

from  
**TEN DAYS THAT SHOOK THE WORLD**  
1926

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*John Reed*

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Early in 1917, Russian workers and soldiers rose up against their government and forced Czar Nicholas II to abdicate his throne. A temporary (provisional) government was established, but it soon lost the support of the people. In November 1917, Bolshevik Red Guards stormed the Winter Palace in Petrograd and kicked out the provisional government. An American journalist, John Reed, wrote the following eyewitness account of the storming of the Winter Palace.

**THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Recognizing Bias**

What were John Reed's impressions of the Bolsheviks?

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Like a black river, filling all the street, without song or cheer we poured through the Red Arch, where the man just ahead of me said in a low voice, "Look out, comrades! Don't trust them. They will fire, surely!" In the open we began to run, stooping low and bunching together, and jammed up suddenly behind the pedestal of the Alexander Column. . . .

After a few minutes huddling there, some hundreds of men, the army seemed reassured and without any orders suddenly began again to flow forward. By this time, in the light that streamed out of all the Winter Palace windows, I could see that the first two or three hundred men were Red Guards, with only a few scattered soldiers. Over the barricade of firewood we clambered, and leaping down inside gave a triumphant shout as we stumbled on a heap of rifles thrown down by the *yunkers*<sup>1</sup> who had stood there. On both sides of the main gateway the doors stood wide open, light streamed out, and from the huge pile came not the slightest sound.

Carried along by the eager wave of men we were swept into the right-hand entrance, opening into a great bare vaulted room, the cellar of the east wing, from which issued a maze of corridors and staircases. A number of huge packing cases stood about, and upon these the Red Guards and soldiers fell furiously, battering them open with the butts of their rifles, and pulling out carpets, curtains, linen, porcelain, plates, glassware. . . . One man went strutting around with a bronze clock perched on his shoulder; another found a plume of ostrich feathers, which he stuck in his hat. The looting was just beginning when somebody cried, "Comrades! Don't take anything. This is the property of the People!" Immediately twenty voices were crying, "Stop! Put everything back! Don't take anything! Property of the People!" Many hands dragged the spoilers down. Damask and

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1. *yunkers*: the provisional government officials

tapestry were snatched from the arms of those who had them; two men took away the bronze clock. Roughly and hastily the things were crammed back in their cases, and self-appointed sentinels stood guard. It was all utterly spontaneous. Through corridors and up staircases the cry could be heard growing fainter and fainter in the distance, “Revolutionary discipline! Property of the People. . . .”

We crossed back over to the left entrance, in the west wing. There order was also being established. “Clear the Palace!” bawled a Red Guard, sticking his head through an inner door. “Come, comrades, let’s show that we’re not thieves and bandits. Everybody out of the Palace except the Commissars, until we get sentries posted.”

Two Red Guards, a soldier and an officer, stood with revolvers in their hands. Another soldier sat at a table behind them, with pen and paper. Shouts of “All out! All out!” were heard far and near within, and the Army began to pour through the door, jostling, expostulating, arguing. As each man appeared he was seized by the self-appointed committee, who went through his pockets and looked under his coat. Everything that was plainly not his property was taken away, the man at the table noted it on his paper, and it was carried into a little room. The most amazing assortment of objects were thus confiscated: statuettes, bottles of ink, bedspreads worked with the Imperial monogram, candles, a small oil painting, desk blotters, gold-handled swords, cakes of soap, clothes of every description, blankets. One Red Guard carried three rifles, two of which he had taken away from *yunkers*; another had four portfolios bulging with written documents. The culprits either sullenly surrendered or pleaded like children. All talking at once the committee explained that stealing was not worthy of the people’s champions; often those who had been caught turned around and began to help go through the rest of the comrades.

*Yunkers* came out in bunches of three or four. The committee seized upon them with an excess of zeal, accompanying the search with remarks like, “Ah, Provocators! Kornilovists! Counter-revolutionists! Murderers of the People!” But there was no violence done, although the *yunkers* were terrified. They too had their pockets full of small plunder. It was carefully noted down by the scribe, and piled in the little room. . . . The *yunkers* were disarmed. “Now, will you take up arms against the People any more?” demanded clamouring voices.

“No,” answered the *yunkers*, one by one. Whereupon they were allowed to go free.

We asked if we might go inside. The committee was doubtful but the big Red Guard answered firmly that it was forbidden. “Who are you anyway?” he asked. “How do I know that you are not all Kerenskys?”<sup>2</sup> (There were five of us, two women.)

“*Pazhal’st’, tovarishtchi! Way, Comrades!*” A soldier and a Red Guard appeared in the door, waving the crowd aside, and other guards with fixed bayonets. After them followed single file half-a-dozen men in civilian dress—the members of the Provisional Government. First came Kishkin, his face drawn and pale, then Rutenberg, looking sullenly at the floor; Terestchenko was next, glancing sharply around; he stared at us with cold fixity. . . . They passed in silence; the victorious

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2. Kerenskys: supporters of Alexander Kerensky, the head of the provisional government

insurrectionists crowded to see, but there were only a few angry mutterings. It was only later that we learned how the people in the street wanted to lynch them, and shots were fired—but the sailors brought them safely to Peter-Paul. . . .

In the meanwhile unrebuked we walked into the Palace. There was still a great deal of coming and going, of exploring new-found apartments in the vast edifice, of searching for hidden garrisons of *yunkers* which did not exist. We went upstairs and wandered through room after room. This part of the Palace had been entered also by other detachments from the side of the Neva. The paintings, statues, tapestries, and rugs of the great state apartments were unharmed; in the offices, however, every desk and cabinet had been ransacked, the papers scattered over the floor, and in the living rooms beds had been stripped of their coverings and wardrobes wrenched open. The most highly prized loot was clothing, which the working people needed. In a room where furniture was stored we came upon two soldiers ripping the elaborate Spanish leather upholstery from chairs. They explained it was to make boots with. . . .

The old Palace servants in their blue and red and gold uniforms stood nervously about, from force of habit repeating, “You can’t go in there, *barin!* It is forbidden—” We penetrated at length to the gold and malachite chamber with crimson brocade hangings where the Ministers had been in session all that day and night, and where the *shveitzari* had betrayed them to the Red Guards. The long table covered with green baize was just as they had left it, under arrest. Before each empty seat was pen, ink and paper; the papers were scribbled over with beginnings of plans of action, rough drafts of proclamations and manifestos. Most of these were scratched out, as their futility became evident, and the rest of the sheet covered with absent-minded geometrical designs, as the writers sat despondently listening while Minister after Minister proposed chimerical schemes. I took one of these scribbled pages, in the hand writing of Konovalov, which read, “The Provisional Government appeals to all classes to support the Provisional Government—”

**Source:** Excerpt from *Ten Days That Shook the World* by John Reed (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1926).