

A Bolshevist's View of Bolshevism

By GRANT M. OVERTON.

WE take it we do no injustice to John Reed when we call him a Bolshevist. And we do no more than justice to his new book, *Ten Days That Shook the World*, when we say that it is the most interesting, informative and important book about present day Russia that has yet appeared in this country. For it is; and much of its interest and importance comes from the fact that the volume is a Bolshevist's view of Bolshevism, or, at least of the coup by which the Bolsheviki triumphed in Russia.

The ten days of his title were the last ten of October, 1917, by the old Russian calendar, which lagged thirteen days behind that of the Western World—for us they were November 4-14, 1917. In that time the Bolsheviki got control of Petrograd and secured the adherence of soviets, or local councils, here and there all over Russia; they also gained the support of the armies and the fleet. At the beginning of the ten days the Bolsheviki were a group of propagandists housed in the Smolny Institute; at the end of them they were the political instrument in which the Russian people had lodged their sovereignty, in so far as that sovereignty had any embodiment at all. After sixteen months the Bolshevists still have "the power," as Russians would say.

John Reed is a vivid reporter, always. He is never neutral and he is never dull. Some people say he is never truthful; but as nobody agrees what Truth is, this general accusation is without point. Undoubtedly his book will stir up a hundred contradictions on specific facts; he might be proved wrong on every one of them and yet have drawn an essentially truthful picture of the Bolshevist coup. As if to fortify himself against these inevitable attacks, he has documented his book rather heavily. There are appendices in fine print to all twelve chapters. Careful notes and explanations preface the straightforward story. Facsimiles vary the photographs. Reed gives in a general way his sources, other than his own notebook; they are mostly newspaper files and official bulletins. Mr. Liveright, the publisher, says on the jacket that *Ten Days That Shook the World* will be used as a source book by historians, and so flanked and fortified is it that we think it will.

Still, it is not as a source book for historians that we are here concerned with it, but as a new book and a piece of news, and news of the first consequence at that. To avoid misconceptions we had better say at the outset what the book is not. It is not an exposition of Bolshevism; it tells what the Bolshevists—and others—said and did and the reader will have to form his own conclusions as to their motives and purposes. The book is not an argument, but a reporter's narrative. It is not unbiassed, but the author's sympathies are well leashed and in plain sight at all times. Political explanations are confined to the prefatory pages. The spectator is always in Petrograd and news of what took place elsewhere is fragmen-



tary and at second hand. Only the ten days, specifically, are covered—they are done in detail—and the background and the aftermath are reserved for a second book, *Kornilov to Brest-Litovsk*, soon to be published. All we have here is the immediate crisis.

II.

The Bolsheviki came to "the power" through the magic of three simple words operating on the imagination of the masses of the Russian people with their "vast and simple desires." The three words were: "Peace! Bread! Land!" The wildest things had been hoped for from the revolution which deposed the Czar, and not one of the things hoped for had been realized, not even the perfectly reasonable expectations. The war went wearily on, but the armies were as starved and unequipped as under the Czar; the price of food went higher and higher and bread became scarcer and scarcer; the land remained in the hands of the few. Kerensky and the changing succession of men grouped with him in the Government could not get from Russia's allies a clear statement of democratic war aims; they joined themselves with first one faction and then another in the effort to keep "the power"; the land was not made over to the peasants; nothing effective was done to check profiteering; there was no reform at home; the Constituent Assembly, which was to set up a permanent political structure, was postponed, and postponed again, and postponed yet again; everywhere there was inefficiency and muddle. Soon the conservatives were talking of the need of a "strong man" and of the preferability of German administration to self-rule that meant disorder.

All this while, through the summer of 1917, discontent was growing everywhere; in city and country alike. At election after election throughout Russia the Bolshevists gained majorities in local councils (the soviets). Who were the Bolshevists?

The Russian Social Democratic Labor party consisted originally of old fashioned Marxian Socialists. At a party congress in 1903 they split, on the question of tactics, into two factions—the majority (bolshevists) and the minority (menshevists). The Bolsheviki were the "members of the majority." Each faction became a party itself and each called itself the "Russian Social Democratic Labor party." After the revolution of 1905, which failed, the Bolsheviki became in the minority, and they remained so until September, 1917.

The Bolsheviki now call themselves the Communist party, to emphasize, Reed says, their complete severance from the other Socialist factions in Russia and the main body of Socialists in all other countries. What did they stand for at the time

they took "the power," and what, essentially, do they stand for to-day—in Hungary, for instance? For "immediate proletarian (or working class) insurrection, and seizure of the reins of the Government, in order to hasten the coming of Socialism by forcibly taking over industry, land, natural resources and financial institutions." In Russia this programme expressed the desire chiefly of the factory workers but also of a large section of the poor peasants.

III.

The aim is a social and an economic revolution; a political overturn is but a means to this general end. The foe is the capitalist system. The cry of the Bolshevists was, "All power to the soviets!" Political organization is of the loosest. Local councils everywhere are the seat of

all rule. Through delegates they deal with the larger councils and central committees. The property owning classes are to be rigidly excluded from any share in Government. Private property in land is at an end. The factories are to be run by the workers, through committees, and are so run. The trade unions have a central executive committee in Petrograd.

Obviously, such a Government can continue only so long as it is supported, or submitted to, by the mass of the people. It must, for some time at least, be largely managed and directed by a handful of men and women who can give the people what they want—or let them take it. The irresistible conclusion that must be drawn from Reed's narrative is that a majority of the Russian people are so far satisfied with what Lenine and Trotzky and the others are doing and propose doing. Or, if there is dissatisfaction, it is neither widespread enough nor definite enough to assert itself with any effect. The conception of the Bolshevists as a small group holding Russia with a mailed fist will not stand examination. If Lenine and Trotzky are dictators they are not more so than—say—Carranza. Equally the idea that the Bolshevists were pro-German and that their leaders were German agents must give way to fact. And the fact is pretty plain, from what Reed says and from the face of things, that the Bolshevist leaders are concerned almost wholly with the success and propagation of their social and economic ideas. If they can spread them in Germany, well and good. If the seizure of political power in Hungary will enable them to carry out their social and economic programme there, then seize the political power. Give the land to the people, the factories to the workers; and keep the property owning class out of "the power." That is the short and simple aim.

IV.

It will be protested that all this is not an account of John Reed's book, and it isn't. But it would be useless to try to summarize his record of events, and even impossible. His is a story that can hardly be condensed; if it were, the reader would find the condensation perfectly meaningless. There is but one way to get Reed's story and that is to take his book, first reading carefully, even memorizing, the opening *Notes and Explanations*, a difficult dozen pages made as lucid as the matter can be. After that it's simply a case of reading straight ahead, as you would a news story in the daily paper.

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