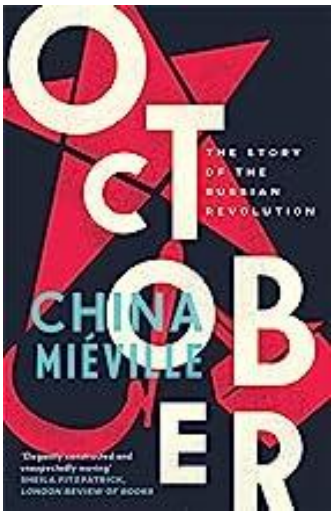

October: The Story of the Russian Revolution

China Miéville

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369 pp.

The hundredth anniversary of the events of October 1917 is, of course, a suitable occasion for the re-consideration of those events and an opportunity to re-tell a tale of such great human interest. Fundamentally, this was a human interest story because, for all of the politics and the revolutions, it is a history of working people going about their daily routines and hoping for a better future than the grinding poverty and ill-treatment that so many of them had to suffer in the inevitable cold. This is true for the members of the navy as much as the peasants and the factory workers, all of whom played such prominent roles in the revolution. With Europe roiled by war and by the possibility of radical change, repression and violence had intensified against proponents of change. The war provided a pretext for submerging radicalism in nationalism and, wherever it was active, people were being promised future freedoms and guarantees they would never receive. This had pretty much always been the way and the few occasions when something different took place, in 1649 or 1848, for example, it was only when the people refused to accept those established precedents and took matters into their own hands to create a rupture. So it was with Lenin and those of his ilk. Marx and Engels had laid out the actual conditions of reality and why they were that way and had predicted that the capitalist system contained within itself the seeds of its own destruction. Yet that system, as we can still see all too well today, still persists, like a vampire or that scarcely visible monster that seems to receive the mortal wound over and over again but keeps slipping back in through the back door, vivid with new and probably stolen energy. There must be a vanguard, therefore, that makes sure that the old order is broken irrevocably and a new one brought into being. Much of the action of 1917 involves the dawning realization that all interim steps will be insufficient and that only when the Russian people – themselves a vanguard who would show the peoples of other nations, Germany and Britain among them – ruled themselves without obstruction from above would a revolution be complete.

As a consequence, the story requires a great deal of explication of what might appear to be arcane or even irrelevant machinations but which at the time were vital parts of the ongoing process. Fortunately for the reader, Miéville is an expert novelist and story-teller and he not only brings these events to life but sets

them concretely in the actuality of the people involved and how they did things, what they were eating and how they spent their spare time:

> "As Sukhanov left his home for the Soviet on the morning of the 10th, his wife Galina Flakserman eyed nasty skies and made him promise not to try to return that night, but to stay at his office, as was his custom when the weather was so bad (p.260)."

The scholarly knowledge behind these details is evident from the footnotes, the capsule biographies of the leading figures and in the guide to further reading about the subject. This promotes verisimilitude. It also provokes more of a response to what is being portrayed and because it is not a story about people from far away about whom we know little. Readers will have different attitudes about the events – although presumably more will have at least some sympathy with the revolutionaries otherwise they would not be reading this book. Those attitudes are likely to be influenced by the knowledge of what is to come and Miéville certainly does not shy away from this, although he attempts in what appears to me to be an even-handed way to present the reasons why things transpired the way they did – the relentless opposition of nearly every other powerful country in the world, the vastness and poverty of the country (since mass extraction of valuable resources had yet to be achieved) and the failings of individuals, often promoted beyond their knowledge and experience required to do things they objected to doing. The centre could not hold:

> "Lenin's health is failing. He suffers strokes in 1922 and 1923, and struggles in what has been called his 'final fight,' against the bureaucratic tendencies, the ossification and corruption he sees growing. He 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 (p.313)."

Within a page, internationalism has been abandoned and a 'Socialism within One Country' proclaimed. As a result, "debate and democracy withers" and the "grey blur" positions himself at the heart of the machine, building up his power base and personal status (p.314). The tragedy is all the greater for coming with a whimper rather than a bang.

Miéville mains a good pace throughout the book and expertly shuffles and deals the extensive cast of characters, each of whom has enough detail attached to stay in the memory and in their allotted role. Some of the more prominent characters are given a starring moment on the stage: Trotsky, Kollontai, Kerensky, Spiridonova and others. It is cold and many things just do not work as they should. Miéville describes the revolution as a "revolution of the railways" owing not just to the Tsar and his family and their ornate agency, balanced by Lenin's closed carriage but, also, because it would only be through the spread of the railways throughout the country that information and resources could be transferred swiftly from the centre of St. Petersburg to the peripheral regions that would enable a genuinely political community to emerge and, perhaps, thrive. However, that was not possible.

This is as good a telling of the events of October revolution as could be desired and it incorporates a great deal of the learning of modern scholars and of the troves of material now available in the post-1989 period. No doubt experts could find flaws or contentious issues and opponents could reject it all but interested readers would be well-rewarded.

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