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The Paris Commune and Kronstadt

Alexander Berkman

March is a historic month: in the struggle of mankind against the power of darkness and oppression it has frequently played a very significant role. But the most important March event of modern times is of comparatively recent date. It took place in Russia just ten years ago in 1921, and is known as the Kronstadt Rebellion.

In many of its characteristics the Kronstadt Rebellion had great similarity with another great historic uprising, namely that of the proletariat of Paris in 1870, which is known as the Paris Commune. The month of March is the anniversary of the Paris Commune, as well the as the Kronstadt Rebellion, and it is fitting that the two great events be celebrated at the same time.

I say “celebrated” advisedly. For though Kronstadt as well as the Paris Commune ended as fearful tragedies, both of them stand out in proletarian history as stirring and momentous struggles for liberty and justice. They are beacon lights, shedding hope and encouragement on the road of emancipation. True, Kronstadt failed of its real purpose just as the Paris Commune had failed, but the very fact of their having been, and having striven and fought with heroic

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revolutionary idealism is a source of lasting inspiration for the oppressed and disinherited of the world.

On March 18, 1871, the revolutionary proletariat of Paris proclaimed the Commune. There are times when overturning the government can be accomplished without much difficulty. At certain moments the political State crumbles to pieces, like a house of cards, before the first warm breath of the people risen in revolt. Such a time was March, 1871, in France. The people at large were bitter against the government, tired of the war with Germany, and desperate with the suffering caused by tyrannical, oppressive and corrupt rule. Bismarck had dictated his own terms in Versailles and humiliated the French government, and that served to increase the contempt and enmity that the French people felt against the heads of the State.

The moment for a revolution was most propitious. The declaration of the Commune in Paris filled the entire population with the greatest joy. It was felt as a most longed-for deliverance from the hated Versailles tyrants. Even the middle class elements were carried away by the general enthusiasm; they welcomed the most thorough change. The time was ripe, the situation most favorable to revolutionary rebuilding of the country.

Action was necessary and urgent — revolutionary action to put the proletarian aspirations into life, to make the Commune a vital reality, broadening and widening it throughout the entire land.

Alas, the respect for the bourgeois conceptions of law and order, to the sanctity of capitalist property, and faith in the “humanity” of the enemy were soon to turn the great victory of the revolutionary masses into terrible defeat. The first measures of the Commune should have taken was to provide bread for the people. The warehouses were well-stocked, the rich had provided themselves during the war with huge supplies, and the Government and private banks were filled with gold.

But instead of confiscating the accumulated wealth and food-stuffs for the benefit of the starving masses, the Commune made

the fatal mistake of wasting precious moments on — elections: instead of acting for themselves and organizing the new order of things, the Communard masses confided in their “ leaders “, entrusted them with taking the initiative and let them pass necessary measures. Known revolutionists were elected by great majorities: Jacobins, Blanquists and Internationalists were represented in the Council of the Commune. But even with the best intentions these revolutionary “ leaders “ did not know what to do with the Revolution. The masses themselves knew their needs and wants, but the Council of the elected simply proceeded to follow established forms of “ governing “. They did not even know how to organize the defense of Paris.

Too late the Commune realized that what it most needed was food and not new rules. It began to open communal kitchens to feed the people, but valuable time had been lost which gave Versailles a chance to recover from its great fright and to gather its forces to attack the revolutionary proletariat of Paris. Theirs and Gallifet slaughtered 30,000 workers in the

streets of the French capital and drowned the Commune in the blood of its heroic defenders. Dearly did they pay for their mistakes.

The same fearful price had Kronstadt to pay for its faith in governors. Staunch revolutionists and as devoted to their cause as the brave Communards, the men of Kronstadt fell victims to their confidence in the revolutionary integrity of the Bolshevik rulers.

The Kronstadt rebellion of March, 1921, began as a mere expression of sympathy with the striking workers at Petrograd. The sailors and soldiers of Kronstadt were historically the most revolutionary element in Russia. It was they who had been the main strength of the Bolsheviki in their fight against the Provisional Government of Kerensky. They had enabled the Communist Party to upset the Constituent Assembly and to proclaimed themselves the new rulers, with Lenin and Trotsky as the dictators in Kremlin. Trotsky had repeatedly declared that without the sailors of Kron-

stadt the Bolsheviki would have been powerless. He addressed the Kronstadt men as “the pride and glory of the Revolution “.

The Kronstadt soldiers and sailors had made common cause with the workers in the October Revolution, fought side-by-side with them, shared their danger hunger, and were indeed true brothers in a common cause. No wonder that when a general strike broke out in Petrograd, on February 24, 1921, the men of Kronstadt stood aghast, as did in fact the entire country. The workers of Petrograd had but a short time before and with their unaided efforts saved Petrograd from the Yudenitch army, and by saving Petrograd they had also saved Moscow and the Revolution. The Bolsheviki had much to thank the Petrograd proletariat for. Its artisans, mechanics and day laborers had served on many fronts; they were the true advance guard of the Revolution and they had sacrificed their blood and all they had in the revolutionary cause.

But conditions in the factories and mills of Petrograd had become unbearable. The work was hard, the rations insufficient, and no clothing was being issued to protect workers against the terrible cold weather. The rule of the Bolsheviki was most draconic and its heavy hand was felt more and more by the workers. But they kept quiet, waiting for the Bolsheviki to make their promises good. A more liberal rule had been solemnly promised them, better rations and more humane treatment, greater liberty and more equal justice — when civil war would be over and the military fronts terminated.

Now the time had come. The soldiers had returned from all fronts and most of them had gone to work on the farms and in the industries. More supplies were available and better means of transportation. The workers of Petrograd, who had suffered most on account of war, revolution and civil strife, were eagerly waiting for the Bolshevik Government to make good its promises.

They waited patiently, a long time, but in vain. Bolsheviki inefficiency and mismanagement continued, their indifference to the country’s suffering was unchanged, and the reign of terror even became daily worse.

of the Paris Commune and of the Kronstadt rebellion to bring to humanity real liberty and well-being and lasting peace to man.

and principles. It has but one aim: to secure power and to hold it, at any cost.

Kronstadt repeated the fatal errors of the Paris Communards. The latter did not follow the advice of the more far-seeing and clearheaded revolutionists who demanded the immediate attack on Versailles while the Government of Thiers was disorganized. They wasted valuable time and they did not carry the revolution into the country, to every nook and corner. Neither the Paris workers of 1871 nor the Kronstadt sailors had set out to abolish the government. The Communards wanted merely certain republican liberties and they believed that a defensive attitude is sufficient protection against the enemy. They failed to assume the aggressive and that proved their undoing

Kronstadt also demanded only some reforms. The sailors refuse to take the aggressive even after it had become clear that the Bolsheviks were preparing to annihilate them. They remained on the defensive and thus lost the psychologic moment for victory. The whole of Russia was bitterly antagonistic to the Bolshevik tyranny and passionately in sympathy with Kronstadt. But the latter talked "peace and understanding", while the Communist Government was marshaling artillery against it. In the Paris Commune, as in Kronstadt, the tendency toward passive, defensive tactics and lack of revolutionary clear-sightedness proved fatal.

The Paris Commune and Kronstadt fell. But they fell victorious in their idealism and moral purity, the generosity and higher humanity. The future is theirs.

Just as the Paris commune, Kronstadt is of utmost historic significance. It sounded the death knell of Bolshevism. It proved to the entire world that the Communist dictatorship and the Russian Revolution are opposites, mutually exclusive. Kronstadt was the first popular attempt at liberation from the tyranny of State Socialism. It was the first step toward the Third Revolution which is inevitable in Russia. May the International proletariat take to heart the lessons

At last realizing that life could not continue in that situation, that the government is remaining inactive in the matter, the workers at Petrograd decided to come together to consult about their needs and means of alleviating the hunger and distress. They called a meeting for this purpose, but the Government Petrograd with Zinoviev at its head, promptly suppressed the meeting. Naturally the workers felt outraged by such unjustified and despotic methods. More meetings were called, but these also were forbidden by the Bolsheviks. The workers became outspokenly indignant. They charged that the Bolsheviks were offering most unrevolutionary concessions to the capitalists of Europe and America and that they were making the worst compromises with them, but at the same time the refusing the least rights to the workers of Russia. Feeling against the Communists grew throughout Russia and especially among the proletariat of Petrograd, the most intelligent element of the Russian masses.

Committees were sent to Zinoviev to talk matters over and find some amicable way of coming to understanding. That autocrat, however, refused even to admit the committees to his presence. At last, to compel the government to consider their demands, the workers of Petrograd called the strike. The first to leave work were the men of the Patronny munition factory, and they were followed by those of the Trubotchny and Baltiysky mills. Instead of giving the strikers a hearing, the Petrograd government created a special "Committee of Defense" to suppress the strike movement.

The committee of defense immediately declared the strikers as counter-revolutionists, locked them out of the factories and deprived them of their rations, which meant starvation for the men and their families. Strikers' demonstrations were dispersed by the military, arrests multiplied daily, and the entire city was declared under martial law. Deaths at the hand of the Tcheka, from hunger and cold became an every day occurrence.

It was these happenings in Petrograd that arouse the sailors and soldiers of Kronstadt. They felt something was radically wrong if

the revolutionary proletariat of Petrograd could receive such treatment at the hands of the Bolsheviki . But they refused to take sides in the matter until they have first investigated the situation. If the workers' demands were unjustified or excessive, the sailors declared, Kronstadt would not give them any assistance.

A committee of the sailors quietly came to Petrograd and investigated the claims and demands of the workers. The report of the Committee was submitted to a public meeting of sailors, soldiers and workers of Kronstadt, held on the Yakorny Square on March first. The meeting, presided over by the Chairman of

The Kronstadt Soviet, the Communist Vassilenko, passed a resolution in favor of the Petrograd strikers and demanding radical reforms of the abuses of the Commissars, as well as the granting of greater liberties by the Bolshevik government.

President Kalinin, who was present at the meeting, and Commissar Kuzmin, head of the Baltic Fleet stationed at Kronstadt denounced the sailors and Red Army men as counter-revolutionists for demanding free elections for the approaching campaign to select a new deputies to the Kronstadt Soviet.

Kronstadt appointed a Committee of 30 persons to call on Zinoviev to discuss the situation. That committee was arrested immediately after reaching the city. It was the first blow the Communist Government struck at Kronstadt for daring to express its sympathy with the starving workers of Petrograd.

From that moment on, the situation developed with rapid strides. The Petrograd Soviet, absolutely under the control of Zinoviev, denounced the Kronstadt sailors and workers as counter-revolutionists working in the interest of the Czar's generals. The same day Lenin and Trotsky issued an ultimatum to Kronstadt to "surrender", and Trotsky had a proclamation spread over Kronstadt by a military flying machine, threatening to "shoot you all like partridges".

Kronstadt asked only justice for the Petrograd strikers and correction of the evils of Commissarship. They were about to elect

a new Soviet in their city, and they insisted on the right to act without Communist interference. The sailors and soldiers of Kronstadt issued numerous proclamations, and published a daily Bulletin, affirming their devotion to the Soviet system, their loyalty to the Communist Party, and declaring over and over again that they demanded solely their revolutionary rights as proletarians. Repeatedly they called upon the Bolsheviki to settle the dispute in a brotherly, amicable manner, vowing that Revolution and its cause are sacred to them and proclaiming to the whole country, "We want no bloodshed"!

Tragic was the faith of Kronstadt in the revolutionary integrity of their Communist rulers. And while Kronstadt was firm in its intention to persuade the Bolsheviki of its loyalty and devotion to the Communist Party, the latter ordered a secret attack at night upon the unsuspecting city of Kronstadt.

The attack was marshaled by Trotsky, with the expert aid of the military Commissar Tukhachevsky, a former Czarist General. Tchekist divisions, wearing white shrouds to blend with the snow-covered Neva River and the remaining unseen in the darkness of the night, attacked Kronstadt simultaneously from three sides and finally broke through the gates of the city. Picked Communist troops continued the slaughter on the streets, sparing neither man nor child. Fourteen thousand lives were sacrificed in that internecine strife. For days and nights the near-by Petrograd woods rang with the Tchekist "practice shooting": it was the Kronstadt survivors being executed for the greater glory of the Communist dictators.

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The Kronstadt movement was spontaneous, unprepared and peaceful. That it became an armed conflict, ending in a most bloody tragedy, was entirely due to Bolshevik despotism.

The Kronstadt experience, like the Paris commune, again proves that government—whatever its name or claims—is always the mortal enemy of liberty and justice to the masses. The state has no soul