



October: The Story of the Russian Revolution

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remaking the world. The narrative of *Fractured Times* is one of disintegration. We are shown the paradoxes and the absurdities of the present – along with its horrors – but we are not offered any intimations of a historically viable alternative. The previously chosen alternatives, as Hobsbawm acknowledges, have failed. In confronting that failure, some new or rediscovered approaches are beginning to gain a hearing, especially in the spheres of environmental justice and workers' control.³ The current challenge for intellectuals is to explore the foundations on which such budding initiatives can flourish.

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China Miéville. *October: The Story of the Russian Revolution* (London and New York: Verso, 2017)

Miéville's *October* is a history of the events in Petrograd between January and November 1917, the period of the two revolutions, with special emphasis on the Bolshevik revolution of October 25 (Julian calendar; November 7 in the Gregorian calendar). Miéville appropriately opens with a chapter that briefly outlines the founding of St. Petersburg by Peter the Great and moves rapidly through the nineteenth century.

Miéville focuses on the history of the Russia Social-Democratic Workers Party, out of which the Bolshevik Party later developed. He writes brief but vivid sketches of the 1905 Revolution, its eventual suppression, and the ebb in Bolshevik political fortunes as a combination of repressions and reforms takes hold from 1907 to 1912. The last two years before the outbreak of the First World War see a dramatic upsurge in workers' strikes and in Bolshevik recruitment, to be followed by regression during the first few years of war. Then he turns to the massive war weariness, the strikes by urban workers, the desire even of the Russian bourgeoisie to see the end of Tsarist rule, and the

3. For a preliminary discussion, see my essay "The Search for a Mass Ecological Constituency," *International Critical Thought* 3:4 (2013) <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/21598282.2013.852872>.

“February Revolution” which establishes an unstable government of the bourgeoisie and reformist socialists.

Miéville’s account of the events of 1917 in Petrograd is fast-paced, well-written, and eminently readable. In Miéville’s telling the Russian revolution of exactly a century ago comes alive. This is the book’s primary accomplishment: to recreate the atmosphere of the time through a dramatic retelling of some of the events.

The historiography of the Revolution is vast. Miéville draws from many first-hand accounts and secondary sources. He has chosen a narrative style reminiscent of John Reed’s *Ten Days That Shook the World*. Reed was also a skilled journalist with a flair for dramatic narration. Reed, however, had the advantage of being an eye-witness. He reported what he witnessed directly, and what those whom he interviewed told him.

In contrast, Miéville, like the rest of us, has to rely on printed sources. This raises a problem. There are far too many sources, primary (produced at the time by the actors themselves, or by direct observers of the events) and secondary – by historians, who themselves use primary sources and whose selection and interpretation of them are shaped by their own biases. But Miéville dismisses this problem, writing:

It has become a ritual of historical writing to disavow any chimerical ‘objectivity’, a disinterest to which no writer can or should want to cleave. I duly perform that caveat here ... (1-2)

Of course, absolute objectivity, like absolute anything, is impossible. But objectivity remains an essential responsibility of every historian. Without a sincere attempt to be objective, the historian’s own biases run amok. And why should the reader care about the personal preferences and prejudices of the historian? What the reader wants is to learn what happened, not an insight into the writer’s subjectivity. In the same paragraph Miéville says:

But, while I do not pretend to be neutral, I have striven to be fair ... (2)

In this he inevitably fails. There is no substitute for the determination to be objective – to question one’s own preconceived ideas and prejudices, to try to give an especially generous reading to sources that contradict one’s own biases, and to treat with especial skepticism sources that tend to reaffirm one’s own biases.

Miéville is a writer of fiction, and it is as a storyteller that he writes *October*. As he states in the Introduction:

... it is precisely as a story that I have tried to tell it. The year 1917 was an epic, a concatenation of adventures, hopes, betrayals, unlikely coincidences, war and intrigue; of bravery and cowardice and foolishness, farce, derring-do, tragedy; of epochal ambitions and change, of glaring lights, steel, shadows; of tracks and trains. (2)

This storyteller's approach is what gives *October* its appeal. To Miéville these events are not only earth-shaking; they are dramatic and exciting. So were they to John Reed, and to many of the other participants and eye-witnesses. But a "story" is not "history" when a gripping narration leading to an acceptable moral was the writer's aim, rather than a true account in the modern sense.

How reliable is Miéville's narrative? Miéville's readers have no way of knowing. Only occasionally does Miéville tell us his sources. This is a very serious matter. The Bolshevik Revolution has long been, and remains, an event that excites passionate negative, as well as positive, reactions. Biased views, unsupported because unsupportable by evidence, abound. Moralizing is substituted for a genuine, evidence-based attempt to discover what actually happened.

Given his chosen approach to this subject – rejection of objectivity, refusal (with a few exceptions) to cite his sources, much less to tell his readers why he has chosen to rely on some accounts rather than others, emphasis on narrative – the result is a work that is not a reliable account. *October* is a work of imagination, informed by secondary sources which the author has selected purely according to his own biases.

According to the biographical sketch on his Wikipedia page, Miéville has been a member of two avowedly Trotskyist political parties, the International Socialist Organization (USA) and the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) (UK). Given that Miéville has openly eschewed objectivity and rarely gives evidence for the fact-claims he makes, one might expect that *October* would show a Trotskyist bias. And so it does. Here are a few examples of that bias – obvious enough to someone familiar with the historiography of the Soviet Union, but dangerously opaque to most readers, who will be approaching this book with little to no knowledge of Soviet history.

1. In defense (one supposes) of Trotsky's notion of "permanent revolution" Miéville claims that building socialism in the USSR reflected a wish for "autarchic socialism" and "a bad hope." "Autarky" means "a national policy of economic independence." What's wrong with that? "Bad hope" is even more incoherent:

... the embrace of 'Socialism in One Country' is a dramatic reversal of a foundational thesis of the Bolsheviks ... (314)

In reality, since at least 1915 Lenin had repeatedly stated that socialism was possible even in a single country:

Uneven economic and political development is an absolute law of capitalism. Hence, the victory of socialism is possible first in several or even in one capitalist country alone. After expropriating the capitalists and organizing their own socialist production, the victorious proletariat of that country will arise against the rest of the world – the capitalist world – attracting to its cause the oppressed classes of other countries, stirring uprisings in those countries against the capitalists, and in case of need using even armed force against the exploiting classes and their states. (“The United States of Europe Slogan,” emphasis added)

Again, in 1917, Lenin wrote:

The development of capitalism proceeds extremely unevenly in different countries. It cannot be otherwise under commodity production. From this it follows irrefutably that socialism cannot achieve victory simultaneously in all countries. It will achieve victory first in one or several countries, while the others will for some time remain bourgeois or pre-bourgeois. (“Military Programme of the Proletarian Revolution,” Part I, emphasis added)

Not all Bolsheviks agreed – Trotsky, for one, did not. But Lenin’s statements serve to demonstrate that Miéville is incorrect here. Stalin’s embracing the possibility of building socialism in once country was not a “reversal of a foundational thesis of the Bolsheviks.”

Neither Stalin nor any other Bolsheviks thought that the thesis of building “socialism in one country” meant that that socialism could be final and complete. All Bolsheviks believed that socialism in a single country could not be secure without revolutions in more countries. In 1924 Stalin wrote:

But the overthrow of the power of the bourgeoisie and establishment of the power of the proletariat in one country does not yet mean that the complete victory of socialism has been ensured. After consolidating its power and leading the peasantry in its wake the proletariat of the victorious country can and must build a socialist society. But does this mean that it will thereby achieve the complete and final victory of socialism, i.e., does it mean that with the forces of only one country it can finally consolidate socialism and fully guarantee that country against intervention and, consequently, also against restoration? No, it does not. For this the victory of the revolution in at least several countries is needed. Therefore, the development and support of revolution in other countries is an essential task of the victorious revolution. (Stalin, *Foundations of Leninism*. Selected Works vol. 6, 111, emphasis added)

2. Miéville writes:

[Lenin] grows suspicious of Stalin’s personality and his place within the machine. In his last writings, he insists Stalin be removed from his post as general secretary. His advice is not followed. (313)

Valentin Sakharov's detailed study of Lenin's supposed "Testament" was published in 2003. Sakharov concludes these documents are forgeries, not by Lenin. Stephen Kotkin agrees.¹ Miéville ignores Sakharov's study, probably because the documents of "Lenin's Testament" became Trotsky's main claim to Lenin's mantle. They remain a basic pillar of Trotskyist belief to the present day.

3. Miéville says of Stalin in 1917:

There is a rare hint at something more troubling about the man in *the assessment of the party's Russian Bureau in Petrograd, which allowed him to join, but only as advisor, without the right to a vote – because, it said, of 'certain personal features that are inherent in him'*. Would that the rest of Sukhanov's description had been accurate: that Stalin had remained no more than glimpsed, 'looming up now and then dimly and without leaving any trace'. (97, emphasis added)

The word in italics and single quotes here are from the minutes of the Russian Buro of March 12, 1917 published in 1962 after Khrushchev's tendentious attack on Stalin at the XXII Party Congress² and the same year Khrushchev expelled Viacheslav Molotov from the Party. The following sentence is a "cheap shot." Even Trotsky wrote that "Sukhanov obviously underestimates Stalin" here.³

Molotov was one of the three members of the Russian Buro already in Petrograd in March 1917 along with Aleksandr Shliapnikov and Piotr Zalutskii.⁴ Molotov wrote that the transcript of March 12 was "completely inaccurate."⁵ Shliapnikov, in his three-volume memoir of 1917, mentions nothing about Stalin's being given less than full membership in the Buro.⁶ Even Trotsky, who misses no opportunity to belittle Stalin, doesn't mention it.⁷ In fact Miéville's account can't be true because Stalin was *already* a member of the Russian Buro! He had been

1. Valentin A. Sakharov, "Politticheskoe Zaveschchanie" Lenina. *Real'nost' Istorii i Mify Politiki*. (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Moskovskogo Universiteta, 2003). Stephen Kotkin, *Stalin. Volume I. Paradoxes of Power* (New York: Penguin, 2014), 498–501.

2. See my analysis in *Khrushchev Lied* (Kettering, OH: Erythrós Press, 2011).

3. Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Press, 2008), 209.

4. *Sovetskaia Istoricheskaia Entsiklopedia*, at <http://dic.academic.ru/dic.nsf/sie/15125/PYCCCKOE>; Alexander Rabinowitch, *Prelude to Revolution* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1968), 32.

5. Vladimir Nikonov, *Molotov. Molodost'* (Moscow: Vagrius, 2005), 234–235.

6. A. Shliapnikov, *Kanun Semnadsatogo Goda. Semnadsatyi God. 2* (Moscow: Izd. "Respublika," 1992), 444–445.

7. Trotsky, *History*, 209.

appointed to it and to the Central Committee in 1912 by the All-Russian Conference of the Bolshevik party.⁸

4. Miéville claims:

... the powerful and respected party right, particularly Stalin, went so far in the direction of moderation as to support a merger of Bolsheviks and Mensheviks ... (104)

This is simply false. Miéville evidently copied it straight from Trotsky, who cites no evidence.⁹ Trotsky also lied when he wrote that Stalin admitted this error in 1924. In reality, what Stalin in 1924 acknowledged as “profoundly mistaken” was the policy of “pressure on the Provisional Government through the Soviets.”¹⁰ Many more such passages can be found in *October*.

Miéville’s bibliography is larded with Trotskyist works, including a strong recommendation of Tony Cliff’s four-volume work on Lenin. Cliff was the longtime head of the British SWP, to which Miéville at one time belonged. In 1961 Robert McNeal, a leading Western historian of the Soviet Union, wrote:

Rarely has the historical image of a major leader been shaped as much by his arch-enemy as the generally accepted conception of Stalin has been shaped by the writings of Trotsky. ... To the end of his life [Trotsky] could not believe that so vulgar a person as Stalin was capable of the most staggering social and economic undertakings or that “history” could continue to suffer such a creature.¹¹

Absent a dedication to objectivity and evidence, bias and error are inevitable. They fatally mar Miéville’s work.

Miéville is at his best discussing the agency of the Petrograd workers in 1917 and in stressing the contingency of the Bolshevik seizure of power there upon Lenin’s determination. This should serve to remind us that revolutions are not inevitable even when external conditions appear favorable.

But Miéville’s discussion of the period *after* October is very sketchy and essentially pessimistic. To say that, post-1917, “democracy withers” and the “bureaucrats” take over (314) dodges all the important

8. P.V. Volobuev, ed. *Politicheskie deiateli Rossii. 1917. Biograficheskii slovar'* (Moscow: Nauchno Izdatel'stvo “Bol'shaia Rossiiskaia Entsiklopediia,” 1993), 303 col. 3.

9. Trotsky, *History*, 721f. Trotsky did not return to Russia until mid-May 1917.

10. J.V. Stalin. *Works. Volume 6. 1924* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1953), 348.

11. Robert McNeal, “Trotsky’s Interpretation of Stalin,” *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 3 (1961), 97.

questions. For what constitutes democracy in a socialist society that aims to be a dictatorship of the working class? And what does a dictatorship of the working class look like?

The word “bureaucracy” is almost always invoked as a substitute for analysis. It has no fixed meaning. All Bolsheviks, Stalin included, feared the corrosive effects of “bureaucracy.” Stalin’s proposal for the new Soviet constitution of 1936 was framed precisely as aiming to fight “bureaucracy” – whatever that meant.

Moreover, “socialism” was understood by everyone to be a society that preserved important aspects of capitalism. Even Marx wrote that essential aspects of bourgeois social relations (“bourgeois right”) must persist during “the first phase of communist society” (“Critique of the Gotha Program,” 1875). Whatever “bureaucracy” means, how is it to be avoided in such a society?

Neither Lenin, nor Stalin, nor Trotsky had a clear or satisfactory answer to these questions. The Bolsheviks were learning by trial and error. They had no blueprint. Both Stalin and Trotsky *believed* they had a blueprint – in the writings of Lenin. Some – especially Trotskyists – believe this still. But they were, and are, mistaken. Neither Marx nor Lenin knew, or could possibly have known, precisely how a society could move after a proletarian revolution from capitalism to communism.

The concept of “socialism” as it was understood then – and, for many on the Marxist-Leninist left, is understood today – was inadequate. There is no point in pretending that a “better understanding” of Lenin, or Marx, or Trotsky, or Stalin, or any of the other great communist thinkers of the past, will reveal the answer. It needs to be thoroughly reconceptualized in the light of the reversion to capitalism in the socialist societies of the twentieth century.

Likewise, it is no good to echo Trotsky, Khrushchev, and the whole crew of overtly anticommunist writers and blame everything on a demonized caricature of Stalin – what Russian historian Yuri Zhukov has called a “Stalin boogeyman.”¹² I believe Miéville is correct when he proclaims that we “can learn from the Revolution” (318). But surely we can only learn from a historically truthful account of the post-1917 years. Yet here Miéville falls short, repeating anti-Stalin bromides that lead to nothing but pessimism.

Socialism was indeed built in one country, and then in several countries. But the socialist movement never solved the problem of

12. Zhukov, “Zhupel Stalina” (“The Stalin Boogeyman”), *Komsomolskaia Pravda* November–December 2002.

transitioning from Marx's "first phase" to his "higher phase." A witticism, evidently of Cuban origin, runs: "Socialism is the stage between capitalism and capitalism."¹³ Sad but true! How "socialism" should be recast so as to prevent this tragic development in future remains, in this reviewer's opinion, the critical problem facing a new worldwide communist movement.

For a serious attempt at scholarly objectivity on the Russian Revolution, Alexander Rabinowitch's three works, the product of a lifetime of research, have not been surpassed. Rabinowitch's second volume, *The Bolsheviks Come to Power*, though published in 1976, covers the period narrated by Miéville and is exciting reading to boot.

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L.A. Kauffman, *Direct Action: Protest and the Reinvention of American Radicalism* (London: Verso, 2017), 236 pp., \$17.95

L.A. Kauffman's valuable book, *Direct Action*, is both a thematic history of a period and a dramatic exploration of the changing repertoire of protest tactics used by the American movements of the radical left. Beginning with the May 3, 1971 "Mayday" anti-Viet Nam War demonstration in Washington, DC, the book concludes with Black Lives Matter and the use of direct action in the 2014 resistance to racist police practices in Ferguson, Missouri. Consideration of times and techniques is integrated into four roughly chronological chapters which answer the book's essential question: "What happened to the American left after the sixties?" (ix).

One of the challenges Kauffman faces, especially given the inviting compactness of the book, is how to organize a unified narrative out of the amazing "proliferation" and diversification of radical "identity-" and "issue-based" groups over the course of these almost four decades. Furthermore, this was an era during which "the left" of her original question lost its definite article. "The" traditional left went

13. I found this in Tom Miller, *Trading with the Enemy: A Yankee Travels Through Castro's Cuba*. 2nd ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 330.