

Recensione

C. Miéville, *October*

Verso 2017

Libera Pisano

As an author of fiction and leftist activist, China Miéville in his last volume is able to offer a brilliant retelling of the Russian Revolution. The author starts the narration *in medias res*, leaving aside all ideological battles. One can say that among the vast range of critical works about this epoch-making event, this volume has the peculiarity of offering a historically accurate overview without adopting an academic tone and a strictly scholarly approach. However, this does not mean that the pages in question are not the result of an accurate enquiry, quite the contrary. And as evidence of this, one might mention two precious tools provided at the end of the volume: one is the glossary of the personal names which were involved in the revolution and the other is a selected list of titles that the author found extremely helpful when carrying out his research for the book.

The volume starts with a prehistory of the Russian Revolution and then the chapters follow the time frame of 1917 from the “joyful tears” of February to the “red October” by showing how this was the result of a long series of revolutions. In order to offer readers also an idea of the geographical extent of the action, at the beginning of the book there are two maps: the first is a map of St Petersburg showing almost 60 relevant places – such as the Tauride Palace, the Winter Palace, and also the Pravda editorial offices – and the second one is a general map of all the different regions of European Russia. St Petersburg was without any doubt «the crucible of the revolutions» and «the story of 1917 [...] is above all the story of its streets», while the huge Russian Empire – from the Arctic to the Black Sea, from Poland to the Pacific – was the stage of a complex power struggle at the turn of the last century. The geographical dimension is relevant in order to appreciate the characteristics of this huge and complicated country, as the author states in the epilogue of the book: «The specifics of Russia, 1917, are distinct and crucial. It would be absurd, a ridiculous myopia, to hold up October as a simple lens through which to view the struggles of today» (p. 318).

In the reconstruction of the turmoil caused by the various alliances and putsches, coups and counter-coups, the history of the Russian Revolution becomes an engaging novel. «It was lunchtime and the Romanov Dynasty was finished»: this pithy sentence, which refers to the circumstances of the abdication of Tsar Nicholas and the proclamation of the Provisional Government, echoes

the pathos of Miéville's retelling of the Russian Revolution. Since this volume is somehow a novel, there is no shortage of sharp and detailed descriptions. The author presents the revolution, «its mystery» (p. 74) and its coincidences, and dwells on some literary figures, for instance Rasputin and his legendary death.

All the details, even the report of completely unknown circumstances, become as a means to offer a precise and detailed picture of the events. The author captures in a brilliant way riots, strikes, battles, anecdotes, legends and intrigues by reporting speeches and by portraying the protagonists of the Russian Revolution through their public addresses. He chooses to narrate the turning point of this event through the words, speeches, leaflets, telegrams and messages of the enemies and protagonists of the revolution. He lets them speak by discretely vanishing into the background. By echoing the last words of State and Revolution – «It is more pleasant and useful to go through the experience of the revolution than to write about it» – the author attempts to follow Lenin's injunction by leading us through the revolution instead of simply describing it.

In the first chapter devoted to the prehistory of the Russian Revolution, among the multitude of Marxists described as a «gaggle of émigrés, reprobates, scholars and workers, in a close weave of family, friendship and intellectual connections, political endeavour and polemic» (p. 11), the author introduces Vladimir Ulyanov: «a striking, prematurely balding man with distinctive narrow eyes, known as Lenin» (p. 12). Starting from his complicated relationship with Martov and the schism between the Mensheviks – (the minority faction) and Bolsheviks (the majority faction), Lenin is presented as a tireless revolutionary. In these first pages of the book we are also introduced to Leon Trotsky, the leader of the Petrograd Soviet. Without any doubt, the author is deeply fascinated by the figure of the Jewish revolutionary and his idea of a “permanent revolution”, so much so that he never misses a chance to refer to it through the whole book. «Trotsky is hard to love but impossible not to admire. He is at once charismatic and abrasive, brilliant and persuasive and divisive and difficult. He can be compelling and he can be cold, even brutal» (p. 22), and later on he says: «Trotsky was universally considered brilliant, a painful thorn in the flesh of any opponents» (p. 129). One might say that the turning point of the Russian Revolution is revealed through Trotsky's words, as is the final uprising of the Bolsheviks: «Trotsky raised his voice over their clamour. ‘Petrograd is in danger!’ he shouted. ‘All power to the soviets! All land to the people!’» (p. 259). Then on the 25th of October at 2:35 p.m., Trotsky exclaimed: «On behalf of the Military Revolutionary Committee, I declare that the Provisional Government no longer exists» (p. 289).

Even Kerensky is introduced through his first speech to the crowd: «Comrades – he said – do you trust me?» (p. 78) in March 2017, when the Provisional Government, based on the dvoevlastie (the dual power of Duma and soviets), was established. At the beginning Kerensky was a popular figure: «For many in those heady moments, Kerensky exemplified ‘the democracy’. He was adored. Artists painted him, badges and medals celebrated him, poets

immortalised him, in a torrent of kitsch» (p. 92). The people were convinced to undertake a proper revolution and tsarist statues were turned down. «People read new books, sang various new versions of the Marseillaise and watched new plays – often lewd, crude retellings of the Romanovs’ overthrow. Irreverence as revenge» (p. 93). However, as is well known, this enthusiasm was short-lived. Miéville carefully reconstructs Lenin’s opposition to the government – expressed in his Letter from Afar – and his legendary return from his Swiss exile with «a motley mix of revolutionaries» (p. 103) on the ‘sealed train’. When he arrived in St Petersburg he was warmly welcomed, he asked for a continual revolution and presented his project in the famous April Theses against the Provisional government. «Lenin was clear that it was not ‘our immediate task to “introduce” socialism’, prior to a European socialist revolution, but to place power in the hands of working people, rather than to pursue political class collaboration as advocated by the Mensheviks» (p. 113).

Meanwhile, the discontent was growing: «We are sick and tired of living in debt and slavery,’ the Rakalovsk peasants had their chairperson write. ‘We want space and light’» (p. 117). Over time the Bolsheviks became the most organised and largest group, as a sense of pending collapse and of dissatisfaction with the government emerged. A sign of this was the biggest demonstration yet, which was held on the 18th of June and which revealed – as Gorky stated – the triumph of Bolshevism, sparking a wave of protests. The author describes this crucial moment with particular enthusiasm. «Sunday 18 June: a clear, windy morning. Workers and soldiers assembled early. That day sister demonstrations were planned in Moscow, Kiev, Minsk, Riga, Helsingfors (Helsinki), Kharkov, and across the empire. At 9 a.m., a band struck up the Marseillaise, the French national anthem that had become an international hymn to freedom. The parade began its procession down Nevsky Prospect. Its colossal size became slowly clear. The march filled the wide vista for miles. Some 400,000 people had taken to the streets» (pp. 155-156). During these turbulent events, the government started spreading the word that Lenin was a German spy.

Even the episodes of Lenin’s life are narrated with a legendary aura, for instance the photo of his fake passport as ‘Konstantin Petrovich Ivanov’ and his Finnish exile at the Rovio residence in the north of Helsingfors. «The very first day he lodged with him, Rovio found Lenin asleep at a desk, his head in his arms, a closely written notebook before him. ‘Consumed with curiosity,’ Rovio reported, ‘I began turning over the pages. It was the manuscript of his book *The State and Revolution*’» (p. 204). Lenin’s masterpiece was written «on a log by a mosquito-ridden lake, and then on a policeman’s table» (p. 204).

Miéville underlines Lenin’s biblical zeal from his exile to his return to St Petersburg wearing a ready-made grey wig on his head. In September Kerensky, who remained after all the head of the government, «gathered the rags of his messianism about him, believing himself [to have been] chosen by something or other for something or other» (p. 256). However, the situation was on the verge of complete collapse. «In this ambience of perfidy, weakness and violence, Lenin

took his campaign for insurrection to the wider party» (p. 257). When Lenin joined his comrades, «the final transition, from de facto to overt insurrection, had begun» (p. 283). Armed groups, revolutionaries and activists gathered together. Lenin's proclamation – which was «not a truth, but an aspiration» (p. 287) – was circulated as swiftly as possible as a poster and by telegraph. On 25 October 1917, a blank shot was fired from the fore-castle gun of the legendary Russian cruiser Aurora which marked the start of the assault on the Winter Palace: «its blast was sound without fury, but a sound much louder than that of live ammunition. A cataclysmic boom shook Petrograd» (p. 293).

Beside recounting the well-known events of the Revolution, the author sheds light on different elements. For instance, he reports the various pogroms and persecutions of Jews which occurred from the prehistory of the Russian Revolution, drawing attention to their torture and rape through «traditional ultra-right sadism» (p. 20). He recalls that in October 1905 the so-called 'Black Hundreds' – proto-fascist and ultra-reactionary activists – butchered more than 400 Jews in Odessa. Miéville also sheds light on the way in which the long wave of the revolutionary events of 1917 reached the outskirts of the empire, including the Muslim areas. He refers to the Islamic Council in Tashkent, Turkestan, and across the region, whose aim was to «dismantle the old government structures – already undermined by the spread of local soviets – and enhancing the role of the indigenous Muslim population» (p. 121). On 23 April in Tartastan there was an important All Russian Muslim Women's Congress in which «fifty-nine women delegates met before an audience 300 strong, overwhelmingly female, to debate issues including the status of Sharia law, plural marriage, women's rights and the hijab» (ibid.). Participants included Zulaykha Rahmanqulova, the twenty-two-year-old poet Zahida Burnasheva, Selima Jacobova, Fatima Latifiya and Labiba Huseynova, an expert on Islamic law. They discuss women's right to vote, the equality of the sexes, and the non-compulsory nature of the hijab. The conference was a clear «symptom of tremulous times» (p. 122).

The gender issue also plays an important role in these pages and the author pays attention also to the female protagonists of the Revolution. He tells the stories of many revolutionary women, such as: «the legendary Vera Zasulich» (p. 11), a radical young student who in 1878 shot the chief of the Saint Petersburg police and then fled to Switzerland; Maria Spiridova, who in February 1906 became a heroine after she shot down the local security chief who was famous for his savage repression of peasants in the town of Borisoglebsk; and Inessa Armand, the French-Russian communist, feminist and writer who was Lenin's close collaborator and travelled with him through Europe on the sealed train.

Another important aspect is the attention paid to the technological preconditions for the Revolution, by drawing the attention to the roads and railway tracks as the material substratum of the revolution. «Russia was an extensive empire of wires, running mostly through post offices and railways» (p. 75). The famous Marxian idea of the revolution as a locomotive was far from

being just a metaphor in Russia: «The revolution of 1917 is a revolution of trains. History advancing through the screeching of cold metal» (p. 319).

While taking for granted the premature nature of the revolution – something Lenin himself noted in his short piece *Our Revolution* written in 1923 – and even its ultimately tragic outcome, the author celebrates enthusiastically the Russian Revolution or, better, the year 1917: «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» (p. 2).

Towards the end of the book, Miéville rhetorically asks whether the telos of Bolshevism was Stalinism or not. The answer leaves no room for doubt: October was «a ground zero» and its «degradation was not a given, was not written in the stars» (p. 316). Stalin is mentioned just few times in the book. In the author's reconstruction, he did not play an important role at all in the events of 1917. On the contrary, in the last pages the author states that, after Lenin's death in 1924, Stalin's «embrace of 'Socialism in One Country' is a dramatic reversal of a foundational thesis of the Bolsheviks» (p. 314).

Despite Stalinism, Red October deserves a celebration, because it marked not only a «change in the soul» (p. 317), but also a new kind of power, a shift towards workers' control of production and the rights of peasants, equal rights for men and women in the workplace and in marriage, the right to divorce, maternity support, the decriminalisation of homosexuality, free and universal education, a cultural explosion, etc.

However, given that this is such a well-known story, why should we tell it again? Surely not for «nostalgia's sake» (p. 317). Rather, because – as in every story – we find something unspoken. «There have been a hundred years of crude, a-historical, ignorant, bad-faith and opportunist attacks on Red October. Without echoing such sneers, we must nonetheless interrogate the revolution» (p. 315). This is exactly what China Miéville does, and we must be grateful to him.

The book symbolically begins and ends with a quotation of Nikolai Chernyshevsky taken by his *What Has to Be Done?*. Chernyshevsky's words can be considered the guiding thread of this volume, starting from two rows of dots and ending in the epilogue with his quotation: «Oh, my love, now I know all your freedom/ I know that it will come; but what will it be like?» (p. 305).

This question cannot be answered. There is «something ostentatiously unspoken» (p. 305) that marks the beginning and the end of this book. In this apophatic gesture, one can find all the tragic bet of the Russian Revolution and of all the revolutions (hopefully) to come.