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BOOK REVIEW | FURTHER READING

Condoleezza Rice on the 10 Days Still Shaking the World

By CONDOLEEZZA RICE OCT. 17, 2017

"This is where it happened," my Russian guide declared. It was 1979 and I was a graduate student in Moscow for the summer. A side trip to Leningrad was a must for me, a first time traveler to the country. "Czar Alexander II was riding down this road when the assassins struck," she said. Almost under her breath, she added, "He was a reformer." Any hope for the liberalization of Russia seemed to die with the czar who had freed the serfs and attempted to modernize the country. Alexander II's death brought to power his hard-line successor Alexander III, who initiated a harsh crackdown (among those soon executed was the older brother of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin). This would only sharpen the conflict in the country. Peasants had no bread. Workers' lives were miserable and often endangered. And soldiers were forced into battle in the Great War, a fight they could not win. Alexander III's son and successor, the hapless Nicholas II, would abdicate in 1917. The parliamentary government of Alexander Kerensky would survive less than a year.

From the Church of the Savior on Spilled Blood it was just a short walk across the square to the Winter Palace, where workers' militias seized power and laid the foundation for the Bolshevik Revolution and more than seven decades of Communist rule. "Peace, Land and Bread," they promised.

"Ten Days That Shook the World" captures the excitement of that moment. The author, John Reed, was an American who made no secret of his Bolshevik

sympathies. He nevertheless provided a riveting and vivid — if not impartial — account of the most pivotal phase of the revolution, as viewed from the ground.

From his vantage point, Reed could only tell a part of the story, however. To fully understand the Bolshevik Revolution, one must also appreciate the long trajectory of Russian history. Two other seminal works, James Billington's "The Icon and the Axe" and Sheila Fitzpatrick's "The Russian Revolution," stand alongside "Ten Days" as indispensable guides to these events.

"The Icon and the Axe" is a sweeping, intricate description of Russian cultural history, spanning the pre-Romanov era through six centuries to the reign of Joseph Stalin. Flowing with ease through time and topic — from art to music, literature, philosophy, mythology and more — the book provides readers with an alluring portrayal of Russia's proud heritage. Its impressive scope and lasting insights have made it a foundational text in Russian studies. In fact, it was this book, more than any other, that captured my imagination and propelled me toward the study of Russia and the Soviet Union.

Billington's book, named for two items typically displayed in a place of honor in the peasant home, reminds us that Russia's vast geography helped shape its identity. "The virgin forest was the nursery of Great Russian culture," he writes. That made the ax, which enabled the people of the forest to reshape their environment, something of a revolutionary symbol.

In tracing the final years of the Romanov dynasty, Billington sets the stage for 1917 and puts Lenin's revolutionary ideology into historical context. Even before the popular revolt that led to the abdication of Czar Nicholas II, there was a growing sense that the days of old were drawing to an end. Electricity had recently arrived in Russia, replacing primordial fire. When Lenin returned from exile to capitalize on the chaos of the czar's abdication, he played to this sense of new beginnings and urged a complete and total rupture with the past. He was a firebrand to his core, spewing inflammatory rhetoric, eschewing compromise and pushing political discourse to the extremes.

For Lenin, “morality was not to be based on ‘idealistic’ standards of inner feelings, but on the ever-changing dictates of revolutionary expediency,” Billington writes. Beyond that, the primary characteristic that set him apart from his socialist rivals was his single-mindedness: “In the midst of soaring visionaries, Lenin focused his attention on one all-consuming objective that had not traditionally been uppermost in the thinking of the intelligentsia: the attainment of power.”

What Lenin’s victory brought, of course, was not worker control or “all power to the Soviets,” as he promised, but civil war and dictatorship of the Bolshevik Party.

Sheila Fitzpatrick recounts this transformation in her easily digestible “The Russian Revolution,” first published in the early 1980s and widely recognized as one of the best books on the topic. “The Russian Revolution” is a short book but it is serious history, based on extensive archival research. Fitzpatrick has made a number of updates over the years to incorporate newly available materials, but she has not had to make any changes to her argument.

What makes Fitzpatrick’s account particularly compelling is the link that she draws to subsequent developments, arguing, in the style of Crane Brinton’s “The Anatomy of Revolution,” that the tumult of the Bolshevik uprising did not end until after Stalin’s 1930s Reign of Terror. “The October seizure of power was not the end of the Bolshevik Revolution but the beginning,” she writes.

The Soviet Union would last a little over 70 years. One might say that its end was also a beginning. But it has not been the new beginning that many had hoped — one of democracy and integration into the West. Rather, Russia’s rough history — so evident one century ago — continues to haunt and shape its future. That is good reason to remember the 10 days in 1917 that really did shake the world.

Correction: October 17, 2017

A previous version of this article misstated the name of the author of “The Anatomy of Revolution.” He was Crane Brinton, not Brinton Crane.

Condoleezza Rice was the 66th United States secretary of state.

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