

100 years after his death, John Reed's example still shines

written by Greg Butterfield

October 19, 2020



John Reed

One hundred years ago, the communist journalist John Reed died in Moscow. (The date of his death is given variously between Oct. 17 and Oct. 20, 1920; the Russian comrades say Oct. 19, so I'll go with that.) He is one of a handful of U.S. revolutionaries interred in the Kremlin wall.

Amidst the devastation of the Russian Civil War, 1918 to 1920, Reed had contracted typhus on his return trip from the historic [Congress of the Peoples of the East](#) in Baku, Azerbaijan, where he gave a roaring speech warning the oppressed peoples of the world not to trust U.S. imperialism's honeyed words about "democracy" - a warning that is still 100 percent relevant today.

Reed is best remembered as the author of ["Ten Days That Shook the World,"](#) his on-the-scene account of the Great October Socialist Revolution, with an approving foreword by Lenin. This is still the best introduction to the events of the socialist revolution of 1917.

But Reed was much more than one book. He was a founder of the U.S. communist movement, coming over from the radical wing of the Socialist Party. He was an outstanding journalist of working-class struggles in the U.S. — see, for example, his account of the 1913 [Paterson Silk Strike](#) — and of the struggles of the oppressed workers of the world, including his book ["Insurgent Mexico"](#) about the great Mexican Revolution.

"Ten Days" was the second piece of communist literature I ever read as a teenager, and Reed continues to be an inspiration for me after over 30 years as a revolutionary writer and journalist. Reed rejected the bogus ideology of "impartial journalism" taught by U.S. academics and media, which always winds up as a justification of the capitalist status quo. He knew that honest reporting and analysis goes hand-in-hand with a clear, open and unashamed working-class point of view.

Despite various biographical attempts to tame his image for the anti-communist purposes of U.S. intellectuals (such as the film “Reds”), John Reed was a communist revolutionary to the bone — an independent thinker who was not afraid to challenge the class enemy or his own comrades when he believed they were mistaken, who made mistakes of his own (such as his initial position, shared by many socialists, in support of the Entente in World War I) but corrected them, and who understood the importance of standing on the right side of the class barricades.

One hundred years later, John Reed’s revolutionary example still shines.

