

In Defence of the Truth

A reply to “In Defence of October” by John Rees of the British SWP

Anarcho

April 28, 2009

Contents

I	3
<i>Objective Factors</i>	3
<i>Rees on Makhno</i>	4
<i>Betraying the Makhnovists</i>	5
<i>The third and final break</i>	7
<i>Dictatorship of the Party</i>	8
II	10
<i>Anarchism in practice</i>	10
<i>Making the trails run on time</i>	13
<i>Peasants and revolution</i>	13
<i>Peasant Communes</i>	15
<i>Paper Decrees?</i>	16
<i>Conclusion</i>	16
III	17
<i>A Peasant revolt?</i>	18
<i>Peasant demands?</i>	19
<i>Changing composition or changing the facts?</i>	22
<i>Changing politics?</i>	24
IV	25
<i>What were they fighting for?</i>	26
<i>Pro-White?</i>	27
<i>Balance of class forces?</i>	29
<i>After the revolt</i>	30
<i>Conclusion</i>	31

The Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci once wrote that “*to tell the truth is a communist and revolutionary act.*” If we apply this maxim to most of the left, we would draw the obvious conclusion that it is neither communist nor revolutionary.

The Socialist Workers Party is a classic example of this mentality, rewriting history to suit the recruitment needs of the organisation. One of the ironies of history is that the Trotskyists who spent so much time combating the “Stalin school of falsification” have created their own.

I

The SWP is notorious, of course, for its inaccurate diatribes on anarchism. Pat Stack’s laughably bad “*Anarchy in the UK?*” (**Socialist Review**, no. 246) is just the latest in a long line of articles whose relationship to reality is one of accidental coincidence. Unsurprisingly, when it comes to the Russian Revolution, we get a similar distortions for a similar reason: the necessity to maintain the Bolshevik Myth. The idea that Leninism works would be impossible to argue if an accurate account of the Russian Revolution (and the role of Bolshevism within it) was widely available to radicals.

One of the party’s major attempts to “defend” the Bolshevik tradition is “In Defence of October” by John Rees, which appeared in **International Socialism** no. 52 and as been reprinted has a pamphlet. Needless to say, a comprehensive analysis of the whole article cannot be done here and, therefore, it is necessary to concentrate on his account of the anarchist influenced Makhnovist movement. Such an analysis is useful for three reasons. Firstly, it exposes the flaws (and honesty) of Rees’s approach. Secondly, it shows the depths to which a so-called “revolutionary” will sink to justify his ideology. Thirdly, it allows us to review the activities of the Makhnovists and show that there is an alternative to the bankrupt politics of Bolshevism.

Objective Factors

Rees is at pains to blame the authoritarian policies of the Bolsheviks on what he calls “the weight of objective factors” facing the Bolsheviks, by which he means the combined impact of events the Bolsheviks could not control (namely economic disruption, civil war and so on). He argues that the “subjective factor” of Bolshevik ideology played had an impact (indeed, “was decisive”) on the outcome of the Russian Revolution within the “choice between capitulation to the Whites or defending the revolution with whatever means were at hand.” Such an argument explains his dishonest account of the Makhnovist movement. After all, they faced the same “weight of objective factors” as the Bolsheviks yet did not make the same choices, act in the same way, or come to the same ideological conclusions.

Clearly, then, the Makhnovists undermine Rees’s basic thesis and effectively refutes the claim that the Bolsheviks had no choice but to act as they did. This means that the Makhnovists provide strong evidence that Bolshevik politics played a key role in the degeneration of the Russian Revolution. Such a conclusion is dangerous to Bolshevism and so the Makhnovist movement must be attacked, regardless of the facts. This Rees does in abundance, distorting and abusing the source material he bases his account on in the process.

Rees on Makhno

The Makhnovist movement, named after anarchist Nestor Makhno, was a popular peasant based army which was active in the Ukraine from 1918 to 1921. It played a key role in the defeat of the White Generals Denikin and Wrangel and pursued the anarchist dream of a self-managed society based on a federation of free communes and workers' councils (soviets). Rees, however, talks about the "muddled anarchism" of Makhno, dismissing the whole movement as offering no alternative to Bolshevism and being without "an articulated political programme." Ultimately, for Rees, Makhno's "anarchism was a thin veneer on peasant rebellion" and while "on paper" the Makhnovists "appeared to have a more democratic programme" than the Bolsheviks, they were "frauds."

The reality of the Makhnovist movement was totally different than Rees's claims. We shall analyse his account of the Makhnovist movement in order to show exactly how low the supporters of Bolshevism will go to distort the historical record for their own aims. Once the selective and edited quotations provided by Rees are corrected, the picture that clearly emerges is that rather than the Makhnovists being "frauds," it is Rees' account which is the fraud (along with the political tradition which inspired it).

Rees's critique of the Makhnovists comprises of two parts. The first is a history of the movement and its relationships (or lack of them) with the Bolsheviks, which we discuss here. The second is a discussion of the ideas which the Makhnovists tried to put into practice (as discussed in the next issue). Both aspects of his critique are extremely flawed. Indeed, the errors in his history of the movement are so fundamental (and so at odds with his references) that it suggests that ideology overcame objectivity (to be polite). The best that can be said of his account is that at least he does not raise the totally discredited accusation that the Makhnovists were anti-Semitic or "kulaks." However, he more than makes up for this by distorting the facts and references he uses. Indeed, it would be no exaggeration to argue that the only information Rees gets correct about his sources is the page number.

To give a flavour of the quality of Rees's scholarship, we can point to his comparison of the Makhnovists and the Tambov rebellion. He claims that Makhno's was the "smaller rebellion" of the two in spite of the facts that the Makhnovists lasted longer (over four years compared to less than one), started in a larger area and later expanded (the Tambov revolt was restricted to the southern half of one province) and had more troops (a peak of around 40 000 compared to around 20 000). Perhaps Rees simply meant that Makhno was physically smaller than Antonov, the leader of the Tambov rebellion?

Needless to say, every distortion and error cannot be corrected as space would prohibit it. As such, we must concentrate on the important ones.

Rees starts by setting the appropriate tone. He states that the "methods used by Makhno" in his "fight against the Red Army often mirrored those used by the Whites." Strangely enough, he fails to specify any. He quotes Red Army reports from the Ukrainian Front to blacken the Makhnovists, using them to confirm the picture he draws from "the diary of Makhno's wife" from 1920. These diary entries, he claims, "betray the nature of the movement" when fighting the Bolsheviks in early 1920 (after the Bolsheviks engineered the outlawing of the Makhnovists). The major problem for Rees' case is the fact that this diary is a fake and has been known to be a fake since Arshinov wrote his classic account of the Makhnovists in 1923.¹ Rees implicitly

¹ Peter Arshinov, *History of the Makhnovist Movement*, p. 226f

acknowledges this by lamely admitting (in an end note) that “Makhno seems to have had two ‘wives’”

As regards these “methods,” Rees simply shows that Bolsheviks were shot by Makhno’s troops. This went both ways, as Rees fails to note. In “military operations the Bolsheviks shot all prisoners. The Makhnovists shot all captured officers unless the Red rank and file strongly interceded for them. The rank and file were usually sent home, though a number volunteered for service with the Insurgents.” Equally, “[o]n the occupation of a village by the Red Army the Cheka would hunt out and hang all active Makhnovite supporters; an amenable Soviet would be set up; officials would be appointed or imported to organise the poor peasants ... and three or four Red militia men left as armed support for the new village bosses.”² As such, Rees’ account of Makhnovist “terror” against the Bolsheviks seems somewhat hypocritical. We can equally surmise that the methods used by the Bolsheviks against the Makhnovists also “often mirrored those used by the Whites”! And it should also be stressed that the conflict Rees is referring to was needlessly started by the Bolsheviks and so Rees is attacking the Makhnovists for defending themselves!

Betraying the Makhnovists

As regards the historical summary Rees presents, it would be fair to say his account of the relationships between the Makhnovists and the Bolsheviks are a total distortion. The two armies had three “pacts” and Rees totally distorts the first two. Simply put, Rees alleges that the Makhnovists broke with the Bolsheviks. The opposite is the case – the Bolsheviks turned on the Makhnovists and betrayed them. These facts are hardly unknown to Rees as they are contained in the very books he quotes as evidence for his rewritten history.

According to Rees, “[c]o-operation continued until June 1919 when the Insurgent Army broke from the Red Army” and quotes Michael Palij’s book as follows: “as soon as Makhno left the front he and his associates began to organise new partisan detachments in the Bolsheviks’ rear, which subsequently attacked strongholds, troops, police, trains and food collectors.” Rees is clearly implying that Makhno attacked the Bolsheviks, apparently for no reason. The truth is totally different.

Rees quotes Palij on page 177. This page is from chapter 16, which is called “***The Bolsheviks Break with Makhno.***” As this was not enough of a clue, Palij presents some necessary background to this event. He notes that “the Bolsheviks renewed their anti-Makhno propaganda. Trotsky, in particular, led a violent campaign against the Makhno movement.” He also mentions that “[a]t the same time, the supplies of arms and other war materials to Makhno were stopped, this weakening the Makhno forces vis-a-vis the Denikin troops.” In this context, the Makhnovists Revolutionary Military Council “decided to call a fourth congress of peasants, workers, and partisans” for June 15th, 1919, which Trotsky promptly banned and warned the population that “participation in the Congress shall be considered an act of state treason against the Soviet Republic and the front.”³

The Bolsheviks had tried to ban the third congress in April but had been ignored. This time, they made sure that they were not. Makhno and his staff were not informed of Trotsky’s dictatorial order and learned of it three days latter. On June 9th, Makhno sent a telegram informing the

² David Footman, *Civil War in Russia*, p. 292–3

³ Michael Palij, *The Anarchism of Nestor Makhno*, p. 175–6

Bolsheviks that he was leaving his post as leader of the Makhnovists. He “handed over his command and left the front with a few of his close associates and a cavalry detachment” while calling upon the partisans to “remain at the front to hold off Denikin’s forces.” Trotsky ordered his arrest, but Makhno was warned in advance and escaped. On June 15–16th, members of Makhno’s staff “were captured and executed the next day.” Now Palij recounts how “[a]s soon as Makhno left the front he and his associates began to organise new partisan detachments in the Bolsheviks’ rear, which subsequently attacked strongholds, troops, police, trains and food collectors.”

Palij “subsequently” refers to Makhno after Denikin’s breakthrough and his occupation of the Ukraine. “The oppressive policy of the Denikin regime,” he notes, “convinced the population that it was as bad as the Bolshevik regime, and brought a strong reaction that led able young men ... to leave their homes and join Makhno and other partisan groups.” As Makhno put it: “When the Red Army in south Ukraine began to retreat ... as if to straighten the front line, but in reality to evacuate Ukraine ... only then did my staff and I decide to act.” After trying to fight Denikin’s troops, he retreated and called upon his troops to leave the Red Army and rejoin the fight against Denikin. He “sent agents amongst the Red troops” to carry out propaganda urging them to stay and fight Denikin with the Makhnovists, which they did in large numbers. This propaganda was “combined with sabotage.” Between these two events, Makhno had entered the territory of pogromist warlord Hryhor’iv (which did **not** contain Red troops as they were in conflict) and assassinated him.⁴

Clearly, Rees’s summary leaves a lot to be desired! Rather than Makhno attacking the Bolsheviks, it was they who broke with him as Palij, Rees’s source, makes clear. The dishonesty is obvious, although understandable as Trotsky banning a worker, peasant and partisan congress would hardly fit into Rees’ attempt to portray the Bolsheviks as democratic socialists overcome by objective circumstances! Given that the Makhnovists had successfully held three such congresses to discuss the war against reaction, how could objective circumstances be blamed for the dictatorial actions of Trotsky and other leading Red Army officers in the Ukraine?

Rees moves onto the next alliance between the insurgents and the Bolsheviks which occurred after Denikin’s defeat (needless to say, his version of Denikin’s defeat downplays the Makhnovists key role in it). Again, the Bolsheviks broke it and again Rees attempts to blame the Makhnovists. He argues that “by the end of 1919 the immediate White threat was removed. Makhno refused to move his troops to the Polish front to meet the imminent invasion and hostilities with the Red Army began again on an even more widespread scale.”

This, needless to say, is a total distortion of the facts. Firstly, it should be noted that the “imminent” invasion by Poland Rees mentions did not occur until the 26th of April, 1920. The break with Makhno occurred as a result of an order issued on the 8th of January, 1920. Clearly, the excuse of “imminent” invasion was a cover, as recognised by **all** the historians Rees himself uses. In the words of Palij:

“The author of the order realised at that time there was no real war between the Poles and the Bolsheviks at that time and he also knew that Makhno would not abandon his region ... Uborevich [the author] explained that ‘an appropriate reaction by Makhno to this order would give us the chance to have accurate grounds for our next steps’

⁴ Palij, *Op. Cit.*, p. 177, p. 190, p. 191 and p. 173

... [He] concluded: ‘The order is a certain political manoeuvre and, at the very least, we expect positive results from Makhno’s realisation of this.’⁵

Footman concurs, noting that it was “admitted on the Soviet side that this order was primarily ‘dictated by the necessity’ of liquidating **Makhnovshchina** as an independent movement.”⁶ Rees argues that “[i]n fact it was Makhno’s actions against the Red Army which made ‘a brief return of the Whites possible.’” In defence of his claims, Rees quotes from W. Bruce Lincoln’s *Red Victory*. Looking at that work we discover that Lincoln is well aware who is to blame for the return of the Whites and it is **not** the Makhnovists:

“Once Trotsky’s Red Army had crushed Iudenich and Kolchak and driven Deniken’s forces back upon their bases in the Crimea and the Kuban, it turned upon Makhno’s partisan forces with a vengeance ... [I]n mid-January 1920, after a typhus epidemic had decimated his forces, a re-established Central Committee of the Ukrainian Communist Party declared Makhno an outlaw. Yet the Bolsheviki could not free themselves from Makhno’s grasp so easily, and it became one of the supreme ironies of the Russian Civil War that his attacks against the rear of the Red Army made it possible for the resurrected White armies ... to return briefly to the southern Ukraine in 1920.”⁷

After reading the same fact in three different sources, Rees rewrites history and reverses the facts in true Stalinist fashion. Consider what Rees is (distortedly) accounting. The White Generals had been defeated. The civil war appeared to be over. Yet the Bolsheviki turn on their allies after issuing an ultimatum which they knew would never be obeyed. They *provoked* a conflict with an ally against counter-revolution. It cannot be justified in military terms, as Rees tries to do.

The third and final break

The third pact was suggested by the Makhnovists in light of White success under Wrangel. The Bolsheviki ignored the offer — until Wrangel’s break through in mid-September. Rees argues that this final pact was (“unsurprisingly”) a “treaty of convenience on the part of both sides and as soon as Wrangel was defeated at the end of the year the Red Army fought Makhno until he gave up the struggle.” Makhno, however, “assumed [that] the forthcoming conflict with the Bolsheviki could be limited to the realm of ideas” and that they “would not attack his movement immediately.”⁸ He was wrong. Instead the Bolsheviki attacked the Makhnovists without warning and, unlike the other breaks, without pretext.

Let us not forget the circumstances in which this betrayal took place. The country was, as Rees continually reminds us, in a state of economic collapse caused, in part by the civil war and on which he blames the anti-working class and dictatorial actions and policies of the Bolsheviki. Yet here they are prolonging the civil war by turning (yet again!) on their allies. Resources which could have been used to aid the post-war rebuilding were used to attack their former allies. The talents and energy of the Makhnovists were destroyed or wasted in a pointless conflict. Should

⁵ Palij, Op. Cit., p. 210

⁶ *Civil War in Russia*, pp. 290–1

⁷ W Bruce Lincoln, *Red Victory*, p. 327

⁸ Palij, Op. Cit., p. 231

we be surprised? The Bolsheviks had preferred to compound their foes during the Civil War (and, indirectly, aid the very Whites they were fighting) by betraying their Makhnovist allies on two previous occasions. Clearly, Bolshevik politics and ideology played a key role in all these decisions. They were **not** driven by terrible objective circumstances (indeed, they made them worse).

Dictatorship of the Party

To understand why the Bolsheviks betrayed the Makhnovists, we need to consider the very factor which Rees is at pains to downplay – the “subjective” role of Bolshevik ideology.

Ever since taking power in 1917, the Bolsheviks had become increasingly alienated from the working class (something Rees simply fails to acknowledge). Rather than subject themselves to soviet democracy, the Bolsheviks held on to power by any means necessary. The spring and summer of 1918 saw “great Bolshevik losses in the soviet elections.” The Bolsheviks forcibly disbanded such soviets. They continually postponed elections and “pack[ed] local soviets once they could not longer count on an electoral majority” by giving representation to organisations they dominated which made workplace elections meaningless.⁹ The regime remained “soviet” in name only.

These events occurred *before* the start of civil war. However Rees argues that “the revolution and civil war ... were one” and so the Bolsheviks cannot be blamed for any of their actions. This is incredulous. Lenin correctly argued that revolutions “give rise to exceptionally complicated circumstances.” He stressed that revolution was “the sharpest, most furious, desperate class war and civil war. Not a single great revolution in history has escaped civil war. No one who does not live in a shell could imagine that civil war is conceivable without exceptionally complicated circumstances.”¹⁰ If Bolshevism cannot handle the inevitable, then it is one more reason to reject it!

Therefore to blame the inevitable effects of revolution for the degeneration of Bolshevism is question begging. Rees argues that it “is a tribute to the power of the Bolsheviks’ politics and organisation that they took the measures necessary.” Let us consider these measures, the politics Rees claims had no effect on the outcome of the revolution. In the same year as the Bolsheviks twice turned on the Makhnovists, Trotsky (in *Terrorism and Communism*) argued that there was “no substitution at all” when “the power of the party” replaces “the power of the working class.”¹¹ Zinoviev argued at the 2nd Congress of the Comintern that “the dictatorship of the proletariat is at the same time the dictatorship of the Communist Party.”¹² Lenin had argued in 1919 that “we are reproached with having established a dictatorship of one party ... we say, ‘Yes, it is a dictatorship of one party! This is what we stand for and we shall not shift from that position ...

⁹ Samuel Farber, *Before Stalinism*, pp. 23–4, p. 22 and p. 33

¹⁰ *Will the Bolsheviks Maintain Power?*, p. 80 and p. 81

¹¹ Trotsky stressed that “it can be said with complete justice that the dictatorship of the Soviets became possible only by means of the dictatorship of the party. It is thanks to the ... party ... [that] the Soviets ... [became] transformed from shapeless parliaments of labour into the apparatus of the supremacy of labour.” In 1937, he was still arguing this: “Those who propose the abstraction of Soviets to the party dictatorship should understand that only thanks to the party dictatorship were the Soviets able to lift themselves out of the mud of reformism and attain the state form of the proletariat.” [“Stalinism and Bolshevism,” www.marxists.org]

¹² *Proceedings and Documents of the Second Congress 1920*, vol. 1, p. 152

“¹³ By the end of the civil war, he was arguing that “the dictatorship of the proletariat cannot be exercised through an organisation embracing the whole of the class ... It can be exercised only by a vanguard.” This was applicable to “all capitalist countries.”¹⁴

This was applied to the Makhnovists. The final agreement which the Bolsheviks ripped-up consisted of military and political sections. The political agreement just gave the Makhnovists and anarchists the rights (such as freedom of expression and participation in soviet elections) they should have had according to the Soviet Constitution! The Makhnovists, however, insisted on a fourth point of the political agreement, which was never ratified by the Bolsheviks as it was “absolutely unacceptable to the dictatorship of the proletariat”¹⁵ :

“One of the basic principles of the Makhno movement being the struggle for the self-administration of the toilers, the Partisan Army brings up a fourth point: in the region of the Makhno movement, the worker and peasant population is to organise and maintain its own free institutions for economic and political self-administration; this region is subsequently federated with Soviet republics by means of agreements freely negotiated with the appropriate Soviet governmental organ.”¹⁶

This idea of worker and peasant self-management, like soviet democracy, could not be reconciled with the Bolshevik party dictatorship as the expression of “the dictatorship of the proletariat.” As such, Bolshevik policy explains the betrayals of the Makhnovists. A libertarian alternative to Bolshevism could not be tolerated and was crushed.

Rees argues that the Bolsheviks were “inclined to make a virtue of necessity, to claim that the harsh measures of the civil war were the epitome of socialism.” The question arises of how committed to socialist values were the leading Bolsheviks when they could eliminate soviet, military and workplace democracy, raise the dictatorship of their party to an ideological truism and argue that this was socialism? Does Rees *really* believe that such perspectives had no impact on how the Bolsheviks acted during the Revolution? The betrayal of the Makhnovists can only be understood in terms of the “subjective factor” Rees seeks to ignore. If you think, as the Bolsheviks clearly did, that the dictatorship of the proletariat equalled the dictatorship of the party, then anything which threatened the rule of the party had to be destroyed. Whether this was soviet democracy or the Makhnovists did not matter.

Thus, Rees’s underlying objective is to prove that the **politics** of the Bolsheviks had no influence on the outcome of the revolution – it was a product purely of “objective factors.” He also subscribes to the contradictory idea that Bolshevik politics were essential for the success of that revolution. The facts of the matter are that people are faced with choices, choices that arise from the objective conditions that they face. What decisions they make will be influenced by the ideas they hold – they will **not** occur automatically, as if people were on auto-pilot – and their ideas

¹³ *Collected Works*, vol. 29, p. 535

¹⁴ *Collected Works*, vol. 32, p. 21. This was obvious considered a key lesson of the revolution, as Trotsky was still speaking about the “*objective necessity*” of “*revolutionary dictatorship of a proletarian party*” due “*the heterogeneity of the revolutionary class*” in 1937! “*Abstractly speaking,*” he stressed, “*it would be very well if the party dictatorship could be replaced by the ‘dictatorship’ of the whole toiling people without any party, but this presupposes such a high level of political development among the masses that it can never be achieved under capitalist conditions.*” [*Writings 1936–37*, pp. 513–4]

¹⁵ Bolshevik military historian, quoted by Palij, *Op. Cit.*, p. 225

¹⁶ quoted by Palij, *Op. Cit.*, p. 224

are shaped by the social relationships they experience. Thus, someone placed into a position of power over others will act in certain ways, have a certain world view, which would be alien to someone subject to egalitarian social relations.

So, obviously, political ideas matter, particularly during a revolution. Someone in favour of centralisation, centralised power and who equates party rule with class rule (like Lenin and Trotsky), will act in ways (and create structures) totally different from someone who believes in decentralisation, federalism and working class autonomy (like the Makhnovists). As the *practice* of the Makhnovists proves, Rees' basic thesis is false. Faced with the same "objective factors," the Makhnovists did everything they could to promote working class self-management and did not replace working class power with the power of "revolutionaries."

II

In the first part of "In Defence of the Truth," we proved how SWP member John Rees rewrote the history of the anarchist influenced Makhnovist movement and its relationship with the Bolsheviks in his article "In Defence of October." (**International Socialism**, no. 52). Using sources that clearly argued that the Bolsheviks broke with and attacked the Makhnovists, Rees presented a radically different version of the events and portrayed the Makhnovists as the guilty party. Moreover, we indicated that the actions of the Bolsheviks could only be explained in terms of their ideology which, at the time, was proclaiming to the world the necessity of the dictatorship of the party during a proletarian revolution.

Rees's rewriting of history was one part of a double attack on the Makhnovists. Not intent in rewriting history, he also sought to discredit the Makhnovists by attacking their ideas. As we prove in this section, this attempt fails. Rather than present an honest account of the Makhnovist programme and ideas, Rees simply abuses his source material again to present a radically false picture of Makhnovist theory and practice. Once his distortions are corrected, it quickly becomes clear that the Makhnovists provided a real libertarian alternative to the authoritarianism of Bolshevism.

Anarchism in practice

After distorting Makhnovist relations with the Bolsheviks, Rees moves onto distorting the social-political ideas and practice of the Makhnovists. Like his account of military aspects of the Makhnovist movement, his account of its theoretical ideas and its attempts to apply them again abuse the facts.

For example, Rees states that under the Makhnovists "[p]apers could be published, but the Bolshevik and Left Socialist Revolutionary press were not allowed to call for revolution" and references Palij's book. Looking at the page in question, we discover a somewhat different account. What the Makhnovists *actually* "prohibited" was these parties "propagat[ing] armed uprisings against the Makhnovist movement."¹⁷ A clear rewriting of the source material. Significantly, Palij notes that "freedom of speech, press, assembly and association" was implemented under the Makhnovists "[i]n contrast to the Bolshevik regime."

¹⁷ Palij, *The Anarchism of Nestor Makhno*, p. 152

However, this distortion of the source material **does** give us an insight into the mentality of Leninism. After all when the Makhnovists entered a city or town they “immediately announced to the population that the army did not intend to exercise political authority.” The workers and peasants were to set up soviets “that would carry out the will and orders of their constituents” as well as “organis[ing] their own self-defence force against counter-revolution and banditry.” These political changes were matched in the economic sphere, with the “holdings of the landlords, the monasteries and the state, including all livestock and goods, were to be transferred to the peasants” and “all factories, plants, mines, and other means of production were to become property of all the workers under control of their professional unions.”¹⁸

As the Makhnovists were clearly defending working class and peasant self-government, a call for “revolution” (i.e. “armed uprisings against the Makhno movement”) could only mean a coup to install a Bolshevik party dictatorship and the end of working class autonomy. Arshinov makes the situation clear:

“The only restriction that the Makhnovists considered necessary to impose on the Bolsheviks, the left Socialist Revolutionaries and other statistes was a prohibition on the formation of those ‘revolutionary committees’ which sought to impose a dictatorship over the people. In Aleksandrovsk and Ekaterinoslav, right after the occupation of these cities by the Makhnovists, the Bolsheviks hastened to organise **Revkoms (Revolutionary Committees)** seeking to organise their political power and govern the population ... Makhno advised them to go and take up some honest trade instead of seeking to impose their will on the workers ... In this context the Makhnovists’ attitude was completely justified and consistent. To protect the full freedom of speech, press, and organisation, they had to take measures against formations which sought to stifle this freedom, to suppress other organisations, and to impose their will and dictatorial authority on the workers.”¹⁹

Little wonder Rees distorts his source and the issues, transforming a policy to defend the **real** revolution into one which banned a “call for revolution”! We should be grateful that he distorted the Makhnovist message for it allows us to indicate the dictatorial nature of the regime and politics Rees is defending.

Rees claims that “Makhno held elections, but no parties were allowed to participate in them.” This is probably derived from Palij’s comment that the free soviets would “carry out the will and orders of their constituents” and “[o]nly working people, not representatives of political parties, might join the soviets.”²⁰

Rees comments indicate that he is not familiar with the make-up of the soviets, which allowed various parties to acquire voting representation in the soviet executive committees (and so were not directly elected by the producers).²¹ In addition, Russian Anarchists had often attacked the use of “party lists” in soviet elections, which turned the soviets from working class organs into talking-shops.²² This use of party-lists meant that soviet delegates could be anyone. For example,

¹⁸ Palij, Op. Cit., p. 151

¹⁹ Arshinov, *The History of the Makhnovist Movement*, p. 154

²⁰ Palij, Op. Cit., p. 151

²¹ Samuel Farber, *Before Stalinism*, p. 31

²² Paul Avrich, *The Russian Anarchists*, p. 190

the leading left-wing Menshevik Martov recounts that in early 1920 a chemical factory “put up Lenin against me as a candidate [to the Moscow soviet]. I received seventy-six votes he-eight (in an open vote).”²³ How would either of these two intellectuals actually know and reflect the concerns and interests of the workers they would be “delegates” of? If the soviets were meant to be the delegates of working people, then why should non-working class members of political parties be elected to a soviet?

As such, the Makhnovist ideas on soviets did not, in fact, mean that workers and peasants could **not** elect or send delegates who were members of political parties. They had no problems as such with delegates who happened to be working class party members. They did have problems with delegates representing only political parties, delegates who were not workers and soviets being ciphers covering party rule.

This can be seen from the fact that the Makhnovist Revolutionary Military Soviet created at the Olexandrivske congress in late 1919 had three Communists elected to it. Of the 18 worker delegates at that congress, six were Mensheviks and the remaining 12 included Communists²⁴ As such, the idea that free soviets excluding members of political parties is false – they were organised to stop parties dominating them. This could, of course, change. In the words of the Makhnovist reply to the first Bolshevik attempt to ban one of their congresses:

“The Revolutionary Military Council ... holds itself above the pressure and influence of all parties and only recognises the people who elected it. Its duty is to accomplish what the people have instructed it to do, and to create no obstacles to any left socialist party in the propagation of ideas. Consequently, if one day the Bolshevik idea succeeds among the workers, the Revolutionary Military Council ... will necessarily be replaced by another organisation, ‘more revolutionary’ and more Bolshevik.”²⁵

As such, the Makhnovists supported the right of working class self-determination, as expressed by one delegate to Huliai Pole conference in February 1919:

“No party has a right to usurp governmental power into its hands ... We want life, all problems, to be decided locally, not by order from any authority above; and all peasants and workers should decide their own fate, while those elected should only carry out the toilers wish.”²⁶

Therefore, Rees’ attempt to imply the Makhnovists were anti-democratic backfires on Bolshevism. The Russian soviets were no longer organs of working class power and had long since become little more than rubberstamps for the Bolshevik dictatorship. Under the Makhnovists, the soviets had independence and were made up of working people and executed the wishes of their electorate. If a worker who was a member of a political party could convince their work mates of their ideas, the delegate would reflect the decisions of the mass assembly. The input of political parties would exist in proportion to their influence and their domination eliminated.

²³ quoted by Israel Getzler, *Martov*, p. 202

²⁴ Michael Malet, *Nestor Makhno in the Russian Revolution*, p. 111, p. 124

²⁵ quoted by Arshinov, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 103–4

²⁶ quoted by Palij, *Op. Cit.*, p. 154

Making the trails run on time

Rees tries to paint the Makhnovists as anti-working class. This is the core of his dismissal of them as a “libertarian alternative to the Bolsheviks.” He gives the example of Makhno’s advice to railway workers in Aleksandrovsk “who had not been paid for many weeks” that they should “simply charge passengers a fair price and so generate their own wages.” He states that this “advice aimed at reproducing the petit-bourgeois patterns of the countryside.” Two points can be raised to this argument.

Firstly, we should highlight the Bolshevik (and so, presumably, “proletarian”) patterns imposed on the railway workers. Trotsky simply “plac[ed] the railwaymen and the personal of the repair workshops under martial law” and “summarily ousted” the leaders of the railwaymen’s trade union when they objected.” The Central Administrative Body of Railways (Tsektran) he created was run by him “along strictly military and bureaucratic lines.” In other words, he applied his ideas on the “militarisation of labour” in full.²⁷ Compared to this, only an ideologue could suggest that Makhno’s advice (and it was advice, not a decree imposed from above, as was Trotsky’s) can be considered worse. Indeed, by being based on workers’ self-management it was infinitely more socialist than the militarised Bolshevik state capitalist system.

Secondly, Rees fails to understand the nature of anarchism. Anarchism argues that it is up to working class people to organise their own activities. This meant that, ultimately, it was up to the railway workers **themselves** (in association with other workers) to organise their own work and industry. Rather than being imposed by a few leaders, **real** socialism can only come from below, built by working people by their own efforts and own class organisations. Anarchists can suggest ideas and solutions, but ultimately its up to workers (and peasants) to organise their own affairs. Thus, rather than being a source of condemnation, Makhno’s comments should be considered as praiseworthy as they were made in a spirit of equality and were based on encouraging workers’ self-management.

However, the best reply to Rees is simply the fact that after holding a “general conference of the workers of the city” at which it was “proposed that the workers organise the life of the city and the functioning of the factories with their own forces and their own organisations” based on “the principles of self-management,” the “[r]ailroad workers took the first step in this direction” by “form[ing] a committee charged with organising the railway network of the region.”²⁸

Peasants and revolution

Rees states that the Makhnovists “did not disturb the age old class structure of the countryside” and that the “real basis of Makhno’s support was not his anarchism, but his opposition to grain requisitioning and his determination not to disturb the peasant economy.” He quotes Palij:

“Makhno had not put an end to the agricultural inequalities. His aim was to avoid conflicts with the villages and to maintain a sort of united front of the entire peasantry.”

Needless to say, Rees would have a fit if it were suggested that the basis of Bolshevik support was not their socialism, but their opposition to the world war! However, this is a side issue as

²⁷ M. Brinton, *The Bolsheviks and Workers’ Control*, p. 67

²⁸ Arshinov, *Op. Cit.*, p. 149

we can demolish Rees' argument simply by showing how he selectively quotes from Palij's work. Here is the actual context of the (corrected) quote:

“Peasants' economic conditions in the region of the Makhno movement were greatly improved at the expense of the estates of the landlords, the church, monasteries, and the richest peasants, but Makhno had not put an end to the agricultural inequalities. His aim was to avoid conflicts within the villages and to maintain a sort of united front of the entire peasantry.”²⁹

Rees has, again, distorted his source material, conveniently missing out the information that Makhno had most definitely “disturbed” the peasant economy at the expense of the rich and fundamentally transformed the “age old class structure”! In fact, “Makhno and his associates brought sociopolitical issues into the daily life of the people, who in turn supported the expropriation of large estates.” The official Makhnovist position was, of course, that the “holdings of the landlords, the monasteries, and the state, including all livestock and goods, were to be transferred to the peasants.” At the second congress of workers, peasants and insurgents held in February, 1919, it was resolved that “all land be transferred to the hands of toiling peasants ... according to the norm of equal distribution.”³⁰ This meant that every peasant family had as much land as they could cultivate without the use of hired labour.

That the Makhnovist policy was correct can be seen from the fact that the Bolsheviks changed their policies and brought them in line with the Makhnovist one. The initial Bolshevik policy meet with “peasant resistance” and their “agricultural policy and terrorism brought about a strong reaction against the Bolshevik regime” and by the “middle of 1919, all peasants, rich and poor, distrusted the Bolsheviks.” In February, 1920, the Bolsheviks “modified their agricultural policy” by “distributing the formers landlords', state, and church lands among the peasants.”³¹ Which was a vindication of Makhnovist policy.

As such, it is ironic that Rees attacks the Makhnovists for not pursuing Bolshevik peasant policies. Considering their absolute *failure*, the fact that Makhno did not follow them is hardly cause for condemnation! Indeed, given the numerous anti-Bolshevik uprisings and large scale state repression they provoked, attacking the Makhnovists for not pursuing such insane policies is deeply ironic. After all, who in the middle of a Civil War makes matters worse for themselves by creating more enemies? Only the insane – or the Bolsheviks! We can also wonder just how sensible is it to “disturb” the economy that produces the food you eat. Given that Rees in part blames Bolshevik tyranny on the disruption of the economy, it seems incredulous that he faults Makhno for not adding to the chaos by failing to “disrupt the peasant economy”!

After distorting the source material once, Rees does it again. He states “by the spring of 1920” the local Bolsheviks “had reversed the policy towards the peasants and instituted Committees of Poor Peasants, these ‘hurt Makhno ... his heart hardened and he sometimes ordered executions.’ This policy helped the Bolshevik ascendancy.” Rees quotes Palij as evidence. We shall quote the same pages:

“Although they [the Bolsheviks] modified their agricultural policy by introducing on February 5, 1920, a new land law, distributing the former landlords', state and

²⁹ M. Palij, Op. Cit., p. 214

³⁰ Palij, Op. Cit., p. 71, p. 151 and p. 154

³¹ Palij, Op. Cit., p. 156 and p. 213

church lands among the peasants, they did not succeed in placating them because of the requisitions, which the peasants considered outright robbery ... Subsequently the Bolsheviks decided to introduce class warfare into the villages. A decree was issued on May 19, 1920, establishing 'Committees of the Poor' ... Authority in the villages was delegated to the committees, which assisted the Bolsheviks in seizing the surplus grain ... The establishment of Committees of the Poor was painful to Makhno because they became not only part of the Bolshevik administrative apparatus the peasants opposed, but also informers helping the Bolshevik secret police in its persecution of the partisans, their families and supporters, even to the extent of hunting down and executing wounded partisans ... Consequently, Makhno's 'heart hardened and he sometimes ordered executions where some generosity would have bestowed more credit upon him and his movement. That the Bolsheviks preceded him with the bad example was no excuse. For he claimed to be fighting for a better cause.' Although the committees in time gave the Bolsheviks a hold on every village, their abuse of power disorganised and slowed down agricultural life ... This policy of terror and exploitation turned almost all segments of Ukrainian society against the Bolsheviks, substantially strengthened the Makhno movement, and consequently facilitated the advance of the reorganised anti-Bolshevik force of General Wrangel from the Crimea into South Ukraine, the Makhno region."³²

Amazing what a "... can hide, is it not! Rees turns an account which is an indictment of Bolshevik policy into a victory and transforms it so that the victims are portrayed as the villains! Given the actual record of the Bolsheviks attempts to break up what they considered the "age old class structure" of the villages with the "Committees of the Poor," it is clear why Rees distorts his source. All in all, the Makhnovist policies were clearly the most successful as regards the peasantry. They broke up the class system in the countryside by expropriating the ruling class and did not create new conflicts by artificially imposing themselves onto the villages.

Peasant Communes

After distorting the wealth of information on Makhnovist land policy, Rees turns to their attempts to form free agrarian communes. He argues that Makhno's attempts "to go beyond the traditional peasant economy were doomed" and quotes Makhno memoirs which state "the mass of the people did not go over" to his peasant communes, which only involved a few hundred families.

Looking at Makhno's memoirs a somewhat different picture appears. Makhno does state that "the mass of people did not over to it" but, significantly, he argues that this was because of "the advance of the German and Austrian armies, their [the peasants] own lack of organisation, and their inability to defend this order against the new 'revolutionary' and counter-revolutionary authorities. For this reason the toiling population of the district limited their real revolutionary activity to supporting in every way those bold spirits among them who had settled on the old estates [of the landlords] and organised their personal and economic life on free communal lines."³³

³² M. Palij, Op. Cit., pp. 213-4

³³ quoted by Paul Avrich, *The Anarchists in the Russian Revolution*, pp. 130-2

Of course, Rees failing to mention the “objective factors” facing these communes does distort their success (or lack of it). Soon after the communes were being set up, the area was occupied by Austrian troops and it was early 1919 before the situation was stable enough to allow their reintroduction. Conflict with the Whites and Bolsheviks resulted in their destruction in July 1919. In such circumstances, can it be surprising that only a minority of peasants got involved? Rather than praise the Makhnovists for positive social experimentation in difficult circumstances, Rees shows his ignorance of the objective conditions facing the Makhnovists. His concern for “objective factors” is distinctly selective.

Paper Decrees?

Ironically, Rees states that given the Makhnovist peasant base, it is “hardly surprising” that “much of Makhno’s libertarianism amounted to little more than paper decrees.” Ironically, the list of “paper decrees” he presents (when not false or distorted) are also failings associated with the Bolsheviks (and taken to more extreme degrees by them)! As such, his lambastes against the Makhnovists seem deeply hypocritical. After all, if the Bolshevik violations of principle can be blamed on “objective factors” then why not the Makhnovists?

However, rather than apply his main thesis to the Makhnovists, he attempts to ground the few deviations that exist between Makhnovist practice and theory in the peasant base of the army. This is an abuse of class analysis. After all, these deviations were also shared by the Bolsheviks (although they did not even pay lip service to the ideals raised by the Makhnovists). Take, for example, the election of commanders. The Makhnovists applied this principle extensively but not completely. The Bolsheviks abolished it by decree (and did not blame it on “exceptional circumstances” nor consider it as a “retreat” as Rees asserts). Unlike the Red Army, Makhnovist policy was decided by mass assemblies and conferences. Now, if Rees “class analysis” of the limitations of the Makhnovists was true, does this mean that an army of a regime with a proletarian base (as he considers the Bolshevik regime) cannot have elected commanders? Similarly, his attack on Makhno’s advice to the railway workers suggests, as noted above, that a “proletarian” regime would be based on the militarisation of labour and **not** workers’ self-management. As such, his pathetic attempt at “class analysis” of the Makhnovists simply shows up the dictatorial nature of the Bolsheviks. If trying to live up to libertarian/democratic ideals but not totally succeeding is “petty-bourgeois” while dismissing those ideals totally in favour of top-down, autocratic hierarchies is “proletarian” then sane people would happily be labelled “petty-bourgeois”!

Conclusion

As should be clear by now, Rees’ account of the Makhnovist movement is deeply flawed. Rather than present an honest account of the movement, he abuses his sources to blacken its name. This is hardly surprising as an honest account of the movement would undermine his basic argument that Bolshevik policies played no role in the degeneration of the Russian Revolution.

Faced with the same “objective factors,” the Makhnovists did not embrace the Bolshevik mantra of party dictatorship. They regularly held workers, peasant and partisan assemblies and conferences to discuss the development of the revolution, promoted freedom of speech, organisation and assembly and did all they could to promote self-management in difficult circumstances. In contrast, the Bolsheviks continually violated socialist principles and created increasingly bizarre

ideological justifications for them. And Rees states that “[n]either Makhno’s social programme nor his political regime could provide an alternative to the Bolsheviks”!

This indicates the weakness of Rees’ main thesis as, clearly, the “subjective factor” of Bolshevik politics cannot be ignored or downplayed. Rees states somewhat incredulously that the “degree by which workers can ‘make their own history’ depends on the weight of objective factors bearing down on them. At the height of the revolutionary wave such freedom can be considerable, in the concentration camp it can be reduced to virtually zero.” Post-October 1917, one of the key “objective factors” bearing down on the workers was, quite simply, the Bolshevik ideology itself. Like the US officer in Vietnam who destroyed a village in order to save it, the Bolsheviks destroyed the revolution in order to save it (or, more correctly, their own hold on power, which they identified with the revolution). As the experience of the Makhnovists showed, there was no objective factors stopping the free election of soviets, the calling of workers and peasants conferences to make policy, and protecting the *real* gains of revolution.

Little wonder Rees spent so much time lying about the Makhnovists.

III

In the first two parts our article, we have recounted how John Rees of the SWP distorted the history and politics of the Makhnovist movement during the Russian Revolution (“*In Defence of October*”, **International Socialism**, no. 52). We proved how Rees had misused his source material to present a clearly dishonest account of the anarchist influenced peasant army and how he failed to indicate how Bolshevik ideology played a key role in Bolshevik betrayals of that movement.

The Makhnovists are not the only working class movement misrepresented by Rees. He also turns his attention on the Kronstadt revolt of 1921. Kronstadt was a naval base and town which played a key role in all three Russian Revolutions (i.e. in 1905 and 1917). In 1917, the Kronstadt sailors were considered the vanguard of the Russian masses. In February 1921 they rose in revolt against the Bolshevik regime, demanding (among other things) the end of Bolshevik dictatorship, free soviet elections and freedom of speech, assembly, press and organisation for working people. The Bolsheviks, in return, labelled the revolt as “White Guardist” (i.e. counter-revolutionary) and repressed it.

The Kronstadt revolt is considered a key turning point in the Russian revolution. As it occurred after the end of the Civil War, its repression cannot be blamed on the need to defeat the Whites (as had other repression of working class strikes and protests). For anarchists like Alexander Berkman and Emma Goldman, it was the final straw and they had to recognise that the Russian Revolution was dead.

Knowing this, Rees attempts to justify Bolshevik repression of this revolt. He does this in four ways. Firstly, by arguing that the revolutionary sailors of 1917 had been replaced by raw peasant recruits. Secondly, that the revolt had “the same root as the peasant rebellions” of Makhno, Antonov and others. Thirdly, by portraying the Kronstadt sailors as responsible for the Bolsheviks actions by refusing to negotiate. Fourthly, by arguing that the Kronstadt revolt was pro-White to some degree.

All four rationales are false. This is easy to prove, it is just a case of using the same references that Rees uses to build his case. If this is done, it will quickly be seen that Rees distorts the

evidence, selecting quotes out of context to prove his case. As with his account of the Makhnovists (see parts I and II), it is clear that Rees has distorted his source material deliberately to paint a radically false picture of the Kronstadt revolt.

We discuss the first two rationales in this part, the last two in part IV.

A Peasant revolt?

Rees is at pains to portray the Kronstadt rebellion as (essentially) a revolt by peasants, in favour of peasant interests. As with the Makhnovists, he thinks that by painting the Kronstadders as being non- or anti-working class then this, somehow, justifies the Bolshevik regime and its policies. Hence Rees argues that although “preceded by a wave of serious but quickly resolved strikes, the motivation of the Kronstadt rebellion was much closer to that of the peasantry than it was to dissatisfaction among what remained of the urban working class.” However, the facts of the matter are different.

Firstly, there is the question of the social context in which revolt took place. Rees fails to present an accurate account of the strike wave which preceded (and inspired) the Kronstadt revolt. Secondly, he fails to note the obvious similarities of the strikers demands and those raised by Kronstadt. This is unsurprising, as to do so would totally undermine his case. We will look at each issue in turn, using the same sources that Rees uses for evidence for his case.

Looking at these “serious but quickly resolved strikes,” we can say that Rees downplays the importance of these strikes in the revolt and simply ignores how they were “quickly resolved.” By failing to mention these issues Rees quite clearly deliberately falsifies the facts.

The Kronstadt revolt was sparked off by the strikes and occurred in solidarity with them. The strikes started with “*street demonstrations*” which “*were heralded by a rash of protest meetings in Petrograd’s numerous but depleted factories and shops.*” Speakers “*called for an end to grain requisitioning, the removal of roadblocks, the abolition of privileged rations, and permission to barter personal possessions for food.*” On the 24th of February, the day after a workplace meeting, the Trubochny factory workforce downed tools and walked out the factory. Additional workers from nearby factories joined in. The crowd of 2,000 was dispersed by armed military cadets. The next day, the Trubochny workers again took to the streets and visited other workplaces, bringing them out on strike too.³⁴

A three-man Defence Committee was formed and Zinoviev “*proclaimed martial law*” on February 24th. A curfew of 11pm was proclaimed, all meetings and gatherings (indoor and out) were banned unless approved of by the Defence Committee and all infringements would be dealt with according to military law.³⁵

As part of this process of repression, the Bolshevik government had to rely on the *kursanty* (Communist officer cadets) as the local garrisons had been caught up the general ferment and could not be relied upon to carry out the government’s orders. Hundreds of *kursanty* were called in from neighbouring military academies to patrol the city. “*Overnight Petrograd became an armed camp. In every quarter pedestrians were stopped and their documents checked ... the curfew [was] strictly enforced.*” The Petrograd Cheka made widespread arrests.³⁶

³⁴ Paul Avrich, *Kronstadt 1921*, pp. 37–8

³⁵ Avrich, Op. Cit., p. 39

³⁶ Avrich, Op. Cit., pp. 46–7

The Bolsheviks also stepped up their propaganda drive. The strikers were warned not to play into the hands of the counterrevolution. As well as their normal press, popular party members were sent to agitate in the streets, factories and barracks. They also made a series of concessions such as providing extra rations. On March 1st (after the Kronstadt revolt had started) the Petrograd soviet announced the withdrawal of all road-blocks and demobilised the Red Army soldiers assigned to labour duties in Petrograd.³⁷

The Bolshevik slandering of the Kronstadt rebels cannot be ignored, as Rees does. Victor Serge, a French anarchist turned Bolshevik and a favourite Rees source, remembered that he was first told that “Kronstadt is in the hands of the Whites” and that “[s]mall posters stuck on the walls in the still empty streets proclaimed that the counter-revolutionary General Kozlovsky had seized Kronstadt through conspiracy and treason.” Later the “truth seeped through little by little, past the smokescreen put out by the Press, which was positively berserk with lies” (indeed, he states that the Bolshevik press “lied systematically”). He found out that the Bolshevik’s official line was “an atrocious lie” and that “the sailors had mutinied, it was a naval revolt led by the Soviet.” However, the “worse of it all was that we were paralysed by the official falsehoods. It had never happened before that our Party should lie to us like this. ‘It’s necessary for the benefit of the public,’ said some ... the strike [in Petrograd] was now practically general.”³⁸

Thus a combination of force, propaganda and concessions was used to defeat the strike (which quickly became a general strike). As Paul Avrich notes, “there is no denying that the application of military force and the widespread arrests, not to speak of the tireless propaganda waged by the authorities had been indispensable in restoring order. Particularly impressive in this regard was the discipline shown by the local party organisation. Setting aside their internal disputes, the Petrograd Bolsheviks swiftly closed ranks and proceeded to carry out the unpleasant task of repression with efficiency and dispatch.”³⁹

Ignoring the Bolshevik repression and systematically lying against Kronstadt, Rees argues that the “Bolshevik regime still rested on the shattered remnants of the working class. The Kronstadt sailors’ appeals to the Petrograd workers had met with little or no response.”

One has to wonder what planet Rees is on. After all, **if** the Bolsheviks **had** rested on the “shattered remnants of the working class” then they would **not** have had to turn Petrograd into an armed camp, repress the strikes, impose martial law and arrest militant workers. The Kronstadt sailors appeals “met with little or no response” due to the Bolshevik coercion exercised in those fateful days. To not mention the Bolshevik repression in Petrograd is to deliberately deceive the reader. That the Kronstadt demands would have met with strong response in Petrograd can be seen from the actions of the Bolsheviks (who did not rest upon the workers but rather arrested them).

Thus Rees’ account has no bearing to the reality of the situation in Petrograd nor to the history of the revolt itself.

Peasant demands?

It was the labour protests and their repression which started the events in Kronstadt. While many sailors had read and listened to the complaints of their relatives in the villages and had

³⁷ Avrich, Op. Cit., pp. 48–9

³⁸ *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, pp. 124–6

³⁹ Avrich, Op. Cit., p. 50

protested on their behalf to the Soviet authorities, it took the Petrograd strikes to be the catalyst for the revolt. Moreover, they had other political reasons for protesting against the policies of the government. Navy democracy had been abolished by decree and the soviets had been turned into fig-leaves of party dictatorship.

Unsurprisingly, the crew of the battleships *Petropavlovsk* and *Sevastopol* decided to act once “the news of strikes, lockouts, mass arrests and martial law” in Petrograd reached them. They “held a joint emergency meeting in the face of protests and threats of their commissars ... [and] elected a fact-finding delegation of thirty-two sailors which, on 27 February, proceeded to Petrograd and made the round of the factories... They found the workers whom they addressed and questioned too frightened to speak up in the presence of the hosts of Communist factory guards, trade union officials, party committee men and Chekists.”⁴⁰

The delegation returned the next day and reported its findings to a general meeting of the ship’s crews and adopted the resolutions which were to be the basis of the revolt.

It should be noted that Rees (like most Leninists) does not provide even a summary of the 15 point programme of the revolt. He asserts that the “sailors represented the exasperated of the peasantry with the War Communism regime” while, rather lamely, noting that “no other peasant insurrection reproduced the Kronstadters demands.” By not providing the demands of the rebels or the strikers it is impossible for the reader to evaluate this (contradictory) assertion.

The full list of demands are as follows:

- “1. Immediate new elections to the Soviets. The present Soviets no longer express the wishes of the workers and peasants. The new elections should be by secret ballot, and should be preceded by free electoral propaganda.
2. Freedom of speech and of the press for workers and peasants, for the Anarchists, and for the Left Socialist parties.
3. The right of assembly, and freedom for trade union and peasant organisations.
4. The organisation, at the latest on 10th March 1921, of a Conference of non-Party workers, soldiers and sailors of Petrograd, Kronstadt and the Petrograd District.
5. The liberation of all political prisoners of the Socialist parties, and of all imprisoned workers and peasants, soldiers and sailors belonging to working class and peasant organisations.
6. The election of a commission to look into the dossiers of all those detained in prisons and concentration camps.
7. The abolition of all political sections in the armed forces. No political party should have privileges for the propagation of its ideas, or receive State subsidies to this end. In the place of the political sections various cultural groups should be set up, deriving resources from the State.
8. The immediate abolition of the militia detachments set up between towns and countryside.
9. The equalisation of rations for all workers, except those engaged in dangerous or unhealthy jobs.

⁴⁰ I. Gelzter, *Kronstadt 1917–1921*, p. 212

10. *The abolition of Party combat detachments in all military groups. The abolition of Party guards in factories and enterprises. If guards are required, they should be nominated, taking into account the views of the workers.*

11. *The granting to the peasants of freedom of action on their own soil, and of the right to own cattle, provided they look after them themselves and do not employ hired labour.*

12. *We request that all military units and officer trainee groups associate themselves with this resolution.*

13. *We demand that the Press give proper publicity to this resolution.*

14. *We demand the institution of mobile workers' control groups.*

15. *We demand that handicraft production be authorised provided it does not utilise wage labour.*⁴¹

We can see that these demands echoed those raised during the Moscow and Petrograd strikes that preceded the Kronstadt revolt. For example, Paul Avrich records that the demands raised in the February strikes included “removal of roadblocks, permission to make foraging trips into the countryside and to trade freely with the villagers, [and] elimination of privileged rations for special categories of working men.” The workers also “wanted the special guards of armed Bolsheviks, who carried out a purely police function, withdrawn from the factories” and raised “pleas for the restoration of political and civil rights.” One unsigned manifesto which appeared argued that “the workers and peasants need freedom. They do not want to live by the decrees of the Bolsheviks. They want to control their own destinies.” It urged the strikers to demand the liberation of all arrested socialists and nonparty workers, abolition of martial law, freedom of speech, press and assembly for all who labour, free elections of factory committees, trade unions, and soviets.⁴²

As can be seen, these demands related almost directly to points 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 9, 10, 11 and 13 of the Kronstadt demands. As Avrich argues, the Kronstadt demands “echoed the discontents not only of the Baltic Fleet but of the mass of Russians in towns and villages throughout the country. Themselves of plebeian stock, the sailors wanted relief for their peasant and worker kinfolk. Indeed, of the resolution’s 15 points, only one — the abolition of the political departments in the fleet — applied specifically to their own situation. The remainder ... was a broadside aimed at the policies of War Communism, the justification of which, in the eyes of the sailors and of the population at large, had long since vanished.” Avrich argues that many of the sailors had returned home on leave to see the plight of the villagers with their own eyes played at part in framing the resolution (particularly of point 11, the **only** peasant specific demand raised) but “[b]y the same token, the sailors’ inspection tour of Petrograd’s factories may account for their inclusion of the workingmen’s chief demands — the abolition of road-blocks, of privileged rations, and of armed factory squads — in their program.”⁴³ Simply put, the Kronstadt resolution merely reiterated long standing workers’ demands.

As can be seen, a far stronger case can be made that the “motivation” of the rebels were far closer to “dissatisfaction of the urban working class” than “that of the peasantry.” This can be seen both from the demands raised and the fact they were raised after a delegation of sailors had returned from visiting Petrograd.

⁴¹ quoted by Ida Mett, *The Kronstadt Revolt*, pp. 37–8

⁴² Avrich, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 42–3

⁴³ Avrich, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 74–5

This is, ironically, implicitly confirmed by Rees himself, who notes that “*no other peasant insurrection reproduced the Kronstadters’ demands.*” If, as he maintained two pages previously, the Kronstadt rebellion’s motivation was “closer to that of the peasantry,” then why did no other “peasant insurrection” reproduce their demands? Perhaps because the Kronstadt revolt was **not** a peasant insurrection but rather a revolt by the politicised sailors in solidarity with striking workers?

Clearly Rees’ account leaves a lot to be desired! No mention that the strikes were “*resolved*” by force nor that the Kronstadt revolt was not only “*preceded*” by the strikes but was in **solidarity with them** and raised many of the same demands! Not that Rees is unaware of these facts — they are contained in the very books he uses for evidence.

Changing composition or changing the facts?

The conclusion that the Kronstadt revolt reflected interests other than peasant ones is one that Rees is at pains to avoid. A major aspect of his account of Kronstadt is to prove that the sailors of 1921 were not those of 1917. As he puts it, “the composition of the garrison had changed” because “the peasants had increased their weight in the Kronstadt.” He apparently presents evidence to support this argument. Sadly, on close inspection Rees’ evidence falls apart as it soon becomes clear that he has simply cherry-picked quotes to support his case, ignoring evidence from the same sources which contradicts it.

Rees argues as follows:

“In September and October 1920 the writer and the Bolshevik party lecturer Ieronymus Yasinsky went to Kronstadt to lecture 400 naval recruits. They were ‘straight from the plough’. And he was shocked to find that many, ‘including a few party members, were politically illiterate, worlds removed from the highly politicised veteran Kronstadt sailors who had deeply impressed him’. Yasinsky worried that those steeled in the revolutionary fire’ would be replaced by ‘inexperienced freshly mobilised young sailors.’”

This quote is referenced to Israel Getzler’s **Kronstadt 1917–1921**. Rees account is a fair version of the first half of Yasinsky’s report. The quote however continues exactly as reproduced below:

“Yasinsky was apprehensive about the future when, ‘sooner or later, Kronstadt’s veteran sailors, who were steeled in revolutionary fire and had acquired a clear revolutionary world-view would be replaced by inexperienced, freshly mobilised young sailors’. Still he comforted himself with the hope that Kronstadt’s sailors would gradually infuse them with their ‘noble spirit of revolutionary self-dedication’ to which Soviet Russia owed so much. As for the present he felt reassured that ‘in Kronstadt the red sailor still predominates.’”⁴⁴

Rees handy ‘editing’ of this quote transforms it from one showing that three months before the rising that Kronstadt had retained its revolutionary spirit to one implying the garrison had indeed been replaced. The dishonesty is clear.

⁴⁴ Getzler, Op. Cit., p. 207

Rees tries to generate "[f]urther evidence of the changing class composition" by looking at the "social background of the Bolsheviks at the base." However, he goes on to contradict himself about the composition of the Bolshevik party at the time. On page 61 he says the "same figures for the Bolshevik party as a whole in 1921 are 28.7% peasants, 41% workers and 30.8% white collar and others". On page 66 however he says the figures at the end of the civil war (also 1921) were 10% factory workers, 25% army and 60% in "the government or party machine". An endnote says even of those classed as factory workers "most were in administration." The first set of figures is more useful for attacking Kronstadt and so is used.

What is the basis of Rees "further evidence"? Simply that in "September 1920, six months before the revolt, the Bolsheviks had 4,435 members at Kronstadt. Some 50 per cent of these were peasants, 40 percent workers and 10 percent intellectuals ... Thus the percentage of peasants in the party was considerably higher than nationally ... If we **assume** [my emphasis] that the Bolshevik party was more working class in composition than the base as a whole, then it seems **likely** [my emphasis] that the peasants had increased their weight in the Kronstadt, as Trotsky suggested."

So on the basis of an assumption, it may be "likely" that the "class composition of the garrison" had changed! Impressive "evidence" indeed!

Moreover, as evidence of **changing** class composition these figures are not very useful. This is because they do not compare the composition of the Kronstadt Bolsheviks in 1917 to those in 1921. Given that the Kronstadt base always had a high percentage of peasants in its ranks, it follows that in 1917 the percentage of Bolsheviks of peasant origin could have been higher than normal as well. If this was the case, then Rees argument falls. He is not comparing the appropriate figures.

It would have been very easy for Rees to inform his readers of the real facts concerning the changing composition of the Kronstadt garrison. He could quoted Getzler's work on this subject. Getzler notes that "by the end of 1919 thousands of veteran sailors, who had served on many fronts of the civil war and in the administrative network of the expanding Soviet state, had returned to the Baltic Fleet and to Kronstadt, most by way of remobilisation."⁴⁵ He goes on to argue that "Yasinsky's impression that veteran politicised Red sailor still predominated in Kronstadt at the end of 1920 is borne out by the hard statistical data available regarding the crews of the two major battleships" at Kronstadt. This demonstrates that the crew of the battleships **Petropavlovsk** and **Sevastopol**, which formed the core of the rising, were recruited into the navy before 1917, only 6.9% having been recruited between 1918 and 1921.⁴⁶ This information is on the same page as the earlier quotes Rees uses but are ignored by him. Unbelievably Rees even states "[w]e do not know how many new recruits arrived in the three months before Kronstadt erupted" in spite of quoting a source which indicates the composition of the two battleships which started the revolt!

Or, then again, he could have reported Samuel Farber's summary of Getzler's (and others) evidence. Rees rather lamely notes that Farber "does not look at the figures for the composition of the Bolsheviks" Why should he when he has the appropriate figures for the sailors? Here is Farber's account of the facts:

"this [the class composition] interpretation has failed to meet the historical test of the growing and relatively recent scholarship on the Russian Revolution... In fact, in 1921, a smaller proportion of Kronstadt sailors were of peasant social origin than was the case

⁴⁵ Getzler, Op. Cit., pp. 197-8

⁴⁶ Getzler, Op. Cit., p. 207

*of the Red Army troops supporting the government ... recently published data strongly suggest that the class composition of the ships and naval base had probably remained unchanged since before the Civil War. We now know that, given the war-time difficulties of training new people in the technical skills required in Russia's ultra-modern battleships, very few replacements had been sent to Kronstadt to take the place of the dead and injured sailors. Thus, at the end of the Civil War in late 1920, no less than 93.9 per cent of the members of the crews of the **Petropavlovsk** and the **Sevastopol** ... were recruited into the navy before and during the 1917 revolutions. In fact, 59 per cent of these crews joined the navy in the years 1914–16, while only 6.8 per cent had been recruited in the years 1918–21 ... of the approximately 10,000 recruits who were supposed to be trained to replenish the Kronstadt garrison, only a few more than 1,000 had arrived by the end of 1920, and those had been stationed not in Kronstadt, but in Petrograd, where they were supposed to be trained.”⁴⁷*

And Rees bemoans Farber for not looking at the Bolshevik membership figures! Yes, assumptions and “likely” conclusions drawn from assumptions are more important than hard statistical evidence!

In summary, Rees has distorted the source material on which he bases his argument. The evidence Rees musters for the claim that the “composition” of the Kronstadt sailors “had changed” between 1917 and 1921 is a useful indication of the general Leninist method when it comes to the Russian revolution.

Changing politics?

After stating “*if, for the sake of argument, we accept Sam Farber’s interpretation of the evidence*” (evidence Rees refuses to inform the reader of) Rees then tries to save his case. He states Farber’s “*point only has any validity if we take the statistics in isolation. But in reality this change [!] in composition acted on a fleet whose ties with the peasantry had recently been strengthened in other ways. In particular, the Kronstadt sailors had recently been granted leave for the first time since the civil war. Many returned to their villages and came face to face with the condition of the countryside and the trials of the peasantry faced with food detachments.*”

Of course, such an argument has **nothing to do with Rees original case**. Let us not forget that he argued that the class composition of the garrison had changed, **not** that its **political** composition had changed. Faced with overwhelming evidence against his case, he not only does not inform his readers of it, he changes his original argument!

So, what of this argument? It is hardly an impressive one. Let us not forget that the revolt came about in response to the wave of strikes in Petrograd, **not** a peasant revolt. Moreover, the demands of the revolt predominantly reflected workers demands, **not** peasant ones (as Rees himself implicitly acknowledges). Had the political perspectives in Kronstadt changed? The answer has to be no, they had not.

Firstly, we must point out that Kronstadt in 1917 was **never** dominated by the Bolsheviks. At Kronstadt, the Bolsheviks were always a minority and a “*radical populist coalition of Maximalists and Left SRs held sway, albeit precariously, within Kronstadt and its Soviet.*” The “*Bolshevisation*”

⁴⁷ Samuel Farber, *Before Stalinism*, pp. 192–3

of Kronstadt “and the destruction of its multi-party democracy was not due to internal developments and local Bolshevik strength, but decreed from outside and imposed by force.”⁴⁸

The Maximalists were occupied “a place in the revolutionary spectrum between the Left SR’s and the anarchists while sharing elements of both.” The anarchists influence “had always been strong within the fleet” and “the spirit of anarchism” had been “powerful in Kronstadt in 1917” and “had by no means dissipated” in 1921. Like the anarchists, the Maximalists “preached a doctrine of total revolution” and called for a “toilers’ soviet republic’ founded on freely elected soviets, with a minimum of central state authority. Politically, this was identical with the objective of the Kronstadters [in 1921], and ‘Power to the soviets but not the parties’ had originally been a Maximalist rallying-cry.”⁴⁹

Economically, the parallels “are no less striking.” They denounced grain requisitioning and demanded that “all the land be turned over to the peasants.” For industry they rejected the Bolshevik theory and practice of “workers’ control” over bourgeois administrators in favour of the “social organisation of production and its systematic direction by representatives of the toiling people.” Opposed to nationalisation and centralised state management in favour of socialisation and workers’ self-management of production. Little wonder he states that the “political group closest to the rebels in temperament and outlook were the SR Maximalists.” and stresses that Indeed, “[o]n nearly every important point the Kronstadt program, as set forth in the rebel *Izvestiia*, coincided with that of the Maximalists.”⁵⁰

Clearly, the political composition at Kronstadt had not changed much between 1917 and 1921. The demands of 1921 reflected the political traditions of Kronstadt, which were not, in the main, Bolshevik. The sailors supported soviet power in 1917, not party power, and they again raised that demand in 1921. In other words, the **political** composition of the garrison was the same as in 1917. Rees is clearly clutching at straws.

IV

In the first three parts our article, we have recounted how John Rees of the SWP distorted the history and politics of both the Makhnovist movement and Kronstadt revolt during the Russian Revolution (“*In Defence of October*”, **International Socialism**, no. 52). We proved how Rees had misused his source material to present a clearly dishonest account of social movements and how he failed to indicate how Bolshevik ideology played a key role in Bolshevik relationship with them.

In part III, we indicated how Rees had distorted his source material to show that the revolutionary sailors of 1917 had been replaced by raw peasant recruits and to portray the revolt as being a “peasant insurrection.” The facts show that a large number of the Kronstadt sailors had been at Kronstadt since 1917 and that the revolt had been in solidarity with striking workers and had repeated many of their demands.

Now we show how Rees distorts the evidence in order to portray the Kronstadt sailors as responsible for the Bolsheviks actions by refusing to negotiate. In the process he invents a demand

⁴⁸ Getzler, Op. Cit., p. 179 and p. 186

⁴⁹ Avrich, Op. Cit., p. 171, p. 168, p. 169 and p. 171

⁵⁰ Avrich, Op. Cit., pp. 171–2

and attributes to the Kronstadters. We also how that Rees' attempts to show that the Kronstadt revolt was pro-White is also based on the same lack of concern for his sources.

What were they fighting for?

While Rees fails to present the demands of the Kronstadt rebels, he does state that the Kronstadters insisted “*that they were fighting for a ‘third revolution’, freedom of expression and for ‘soviets without parties’*” While the Kronstadters did raise the anarchist slogan of the “third revolution” and call for freedom of expression, they did **not** call for “soviets with parties.” As Paul Avrich notes,

”Soviets without Communists’ was not, as is often maintained by both Soviet and non-Soviet writers, a Kronstadt slogan.”

Nor did they agitate under the banner “*soviets without parties.*” They argued for “*all power to the soviets and not to parties.*” Political parties were not to be excluded from the soviets, simply stopped from dominating them and substituting themselves for them. As Avrich notes, the Kronstadt program “*did allow a place for the Bolsheviks in the soviets, alongside the other left-wing organisations ... Communists ... participated in strength in the elected conference of delegate, which was the closest thing Kronstadt ever had to the free soviets of its dreams.*”⁵¹ Given that Rees quotes the slogan “soviets without parties,” the question arises which source does he use? Neither Avrich or Getzler in their in-depth analyses of Kronstadt mention this slogan, suggesting that Rees simply invented it.

Not intent in inventing Kronstadt demands, Rees goes one step further and tries to blame the Bolshevik repression of the revolt on the sailors themselves. He argues “*in Petrograd Zinoviev had already essentially withdrawn the most detested aspects of War Communism in response to the strikes.*” Needless to say, Zinoviev did not withdraw the **political** aspects of War Communism, just some of the **economic** ones and, as the Kronstadt revolt was mainly **political**, these concessions were not enough (indeed, Bolshevik repression directed against workers rights and opposition socialist and anarchist groups **increased**). He then states the Kronstadters “*response [to these concessions] was contained in their **What We Are Fighting For***” and quotes it as follows:

“there is no middle ground in the struggle against the Communists ... They give the appearance of making concessions: in Petrograd province road-block detachments have been removed and 10 million roubles have been allotted for the purchase of foodstuffs... But one must not be deceived ... No there can be no middle ground. Victory or death!”

What Rees fails to inform the reader is that this was written on March 8th, while the Bolsheviks had started military operations on the previous evening. Moreover, the fact the “*response*” clearly stated “*[w]ithout a single shot, without a drop of blood, the first step has been taken [of the “Third Revolution”]. The toilers do not need blood. They will shed it only at a moment of self-defence*” is not mentioned.⁵² In other words, the Kronstadt sailors reaffirmed their commitment to non-violent revolt. Any violence on their part was in self-defence against Bolshevik actions. Not that you would know that from Rees' work.

⁵¹ Avrich, Op. Cit., p. 181

⁵² Avrich, Op. Cit., p. 243

Pro-White?

The Kronstadters' rejected every offer of help from the National Centre and other obviously pro-White group (they did accept help towards the end of the rebellion from the Russian Red Cross when the food situation had become critical). Historian Israel Getzler stressed that "*the Kronstadters were extremely resentful of all gestures of sympathy and promises of help coming from the White-Guardist emigres.*" He quotes a Red Cross visitor who stated that Kronstadt "*will admit no White political party, no politician, with the exception of the Red Cross.*"⁵³

Avrich notes that the Kronstadter's "*passionately hated*" the Whites and that "*both during and afterwards in exile*" they "*indignantly rejected all government accusations of collaboration with counterrevolutionary groups either at home or abroad.*" As the Communists themselves acknowledged, no outside aid ever reached the insurgents.⁵⁴

In other words, there was no relationship between the revolt and the Whites.

Obviously aware of the sympathy which the Kronstadt rebels gain from most of the non-Leninist left (and from some critical Leninists), Rees tries to blacken their memory by associating them with the Whites. As he puts it, the obviously democratic and socialist demands raised by Kronstadt "*has convinced many historians that this revolt was fundamentally distinct from the White Rebellions.*" But this, apparently, is not the case as "*one must be careful to analyse the difference between the conscious aims of the rebels and the possible outcome of their actions.*"

He argues that "[h]ad the Kronstadters' demands for 'soviets without parties' been realised they would have expressed the ferocious, element hostility of the peasants to the Bolsheviks in particular and to the cities in general ... the Whites were the only remaining political force which could have profited." Ignoring the awkward facts that the Kronstadters raised no such demand and it was Bolshevik repression that had ensured that they and the Whites were the only "remaining political force" around, the question becomes whether Kronstadt was (objectively) pro-White.

Rees argues that net result of Kronstadt's "utopian programme and its class root" would have resulted in counter-revolution, something the Whites "sensed ... immediately." Ignoring (yet again!) some awkward facts (such as Rees' non-discussion of its programme, his invention of one of its slogans and the overwhelming evidence against Rees' "class root" argument), what can we make of this? What evidence does he present?

Rees argues that the Whites "had predicted a rising in Kronstadt and the White National Centre abroad strained might and main to provide food for the Kronstadters ... Indeed, the National Centre was already making plans for the forces of the French navy and those of General Wrangel, who still commanded 70,000 men in Turkey, to land in Kronstadt if the revolt were to succeed." He quotes a secret White "Memorandum" on Kronstadt as evidence for his claims. This is contained in Paul Avrich's book and so we turn to this in order to refute his claims.

The Memorandum does predict that a revolt would take place and also predicts that "even if the French Command and the Russian anti-Bolshevik organisations do not take part in the preparation and direction of the uprising, a revolt will take place all the same during the coming spring, but after a brief period of success it will be doomed." As regards the "plans" to transport French and Wrangel's troops to Kronstadt, the "Memorandum" states that the "Russian ant-Bolshevik organisations should hold the position that they must refrain from contributing to the success

⁵³ Avrich, Op. Cit., p. 187, p. 112 and p. 123

⁵⁴ Avrich, Op. Cit., p. 187, p. 112 and p. 123

of the Kronstadt rebellion if they do not have the full assurance that the French government has decided to take the appropriate steps in this regard,” the transporting of troops being point 4.⁵⁵ This, to state the obvious, is not “making plans ... to land” troops but rather the stating of essential preconditions for action.

The question is, of course, was this “Memorandum” actually implemented? Avrich rejects the idea that it explains the revolt:

“Nothing has come to light to show that the Secret Memorandum was ever put into practice or that any links had existed between the emigres and the sailors before the revolt. On the contrary, the rising bore the earmarks of spontaneity ... there was little in the behaviour of the rebels to suggest any careful advance preparation. Had there been a prearranged plan, surely the sailors would have waited a few weeks longer for the ice to melt ... The rebels, moreover, allowed Kalinin [a leading Communist] to return to Petrograd, though he would have made a valuable hostage. Further, no attempt was made to take the offensive ... Significant too, is the large number of Communists who took part in the movement...

“The Sailors needed no outside encouragement to raise the banner of insurrection... Kronstadt was clearly ripe for a rebellion. What set it off were not the machinations of emigre conspirators and foreign intelligence agents but the wave of peasant risings throughout the country and the labour disturbances in neighbouring Petrograd. And as the revolt unfolded, it followed the pattern of earlier outbursts against the central government from 1905 through the Civil War.”⁵⁶

He explicitly argues that while the National Centre had “anticipated” the revolt and “laid plans to help organise it,” they had “no time to put these plans into effect.” The “eruption occurred too soon, several weeks before the basic conditions of the plot ... could be fulfilled” (such as gaining French support). It “is not true,” he stresses, “that the emigres had engineered the rebellion.” The revolt was “a spontaneous and self-contained movement from beginning to end.”⁵⁷

Moreover, whether the Memorandum played a part in the revolt can be seen from the reactions of the White “National Centre” to the uprising. Firstly, they failed to deliver aid to the rebels nor get French aid to them. Secondly, Professor Grimm, the chief agent of the National Centre in Helsingfors and General Wrangel’s official representative in Finland, stated to a colleague after the revolt had been crushed that if a new outbreak should occur then their group must not be caught unawares again. Avrich also notes that the revolt “caught the emigres off balance” and that “[n]othing ... had been done to implement the Secret Memorandum, and the warnings of the author were fully borne out.”⁵⁸

If Kronstadt was a White conspiracy then how could the organisation of the conspiracy have been caught unawares?

As regards Wrangel’s troops, the facts are that there simply was no real threat, as Avrich again makes plain.

⁵⁵ quoted by Avrich, Op. Cit., pp. 239–40

⁵⁶ Avrich, Op. Cit., pp. 111–2

⁵⁷ Avrich, Op. Cit., pp. 126–7

⁵⁸ Avrich, Op. Cit., p. 212 and p. 123

Firstly, the Kronstadt revolt broke out months after the end of the Civil War in Western Russia. Wrangel had fled from the Crimea in November 1920. The Bolsheviks were so afraid of White invasion that by early 1921 they demobilised half the Red Army (some 2,500,000 men). Secondly, the Russian emigres “*remained as divided and ineffectual as before, with no prospect of co-operation in sight.*” Thirdly, as far as Wrangel’s forces go, they were in no state to re-invade Russia. His troops were “*dispersed and their moral sagging*” and it would have taken “*months ... merely to mobilise his men and transport them from the Mediterranean to the Baltic.*” A second front in the south “*would have meant almost certain disaster.*” Indeed, in a call issued by the Petrograd Defence Committee on March 5th, they asked the rebels: “*Haven’t you heard what happened to Wrangel’s men, who are dying like flies, in their thousands of hunger and disease?*” The call goes on to add “[t]his is the fate that awaits you, unless you surrender within 24 hours.”⁵⁹

Clearly, the prospect of a White invasion was slim. This leaves the question of capitalist governments. Avrich has this to say on this:

“Apart from their own energetic fund-raising campaign, the emigres sought the assistance of the Entente powers... the United States government, loath to resume the interventionist policies of the Civil War, turned a deaf ear to all such appeals. The prospects of British aid were even dimmer ... The best hope of foreign support came from France ... the French refused to interfere either politically or militarily in the crisis.” The French government had also “*withdrew its recognition of Wrangel’s defunct government*” in November 1920 “*but continued to feed his troops on ‘humane grounds,’ meanwhile urging him to disband.*”⁶⁰

Thus, the claim that foreign intervention was likely seems without basis. Lenin himself argued on March 16th, 1921 that “*the enemies*” around the Bolshevik state were “*no longer able to wage their war of intervention*” and so were launching a press campaign “*with the prime object of disrupting the negotiations for a trade agreement with Britain, and the forthcoming trade agreement with America.*”⁶¹ The demobilising of the Red Army confirms this perspective.

While the Whites **were** extremely happy that Kronstadt revolted, it would be weak politics indeed that based itself on the reactions of reactionaries to evaluate social struggles. Sadly, this is exactly what Rees does.

Balance of class forces?

John Rees continues by arguing that:

“As it became clear that the revolt was isolated Petrichenko was forced to come to terms with the reality of the balance of class forces. On 13 March Petrichenko wired David Grimm, the chief of the National Centre and General Wrangel’s official representative in Finland, for help in gaining food. On 16 March Petrichenko accepted an offer of help from Baron P V Vilkin, an associate of Grimm’s whom ‘the Bolsheviks rightly called a White agent.’ None of the aid reached the garrison before it was crushed, but the tide of

⁵⁹ Avrich, Op. Cit., p. 13, p. 219, p. 146 and p. 105

⁶⁰ Avrich, Op. Cit., pp. 117–9 and p. 105

⁶¹ Lenin and Trotsky, *Kronstadt*, p. 52

events was pushing the sailors into the arms of the Whites, just as the latter had always suspected it would.”

We should note that it was due to the “*food situation in Kronstadt ... growing desperate*” that Petrichenko contacted Grimm, asking him to “petition Finland and other countries for assistance” and the aid they asked for was “food and medicine” from the Red Cross.⁶² If the revolt had spread to Petrograd and the striking workers there, such requests would have been unnecessary. Rather than isolation being due to “*the reality of the balance of class forces*” it was due to the reality of coercive forces — the Bolsheviks had successfully repressed the Petrograd strikes and slandered the Kronstadt revolt. The key to understanding the isolation of the revolt is to know that the Bolsheviks had suppressed the workers uprising in Petrograd in the first days of March (something Rees fails to mention). The Kronstadt, revolt was an outgrowth of the uprising in Petrograd and was cut off from its larger social base and localised on a small island. Rather than express a “balance of class forces,” the acceptance of outside help simply expressed the power of Bolshevik coercion over the Russian workers and peasants.

So, given that the Bolshevik dictatorship had lied to and repressed the Petrograd working class, the Kronstadters had few options left as regards aid. Rees’s argument smacks of the “logic” of Right as regards the Spanish Civil War, the Cuban revolution and the Sandinistas. Isolated, each of these revolts turned to the Soviet Union for aid thus proving what the Right had always known from the start, namely their objectively Communist nature and their part in the International Communist Conspiracy. The Stalinists also used such “logic,” using capitalist support for the Hungarian revolution of 1956 and the Polish union **Solidarity** as evidence to justify their repression. Few revolutionaries would evaluate social struggles on such an illogical and narrow basis but Rees wants us to do so with Kronstadt.

In reality, of course, the fact that others sought to take advantage of these (and other) situations is inevitable and irrelevant. The important thing is whether working class people were in control of the revolt and what the main objectives of it were. By this class criteria, it is clear that the Kronstadt revolt was **revolutionary** as, like Hungary 1956, the core of the revolt was working people and their councils. It was they who were in control and called the tune. That Whites tried to take advantage of it is as irrelevant to evaluating the Kronstadt revolt as the fact that Stalinists tried to take advantage of the Spanish struggle against Fascism.

Moreover, in his analysis of the “*balance of class forces*”, Rees fails to mention the class which had real power (and the related privileges) in Russia at the time — the state and party bureaucracy. The working class and peasantry were officially powerless. The only influence they exercised in the “workers’ and peasants state” was when they rebelled, forcing “their” state to make concessions or to repress them (sometimes both happened). The balance of class forces was between the workers and peasants and ruling bureaucracy. To ignore this factor means to misunderstand the problems facing the revolution and the Kronstadt revolt itself.

After the revolt

Rees quotes Paul Avrich to support his assertion that the Kronstadt revolt was, in fact, pro-White. He argues as follows:

⁶² Avrich, Op. Cit., p. 121–2

“Paul Avrich ... says there is ‘undeniable evidence’ that the leadership of the rebellion came to an agreement with the Whites after they had been crushed and that ‘one cannot rule out the possibility that this was the continuation of a longstanding relationship.’”

What Rees **fails** to mention is that Avrich **immediately** adds “[y]et a careful search has yielded no evidence to support such a belief.” He even states that “[n]othing has come to light to show that ... any links had existed between the emigres and the sailors before the revolt.” How strange that Rees fails to quote or even mention Avrich’s conclusion to his own speculation! As for the post-revolt links between the “leadership” of the rebellion and the Whites, Avrich correctly argues that “[n]one of this proves that there were any ties between the [National] Centre and the Revolutionary Committee either before or during the revolt. It would seem, rather, that the mutual experience of bitterness and defeat, and a common determination to overthrow the Soviet regime, led them to join hands in the aftermath.”⁶³ Seeing your friends and fellow toilers murdered by dictators may affect your judgement, unsurprisingly enough.

Rees notes that one of the leaders of the rebellion, Petrichenko, “got in touch with Wrangel” in exile and “joined forces” with him. Rees comments that the “balance of class forces had finally brought ideology and reality into alignment.” It seems incredible that a self-proclaimed socialist could base his case on the activities of just one individual, but for all his talk of “class forces,” Rees seems happy to do just that.

Let us, however, assume that certain elements in the “leadership” of the revolt were, in fact, scoundrels. What does this mean when evaluating the Kronstadt revolt?

We must point out that this “leadership” was elected by and under the control of the “conference of delegates,” which was in turn elected by and under the control of the rank-and-file sailors, soldiers and civilians. This body met regularly during the revolt “to receive and debate the reports of the Revolutionary committee and to propose measures and decrees.”⁶⁴ The actions of the “leadership” were not independent of the mass of the population and so, regardless of their own agendas, had to work under control from below. In other words, the revolt cannot be reduced to a discussion of whether a few of the “leadership” were “bad men” or not. Indeed, to do so just reflects the elitism of bourgeois history — yet Rees does just that and reduces the Kronstadt revolt and its “ideology” down to just one person (Petrichenko).

Conclusion

As can be seen, Rees has totally distorted the facts as regards the Kronstadt rebellion. On almost every point, Rees distorted his sources. His argument about the changing “class composition” of the Kronstadt garrison depends on his suppressing the numerous facts which contradict it (facts that exist on the very same page he quotes!). As regards the objectively “pro-White” nature of the revolt, his argument is effectively refuted by the very sources he uses as evidence. All this is unsurprising, as the same abuse of the source material was evident in Rees’ account of the Makhnovist movement.

What is significant is his attempts to justify the Bolshevik repression in terms of the class nature of the revolt. Rees can only do this by ripping the Kronstadt revolt from its roots in the Petrograd strike movement and by ignoring both the demands of the strikers and of the sailors.

⁶³ Avrich, Op. Cit., p. 111 and p. 129

⁶⁴ Getzler, Op. Cit., p. 217

This, again, is unsurprising. Like most pro-Bolshevik accounts of the Russian revolution after October 1917, the working class is absent from Rees's account of the degeneration of Bolshevism. This is because a key Leninist justification for Bolshevik tyranny is the claim that the industrial working class disintegrated soon after the Bolsheviks had seized power. However, this position cannot be defended. For all Rees' claims that the Russian working class did was an "*atomised, individualised mass*" which was "*no longer able to exercise the collective power*" the facts are that all during the Civil War period and in February/March in 1921, the Russian workers were able to take collective action up to and including the level of a general strike. This is implicitly acknowledged by Rees who notes that Kronstadt was preceded by a "*wave of serious ... strikes*" all across Russia. How can an "atomised, individualised mass" incapable of "collective power" manage to conduct general strikes that required martial law to break?

The explanation of this "oversight" is simple. Collective working class revolt and power was directed towards the Bolsheviks from 1918 onwards. To mention this (and the resulting Bolshevik repression) would be to contradict Rees' claim that "[i]n the cities the Reds enjoyed the fierce and virtually undivided loyalty of the masses throughout the civil war period" and so goes unmentioned. However, this opposition by the workers to the Bolshevik regime does explain Bolshevik support for "the dictatorship of the party" (see part 1 of this series). A party which **did** have the "virtually undivided loyalty of the masses" would not need to undermine soviet democracy and raise its own dictatorship to an ideological truism. Perhaps Rees means by this something similar to his claim that the Bolshevik "rested" upon the working class (as it was arresting them)?

This perhaps explains Rees' attempt to personalise the Kronstadt events by his discussion of Petrichenko. The class criteria is the decisive one, something which cannot be evaluated by the actions of just one person and to evaluate the real balance of class forces you need an honest account of the events. As Rees does not (and, indeed, cannot) present such an account, it is understandable that he looks to individuals. Ironically, his comment that Petrichenko's liaisons with the Whites during exile "brought ideology and reality into alignment" can better be applied to the Bolshevik repression of Kronstadt and the subsequent rise of Stalinism.

Ultimately, by agreeing with Trotsky that suppressing Kronstadt was "a tragic necessity," Rees is admitting that the SWP would do the same (as can be seen, he currently follows their example by slandering the revolt) and consider a regime based on repression of workers as somehow "socialist." Clearly, the Bolshevik tradition sees working class autonomy and self-management as having little to do with socialism and that, if necessary, these and the self-emancipation of the working class can be postponed provided people like Lenin and Trotsky run the "workers' state" on behalf of the workers and raise the red flag. Working people will never be inspired by a socialism which represses them and their hard won freedoms in the name of their "objective" interests (as defined by the party leaders).

If the Leninist tradition is revolutionary, Rees would not need to rewrite history in order to defend it. That suggests that revolutionaries should look elsewhere for a theory with which to both understand and change the world. If, as Rees claims, the October revolution is both "*our past*" and "*our future*," then he should not have to distort its history and legacy so.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Anarcho
In Defence of the Truth
A reply to "In Defence of October" by John Rees of the British SWP
April 28, 2009

Retrieved on 29th January 2021 from anarchism.pageabode.com

theanarchistlibrary.org