberator* (the successor to *The Masses*), in the autumn of 1918.

It was at this time that he took up a fight for the ideas of Bolshevism in the left wing of the American Socialist Party, along with Louis Fraina and other supporters of the Russian Revolution in the journal *The Revolutionary Age*. His papers from Russia were returned to him, and he

worked feverishly on his description of the events he had lived through in October-November 1917. Eastman later reported that Reed wrote the book in a remarkably short period of time, sequestered in a room in Greenwich Village, seeing no one and coming out only for meals.

In March 1919, the product of this effort, *Ten Days That Shook the World*, was published. It was the peak of Reed’s development as a journalist. He combined his own observations and conversations with the scrupulous publication of the documents of the revolution itself he had collected.

Here is how Reed describes the Bolshevik headquarters, the Smolny Institute, a former upper-class girls school in tsarist times (only eight months previously!) on the day of the insurrection, November 7:

The massive facade of Smolny blazed with lights as we drove up, and from every street converged upon it streams of hurrying shapes dim in the gloom. Automobiles and motorcycles came and went; an enormous elephant-colored armored automobile, with two red flags flying from the turret, lumbered out with screaming siren. It was cold, and at the outer gate the Red Guards had built themselves a bonfire. At the inner gate, too, there was a blaze, by the light of which the sentries slowly spelled out our passes and looked us up and down. ... A crowd came pouring down the staircase, workers in black blouses and round black fur hats, many of them with guns slung over their shoulders, soldiers in rough dirt-colored coats and grey fur shapkas [hats] pinched flat.

On this occasion Reed encounters the Bolshevik leader Lev Kamenev. Kamenev reads out to him, translating from Russian into French, effectively the first proclamation, just passed in session, of the new Soviet government: “The new Workers’ and Peasants’ Government will propose immediately a just and democratic peace to all the belligerent countries ... The Soviet is convinced that the proletariat of the countries of Western Europe will aid us in conducting the cause of Socialism to a real and lasting victory.”

And Reed’s description of Lenin stands out:

Dressed in shabby clothes, his trousers much too long for him. Unimpressive, to be the idol of a mob, loved and revered as perhaps few leaders in history have been. A strange popular leader—a leader purely by virtue of intellect: colorless, humorless, uncompromising and detached, without picturesque idiosyncrasies—with the power of explaining profound ideas in simple terms, of analyzing a concrete situation. And combined with shrewdness, the greatest intellectual audacity.

(An insightful description, aside from the characterization of Lenin as “colorless” and “humorless,” which was anything but the case!)

*Ten Days That Shook the World* is one of the artistic achievements not only of the Russian Revolution, but of American and world literature. The fact that it inspired another great work, Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein’s *October* (1928), gives it a unique place in human culture.

Reed discovered the drama of the revolution in its own action, in the rapid and intense response of classes to one other in the pursuit of their social goals, expressed not only by force of arms, but by the most profound political thought. He was able to translate this into narrative and description.

*Ten Days That Shook the World* was the first time the revolution spoke in its full eloquence to the world. Lenin in his famous preface to the book,

noted above, commented: "With the greatest interest and with never slackening attention I read John Reed's book, *Ten Days That Shook the World*. ... It gives a truthful and most vivid exposition of the events so significant to the comprehension of what really is the Proletarian Revolution and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat. These problems are widely discussed, but before one can accept or reject these ideas, he must understand the full significance of his decision. John Reed's book will undoubtedly help to clear this question, which is the fundamental problem of the international labor movement."

In the summer of 1919, Reed helped to launch the Communist Labor Party (one of the forerunners of the Communist Party, founded in May 1921), as it split from the opportunist Socialist Party. In October he left again for Soviet Russia and participated as an American delegate to the Second Congress of the Communist International, held from July 19 to August 7, 1920. Following that, Reed attended the Congress of the Peoples of the East in Baku in Soviet Azerbaijan, an assembly of 1,900 delegates from across Asia and Europe organized by the Communist International, which opened September 1.

French leftist Alfred Rosmer, in *Moscow Under Lenin*, has a well-known description of Reed speaking at the Congress in Baku, a city famous for its petroleum industry. Rosmer noted that Reed, who had learned a few words of Russian, "was a great success. He shouted a question to his audience: 'Don't you know how Baku is pronounced in American? It's pronounced oil!' The solemn faces were suddenly shaken with laughter."

Reed returned to Moscow on September 15, fell sick with typhus and died on October 17. It is said that he might have survived if the American government had not had an embargo on medications to Soviet Russia.

Rosmer explained in his book that when he and others returned from Moscow, "a sad piece of news greeted us. John Reed, who had returned in advance of us, was in hospital, ill with typhus. No effort was spared to save him, but it was all in vain and a few days later he died. His body was displayed in the great hall of the House of Trade Unions. On the day of the funeral, winter had already arrived and snow was falling. We were overwhelmed."

Rosmer continued, "A burial place was found for him in the Kremlin wall, in the section reserved for heroes who had fallen in the revolutionary battle. The words of farewell were spoken by [Nikolai] Bukharin, for the central committee of the Communist Party, by [Alexandra] Kollontai, and by his comrades from the Executive Committee. Louise Bryant, who had arrived only to see him die, was there, completely shattered by grief. The whole scene was indescribably sad."

Reed's reputation after his death has been closely tied to the fate of the Russian Revolution. The Stalinist regime that usurped the Soviet state in the next decade could not abide the truth about the revolution, and Trotsky's role in October 1917, as Reed had depicted it. Stalin is mentioned only in passing because he played virtually no role in the seizure of power. The work was banned, at Stalin's insistence, in the Soviet Union for decades.

Equally, anticommunist commentators in Europe and America have sought to make *Ten Days That Shook the World* into a mere literary accomplishment. Some have alleged, falsely, that after disagreements over Communist tactics in 1920, Reed became disillusioned with Marxism.

Despite the Stalinist and anticommunist treatment of Reed and his work, for millions of workers and young people *Ten Days That Shook the World* remains an indispensable introduction to the most momentous event in world history. In a time when the question of socialist revolution has been placed before millions and millions, a new generation must discover his work.

*Ten Days That Shook the World* is currently on sale at Mehring Books for \$14.40.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)**