

VIII. A TRIBUTE TO JOHN REED

JOHN REED won immortality by his report of the first socialist revolution, the founding of the Soviet power, in the *Ten Days That Shook the World*.

It is not the peerless and inspired reporter, however, but the partisan of a cause who won the heart of his generation and whose name came to symbolize the movement of the best representatives of the American intellectual world, in their break away from the old decaying world order, their espousal of the new socialist order. It is in the role of passionate partisan of socialism, of the struggle for socialism, that the memory of John Reed waxes with the passing years. He was a great pioneer on the frontier between the old and the new social systems, the death struggle between which dominates our era.

An understanding, penetrating study of Reed's life, which would bring out in bold relief his lasting significance as an historical figure has still to be written.

Born and bred in the tradition of the privileged classes, Reed had further the advantage of talent and personality to open for him the doors of all the bourgeois world has to offer. But long before he was conscious of it, he was in revolt against the inner emptiness of that world. More and more he became a seeker for something unknown, something to fill the emptiness which his world, with all its education and experience, had left in him.

Reed found what he was seeking in Petrograd, Russia, in the days of October and November of 1917, when the Soviet Government was established, when the first Socialist Revolution began. He found

it in the Party of Lenin, the Bolsheviki, the Communists, which guided that revolution.

From the revolution and the Party of Lenin which guided it, Reed acquired a faith and an understanding which gave meaning and dignity to life, which transformed the seeking adolescent into a whole man. He immediately identified himself wholly with the revolution, with socialism, with the Party of Lenin. He became the passionate partisan of a great cause. He had found himself in something so big that in it he could completely lose himself, merge himself. He had found the road away from decay and death, toward growth and life; away from the old life that had poisoned him and his generation, into the new life of affirmation, of belief, of unlimited perspective, of the future.

That experience which John Reed shared with only a minority of his generation of Americans is the experience through which the whole generation of today is now going.

Once again, as in John Reed's day, the decaying capitalist order, the bourgeois world, has been thrown into the violent paroxysm of imperialist war. Once more a whole generation of youth is called upon to offer its lifeblood in a war without aims beyond the indefinite repetition of the past which produced this war. Once more the recruiting sergeants and conscription boards call youth to the colors to fight—for the preservation of the dead past.

Today, however, the young generation stands on the shoulders of the generation of John Reed. He could only see the birth of the new order of socialism; the present generation celebrates the glorious achievements of twenty-three years of Soviet power. He had time only for the intuitive grasp of the great vision of Lenin; the present generation has deeply absorbed the teachings and examples of Lenin's giant successor, Stalin.

In John Reed's day, the American bourgeoisie was arrogantly confident of its power, of its hold on the young generation; today, the bourgeoisie is filled with a dark fear, it is vaguely conscious of its approaching doom, it knows it has lost its hold upon the youth,

it struggles desperately to win the young generation again, with the blood of youth to rejuvenate itself.

The other day I thought of John Reed as I was reading a speech, directed toward American youth, by the most talented fugleman of the moribund old order, Archibald MacLeish. Beating the drums of war, this Laureate of Death was forced to admit, in order to combat, the deep disillusionment of the younger generation with the social order of present-day America. He identified this social order with democracy, and said:

We are wondering whether democracy in the United States has other spiritual weapons than the doubts and misgivings which ten years of depression and twenty years of skepticism provided for the men of France to fight with.

To provide those missing "spiritual weapons," MacLeish with great eloquence invokes the spirit of the Americans of "the thirties and forties of the last century," men "who had no questions about themselves." He describes them:

The smartest, toughest, luckiest, leanest, all-around knowingest nation on God's green earth. Their way of living was the handsomest way of living human beings had ever hit. Their institutions were the institutions history had been waiting for. If you had told them anyone else had a harder hold on the earth than they did, or anyone else believed in himself more than they believed in themselves, they would have laughed in your face.

And MacLeish calls upon the present skeptical and doubting generations to gaze upon his attractive picture of the past in order to imitate their more virile forebears.

Then MacLeish says a few words which, unconsciously, betray the emptiness of his whole eloquent appeal:

That was the way it used to be in this country. That was the way it was while the people of this country were clearing the quarter-sections for a free man's fields.

Your capitalist order, Mr. MacLeish, has abolished the "free man's fields," and with them the America whose glories you sing as a

war song for the present generation. In their place are the crowded and regimented cities, the great factories of mass production and super-exploitation of labor, the F.B.I. of Mr. Hoover, the labor-spy agencies, the outlawing of minority parties, book-burnings and imprisonment for possession of books, draft boards, finger printing and registrations, unemployment, the petty persecutions of W.P.A. and relief bureaucrats. Restore the "free man's fields," Mr. MacLeish, and then perhaps your nostalgic dream-Americans will rise to your exhortations!

I wonder if Mr. MacLeish ever, in the dark hours of sleepless nights, ponders over the significance of this fact, that while his poetic description of the Americans of a century-gone is widely at variance with the Americans of today, yet there are peoples to whom his words could be currently applied with full accuracy. But only in one particular area of the world. Only in the Soviet Union, among the people whose mastery of life arose from new institutions, which "history had been waiting for," socialist institutions, whose rise was chronicled by John Reed in 1917, whose cause John Reed espoused as the forerunner for the present generation.

John Reed has been dead now these twenty years. But his spirit lives today in millions of young Americans. It is a thousand times more virile than that of the MacLeishes who call upon the glories of the past in order to drape the hideous, rotting features of the present, to entice the hungry and seeking young generation into the bloody crusade to save a capitalism that has become Monopoly and Death. The MacLeishes can never restore faith, enthusiasm, passion, wholeness, to the American youth. These things they will find only as they follow the tradition and example of John Reed. And that is the destined road for our America.

Speech delivered at John Reed Memorial Meeting, October 20, 1940.