

# John Silas Reed Biography

## John Silas Reed

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# Biography

John Silas Reed (1887-1920), American revolutionist, poet, and journalist, became a symbol in many American minds of the Communist revolution in Russia.

John Reed was born in the mansion of his maternal grandparents outside Portland, Ore., on Oct. 22, 1887. His father sold agricultural implements and insurance. Reed was a frail youngster and suffered with a kidney ailment. He attended Portland public schools and graduated from Harvard in 1910. Although he felt like an outsider, Reed had been active at the university.

Reed went to work for *American Magazine*, of muckraking fame, and *The Masses*, a radical publication. Journalists Ida Tarbell and Lincoln Steffens awakened his liberal feelings, but he soon bypassed them as a radical. In 1914 *Metropolitan Magazine* sent Reed to Mexico, where he boldly walked within the lines of Pancho Villa's army. Villa reportedly made Reed a staff officer and called the journalist "brigadier general." Reed next gave sympathetic coverage to striking coal miners in Colorado. He went to Europe for *Metropolitan Magazine* when World War I broke out in 1914. He covered the battle fronts in Germany, Russia, Serbia, Romania, and Bulgaria.

Reed and his wife, Louise Bryant, were in Russia during the October Revolution. In reporting the Bolshevik effort to gain control, Reed won V. I. Lenin's friendship. Here Reed gathered materials for his most noted work, *Ten Days That Shook the World* (1919). It is generally recognized that the book lacks factual accuracy, but Bertram Wolfe (1960) contends that "as literature Reed's book is the finest piece of eyewitness reporting the revolution produced."

In 1918 Reed was named Russian consul general at New York, a status never recognized by the United States. In 1919, after he had been expelled from the National Socialist Convention, he formed the Communist Labor party in the United States. He was arrested several times for incendiary speeches and finally, after printing articles in the *Voice of Labor*, was indicted for sedition. He fled to the Soviet Union on a forged passport. The thing usually unreported about Reed among the Muscovites was his unrelenting contention that decisions should be made democratically and his opposition to a monolithic society under dictatorial control. Twice he tried to return to the United States but was unsuccessful. Stricken by typhus, he died on Oct. 19, 1920, in Moscow. He was given a state funeral and buried in the Kremlin.