

The Kronstadt Uprising of 1921

Lynne Thorndycraft

Late 1970s

Contents

I. The Crisis of War Communism	3
II. Who the Rebels Were	6
III.	7
CONCLUSION	12
BIBLIOGRAPHY	13

Shortly after the Russian Civil War, or as the Bolshevik view would have it, as a final chapter of the Civil War, there occurred an uprising at the Kronstadt Naval Base. The sailors whom Trotsky had dubbed “the pride and glory of the Revolution” rose in revolt against the very state they had helped into power. For sixteen days their “revolutionary commune” functioned independently of, and was bitterly attacked by, the “Workers’ and Peasants’ Government.” It finally subdued them with thousands of casualties on both sides. But it was a Pyrrhic victory for the Communists. In a moment of sad honesty, Lenin called Kronstadt “the flash which lit up reality better than anything else.”

I. The Crisis of War Communism

A fair account of the Kronstadt Rebellion must understand the economic crisis in the Soviet Union following several years of war — both international and civil. David Shub writes:

In 1919 and 1920, famine, disease, cold, and infant mortality had claimed some nine million lives — apart from the military casualties of the civil war. In the Urals and the Don region, the population had been reduced by a third. The living standard of the Russian worker had sunk to less than a third of the pre-war level, industrial output to less than a sixth of 1913 production. The prices of manufactured goods skyrocketed, while paper currency dropped in value until in January 1921 a gold ruble was worth 26,529 paper rubles. Nearly half the industrial work force deserted the towns for the villages.¹

The continuing crisis provoked peasant risings all over Russia. (The Cheka reported 118 incidents in February 1921 alone.) The cornerstone of Lenin’s policy of War Communism was the forcible seizure of grains from the peasants by armed detachments from the cities. “We actually took from the peasant,” admitted Lenin, “all his surpluses and sometimes not only the surpluses but part of the grain the peasant needed for food. We took this in order to meet the requirements of the army and to sustain the workers.”² Grain as well as livestock was often confiscated without payment of any kind, and there were frequent complaints that even the seed needed for the next sowing had been seized. In the face of all this, the peasantry resorted to both passive and active resistance. In 1920 it was estimated that over a third of the harvest had been hidden from the governments troops. The amount of sown acreage dropped to three-fifths of the figure for 1913, as the peasants rebelled against growing crops only to have them seized.

As the civil war subsided and it became apparent that a White restoration was no longer a threat, peasant resistance became violent. The demobilization of half the Red Army — two and a half million men — swelled the peasant ranks with experienced fighters who constantly clashed with the requisitioning detachments. They demanded an end to the forced seizures of grain, and called for a fixed tax and the right to dispose of surpluses as they saw fit. But the regime’s ideological distaste for such “petit-bourgeois aspirations”, combined with fears of a resumption of foreign intervention, led to a stubborn continuance of War Communist policies.

For urban workers the situation was even more desperate. Shortage of machinery, raw materials and especially fuel meant that many large factories could operate only part-time. Retreating

¹ Shub, David. *Lenin*. p. 405.

² Quoted in Paul Avrich’s *Kronstadt 1921*. p. 9.

White armies had destroyed many railway lines, interrupting the delivery of food to the cities. What food there was was distributed according to a preferential system which favored heavy industry and especially armament workers over less valued categories. Some were allotted only 200 grams of black bread a day. Paul Avrich describes the situation:

Driven by cold and hunger, men abandoned their machines for days on end to gather wood and forage for food in the surrounding countryside. Traveling on foot or in overcrowded railway cars, they brought their personal possessions and materials which they had filched from the factories to exchange for whatever food they could get. The government did all it could to stop this illegal trade. Armed roadblock detachments were deployed to guard the approaches to the cities and to confiscate the precious sacks of food which the “speculators” were carrying ‘back to their families. The brutality of the roadblock detachments was a byword throughout the country, and complaints about their arbitrary methods flooded the commissariats in Moscow.³

Emma Goldman, the American anarchist who was in Russia at the time, commented bitterly:

In most cases the confiscated stuff was divided by the defenders of the Communist State among themselves. The victims were fortunate indeed if they escaped further trouble. After they were robbed of their precious pack, they were often thrown into gaol for “speculation.”

The number of real speculators apprehended was insignificant in comparison with the mass of unfortunate humanity that filled the prisons of Russia for trying to keep from starving to death.⁴

In addition to the economic grievances of the workers there was growing opposition to the War Communist labor policies imposed by Leon Trotsky, the Commissar of War. He sought to apply the military discipline which had whipped the Red Army into fighting shape to the crumbling industrial economy. The militarization of labor was characterized by forced conscription of demobilized Red Army troops into “labor armies,” disciplining of the civilian workers for pilfering and absenteeism, the installation of armed guards in the workplace, nationalization of the larger factories, and the gradual abandonment of workers’ control in favor of management by “bourgeois specialists.” This last was the ultimate outrage to many workers. Avrich explains:

A new bureaucracy had begun to flourish. It was a mixed lot, veteran administrative personnel rubbing shoulders with untrained neophytes; yet however disparate their values and outlook, they shared vested interests of their own that set them apart from the workers at the bench.

For the rank-and-file workmen, the restoration of the class enemy to a dominant place in the factory meant a betrayal of the ideals of the revolution. As they saw it, their dream of a proletarian democracy, momentarily realized in 1917, had been snatched away and replaced by the coercive and bureaucratic methods of capitalism ... Small wonder that, during the winter of 1920-1921...murmurings of discontent

³ *Op. cit.*, p. 26.

⁴ Quoted in Emanuel Pollack's *The Kronstadt Rebellion*. p. 2-3.

could no longer be silenced, not even by threats of expulsion with the loss of rations. At workshop meetings, where speakers angrily denounced the militarization and bureaucratization of industry, critical references to the comforts and privileges of Bolshevik officials drew indignant shouts of agreement from the listeners. The Communists, it was said, always got the best jobs, and seemed to suffer less from hunger and cold than everyone else.⁵

The Kronstadt rebellion of 1921 was immediately preceded by mass strikes in neighboring Petrograd. Emma Goldman recounts a Bolshevik official's reaction to this development:

"Strikes under the dictatorship of the proletariat!" the official exclaimed. "There is no such thing."

Against whom, indeed should the workers strike in Soviet Russia, he had argued. Against themselves? They were the masters of the country, politically as well as industrially. To be sure, there were some among the class toilers who were not yet fully class conscious and aware of their own true interests. These were sometimes disgruntled, but they were elements incited by the *shkurniki* (self-seekers) and enemies of the Revolution. Skinners, parasites, they were who were purposely misleading the ignorant people...of course the Soviet authorities had to protect the country against their kind. Most of them were in prison.⁶

On an economic level the "self-seekers" of Petrograd wanted food, above all. There were constant demands, in support of the peasants, for an end to grain requisitioning. For themselves they wanted the removal of roadblocks, the abolition of privileged rations and the right to barter personal possessions for food. One leaflet detailed cases of workers frozen or starved to death in their homes. "In Vassili-Ostrov," said Victor Serge, "in a street white with snow; I saw a crowd gather, mostly women. I watched it push its way slowly forward to mingle with the military school cadets sent there to open up the approaches to the factories. Patiently, sadly, the crowd told the soldiers how hungry the people were, called them brothers, asked them for help. The cadets pulled bread out of their knapsacks and divided it up. Meanwhile, the Mensheviks and the Left Social Revolutionaries were blamed for the strike."⁷

But as the struggle wore on, and the Communists responded with martial law, curfews, charges of "counter-revolution," deprivation of rations, and, finally, hundreds of arrests by the Cheka, the demands of the workers took on political tones. The following message appeared on buildings on February 27:

A complete change is necessary in the policies of the government. First of all, the workers and peasants need freedom. They don't want to live by the decrees of the Bolsheviks: they want to control their own destinies.

Comrades, preserve revolutionary order! Determinedly and in an organized manner demand:

Liberation of all arrested socialists and non-partisan working men;

Abolition of martial law: freedom of speech, press and assembly for all those who

⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 28-29.

⁶ Quoted in Pollack, *op. cit.*, pp. 10-11.

⁷ Serge, Victor, *Kronstadt 1921*. p. 2.

labor;
Free election of shop and factory committees, of labor unions and soviet representatives;
Call meetings, pass resolutions, send your delegates to the authorities and work for the realizations of your demands!⁸

It was a call thoroughly in the spirit of October and it aroused the full sympathy of the Kronstadt sailors.

II. Who the Rebels Were

Kronstadt is a fortified city on Kotlin Island in the Gulf of Finland. Thirty kilometers west of the Petrograd, it defends the former capital and is also the main base of the Baltic Fleet. Numerous forts dot the water to the north and south of the island, and there are major additional fortifications on the mainland at Krasnaya Gorka and Lissy Noss.

The citizens of Kronstadt, including the Baltic sailors, the soldiers of the garrison, and civilian workers, merchants and officials, numbered 50,000 in 1921. A brief look at the history of this populace is in order, for a common Bolshevik charge against them is that from 1917 to 1921 a rapid turnover in their ranks occurred, and that the rebels of 1921 lacked the revolutionary credentials of the sailors who had stormed the Winter Palace. Trotsky characterized the former as “completely demoralized elements, men who wore elegant white trousers and did their hair like pimps.”⁹ Actually Kronstadt had an uninterrupted history of revolutionary activity. There were major outbursts in 1905 and 1906, and they celebrated the February Revolution of 1917 by executing their officers. In May they established an independent commune in defiance of the Provisional Government; in July they took part in the abortive rising against Kerensky; in October they helped to bring down his government; in January 1918 they dispersed the Constituent Assembly. Avrich provides a picture of Kronstadt’s internal life:

Together the Soviet and the forum in Anchor Square satisfied the political needs of Kronstadt’s inhabitants. There seems to have been no widespread desire for a national parliament or for any other central ruling body.

For the most part, the social and economic life of the city was administered by the citizens themselves, through the medium of local committees of every sort — house committees, ship committees, food committees, factory and shop committees — which thrived in the prevailing libertarian atmosphere. A popular militia was organized to defend the island from any outside encroachments upon its sovereignty. Kronstadt’s residents displayed a real talent for spontaneous self-organization. Apart from their various committees, men and women working in the same shop or living in the same neighborhood formed tiny agricultural communes, each with about fifty members, which undertook to cultivate whatever arable land could be found on the empty stretches of the island. During the Civil War, says Yarchuk, these collective vegetable gardens helped save the city from starvation.

⁸ Quoted by Alexander Berkmen: “*The Kronstadt Rebellion*,” 1922, in *Anarchy Magazine*.

⁹ Leon Trotsky, from “*Hue and Cry over Kronstadt*,” quoted by Anton Ciliga, *Anarchy Magazine*.

Cherishing their local autonomy, the Kronstadt population warmly endorsed the appeal for “All power to the soviets” put forward in 1917 by Lenin and his party. They interpreted the slogan in a literal sense, to mean that each locality would run its own affairs, with little or no interference from any central authority. This, says Yarchuk, they understood to be the true essence of “socialism.”¹⁰

But the sailors began to exhibit at best mixed feelings toward the Bolshevik regime within months of Lenin’s seizure of power. In April 1918 they passed a resolution calling for replacement of the Bolsheviks by a genuinely revolutionary regime. In October they attempted a mutiny. As the Civil War unfolded, however, once more Kronstadt sailors were some of the best fighters against the Whites. They were sent to all the most precarious fronts, partly due to their ability, and perhaps also, as Voline maintains, because dead heroes — or at least widely dispersed heroes — were of more value to the Bolsheviks than were live and very volatile champions of direct democracy. Thousands of casualties, combined with a centrally imposed reorganization of the Red Fleet might provide the Communists a more passive Kronstadt.

As for Trotsky’s charge that the Kronstadt rebels of early 1921 were morally degenerate “self-seekers,” the regime itself put the lie to that. As late as November 1920, on the third anniversary of the October Revolution, the Kronstadters were again held up as an example of revolutionary reliability. “It is true,” says Nicolas Walter, “that by 1921 the social composition of the fleet had changed; [see our introduction for more recent definitive clarification by Getzler on the actual continuity of social composition since 1917 at Kronstadt] instead of being mainly workers from the Petrograd area, the sailors were now mainly peasants from southern Russia. But far from this making them any less revolutionary, their personal links with such areas as the Ukraine if anything raised their revolutionary consciousness...”¹¹ But the Communist bureaucracy, burdened with its conviction that it alone embodied the Revolution, could only respond to the groundswell of peasant, worker and military unrest in 1921 with cries of “counter-revolution!”

III.

When news of the strike in “Red Peter” reached the Kronstadt sailors, they immediately dispatched a delegation to Petrograd to investigate. The delegates reported back on February 28 to a sailors’ meeting on the battleship Petropavlovsk. Their indignant listeners then passed the following resolution, which was to become the rallying point of the rebellion:

Having heard the report of the representatives sent by the general meeting of ships’ crews to Petrograd to investigate the situation there, we resolve:

1. In view of the fact that the present soviets do not express the will of the workers and peasants, immediately to hold new elections by secret ballot, with freedom to carry on agitation beforehand for all workers and peasants;
2. To give freedom of speech and press to workers and peasants, to anarchists, and left socialist parties;
3. To secure freedom of assembly for trade unions and peasant organizations;

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 73–74. Voline is also an excellent source on Kronstadt’s internal affairs.

¹¹ Walter, Nicolas. From his review of Avrich’s *Kronstadt 1921*, in *Anarchy Magazine*.

4. To call a nonparty conference of the workers, Red Army soldiers and sailors of Petrograd, Kronstadt and the Petrograd Province, no later than March 10, 1921;
5. To liberate all political prisoners of socialist parties, as well as all workers, peasants, soldiers and sailors imprisoned in connection with the labor and peasant movements;
6. To elect a commission to review the cases of those being held in prisons and concentration camps;
7. To abolish all political departments because no party should be given special privileges in the propagation of its ideas or receive the financial support of the state for such purposes. Instead, there should be established cultural and educational commissions, locally elected and financed by the state;
8. To remove immediately all roadblock detachments;
9. To equalize the rations of all working people, with the exception of those employed in trades detrimental to health;
10. To abolish the Communist fighting detachments in all branches of the army, as well as the Communist guards kept on duty in factories and mills. Should such guards or detachments be found necessary, they are to be appointed in the army from the ranks and in the factories and mills at the discretion of the workers;
11. To give the peasants full freedom of action in regard to the land, and also the right to keep cattle, on condition that the peasants manage within their own means, that is, without employing hired labor;
12. To request all branches of the army, as well as our comrades in the military cadets, (*kursanty*) to endorse our resolution;
13. To demand that the press give all our resolutions wide publicity;
14. To appoint an itinerant bureau of control;
15. To permit free handicrafts production by one's own labor.

PETRICHENKO, Chairman of the Squadron Meeting

PEREPELKIN, Secretary¹²

The most immediately striking thing about this document is that only one demand — for the abolition of political departments in the fleet — relates specifically to the sailors' situation. All the other points were made on behalf of the rebelling workers and peasants. Furthermore, Trotsky's charge that the Kronstadters were demanding special food privileges is belied by the call for equalization of rations; Lenin's claim that they had called for the return of the Constituent Assembly is unsubstantiated by this, or any later, document.¹³ The seamen had dispersed the Assembly in 1918 and they were no more favorable to it in 1921; in their eyes, explains Avrich, a national parliament would inevitably be dominated by a new privileged minority.

¹² Avrich, *op. cit.*, p. 73–74.

¹³ In fact, the Kronstadt delegates had told the Petrograd strikers that the guns of Kronstadt would be "resolutely directed against the Constituent Assembly and against all retreat." (Quoted in Voline's *Unknown Revolution*, p. 469.)

Various attempts have been made to “type” the Kronstadt rebels on the basis of this resolution and subsequent publications. Isaac Deutscher states flatly that they were led by anarchists, an assumption he derives from Trotsky. Nicolas Walter disputes this, since “They envisaged a strong administration and wanted a ‘soviet republic of toilers’ based on councils of working class deputies exercising state power.”¹⁴ Certainly the Mensheviks, the Right Social-Revolutionaries and the middle-class liberal groups were not in favor: the call for freedom of speech and assembly was only for “anarchists and left-socialist parties.”¹⁵ Avrich appears to be correct in saying that the rebellion was neither inspired nor engineered by any single party or group. The Kronstadt rebels were pure soviet communists, whose aim was to return to the brief triumph of the October Revolution — “to the hours, as it were,” says Nicolas Walter, “between the disappearance of the Provisional Government and the appearance of the People’s Commissars.”

On March 1st, the day after the passage of the Petropavlovsk resolution, a mass meeting was held in Anchor Square. 16,000 sailors, soldiers and workers heard the report of the delegation to Petrograd, and then a motion to adopt the Petropavlovsk demands. Kalinin, the President of the Soviet Republic, spoke against it; but despite his friendly reception upon arriving in Kronstadt, he failed to move, and in fact provoked the crowd by his arrogance and hostility. They shouted: “Why are our fathers and brothers in the villages shot? You are sated; you are warm; the commissars live in the palaces.”¹⁶ The military commissar Kuzmin followed, and denounced the resolution and the sailors as counter-revolutionary, to be smashed by the iron hand of the proletariat. These two speakers cast the only negative votes in the entire gathering. Kalinin was sent on his way back to Moscow. But Kuzmin was arrested when it was learned that he had ordered the removal of all food and munitions from Kronstadt.¹⁷

At this stage the sailors didn’t see themselves as being in open revolt. In fact, they sent a committee of thirty men to confer with the Petrograd Soviet with the hope of achieving an amicable end to the strike. (Upon their arrival in Petrograd, they were promptly arrested by the Cheka.)

But the government seems to have never seriously entertained the thought of negotiation with the sailors. There are a number of reasons for this. First, the Communists half-believed in their own charge that the uprising was inspired and supported by White emigres, and was the stepping stone to a new intervention. Had this been true, there was probably no better stepping stone than the Kronstadt naval base, with its heavy armaments and its proximity to Petrograd. There is plenty of evidence of elation among the Russian emigres, but as we have seen, Kronstadt’s program was hardly designed for their sakes, and it seems more a case of wishful thinking. White organizations in Europe began rounding up supplies for the sailors as soon as the uprising began, but in fact none were actually delivered, nor were they solicited.

The Bolshevik press further claimed that the military strategy of the rebels was dictated by a General Kozlovsky, a former Tsarist general appointed to Kronstadt by Trotsky. Such a person did live in Kronstadt, and he did provide technical advice. But most of his advice — and that of

¹⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 25

¹⁵ Voline is rather embarrassed by this. He explains that this wording was chosen “to remove in advance any possibility of

misunderstanding the real nature of the movement.” Within the confines of Kronstadt itself, where “reactionary deceptions could have no success,” all opinions could be freely expressed. Voline, *op. cit.*, p. 473.

¹⁶ Shub, *op. cit.*, p. 407

¹⁷ His arrest became a major issue in the battle of propaganda, with the Bolsheviks claiming he had been threatened with execution.

Victor Serge recounts the incident as his first experience with lying as an established policy of the regime.

other military officials — was ignored. Only the Communist government utilized the skills of ex-Tsarist officers, most notably Tukachevsky.¹⁸

A second reason for the Communists' reluctance to negotiate is suggested by R. V. Daniels:¹⁹

That there was at least some legitimate basis for the Kronstadt reform demands was admitted by Kalinin... He described a resolution adopted at Kronstadt on March 1, demanding various reforms ranging from free elections to the permission of free trade, as "with certain corrections, more or less acceptable," and based on real organizational abuses within the Communist Party. Undoubtedly the Kronstadt revolt could have been forestalled by timely reforms, but such a course would have been too embarrassing and might well have been a serious blow to the authority of the government... Given the state of discontent, an admission by the government that the Kronstadters had a case that could be discussed, might have brought the Soviet regime crashing down everywhere. It was essential above all for the Communist Party to suppress the idea of Kronstadt as a movement which defended the principles of the October Revolution against the Communists — the idea of the "third revolution."

Finally, Kronstadt posed a new and disconcerting problem for the regime. Communist Party members in the Baltic Fleet had, in mid-February, condemned the Political Section of the fleet; they had furthermore, according to the Commissar for Petrograd, been leaving the party in droves — 5000 sailors in January alone.²⁰ During the uprising, so many Communists were writing to the rebel Kronstadt *Isvestia* to announce their resignations that the editors had to plead for shorter statements. The central government couldn't negotiate with these rank-and-file defectors at a time when it was about to ban dissent even at its highest levels.

There was one attempt to negotiate initiated by an anarchist mediation group which included Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman. Victor Serge describes a meeting of these two with Zinoviev, Chairman of the Petrograd Soviet. He received them cordially, for they enjoyed wide international support. But he flatly turned down their negotiation proposal. "As a sop," says Serge, "he offered them every facility for seeing Russia from a private railway car."²¹ Most of the Russian members of the mediation group were arrested.²²

The military strategy of the Kronstadters was entirely defensive, a reflection of their illusion that they had merely to wait and the rest of Russia, starting with Petrograd, would rush to their support. They ignored the suggestions of military officers to break up the ice around the island with cannon fire, which could have prevented an assault by land. They further rejected the idea of seizing the fortress of Oranienbaum, from which they could have launched a surprise offensive. Had they done so, they would have saved the lives of the aerial squadron at Oranienbaum, which

¹⁸ Avrich has written an entire chapter on the complex question of White involvement. His conclusions seem fair, and I have reproduced their general tenor.

¹⁹ R. V. Daniels, *The Conscience of the Revolution*, p. 144.

²⁰ This figure is from Ida Mett's *The Kronstadt Uprising*, p. 37.

²¹ Serge, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

²² Avrich describes one brief moment in this story, when the government offered to negotiate. Unfortunately, the sailors distrusted the proposed negotiating team, and their request for an amended proposal was never answered. This all occurred the day after the wives and children of many sailors had been arrested as hostages on the mainland, a move which guaranteed intransigence on the part of the rebels.

was caught in a plan to join the rebels. Several Red Army regiments at Oranienbaum also refused to fight the sailors. Cheka units rushed to the scene and shot every fifth soldier.

On largely ideological grounds, the sailors declined outside help in the form of supplies, thus dooming themselves to slow starvation. But they most gravely miscalculated the situation in Petrograd. The strikes in Red Peter were already declining as the Kronstadt uprising began. Through a combination of repression and concessions — most notably the removal of roadblock detachments — the city was calmed. Hundreds of dissident workers had been arrested and all soldiers suspected of sympathy with Kronstadt were transferred further inland. Kronstadt was alone.

Following acceptance of the Petropavlovsk resolution in Anchor Square, a “Provisional Revolutionary Committee” had been elected to coordinate Kronstadt’s affairs pending the formation of a new Soviet. This group of fifteen — nine sailors, four workmen, one school principal and a transport official — were soon catapulted into the role of military strategists. On March 4, at a heated session of the Petrograd Soviet, Zinoviev demanded the immediate surrender of Kronstadt on pain of death. The rebels were passionately defended by a Petrograd worker-delegate: “It’s the cruel indifference of yourself and of your party,” he shouted at Zinoviev, “that drove us to strike and that roused the sympathy of our brother sailors... They are guilty of no other crime, and you know it. Consciously you malign them and call for their destruction.”²³ Amid cries of “traitor” and “Menshevik bandit” he was drowned out and Zinoviev’s motion was passed.

On March 5, Trotsky issued an ultimatum in which he promised to “shoot like partridges”²⁴ all those who refused to surrender immediately. Only those who did could expect mercy. The Provisional Revolutionary Committee replied: “The ninth wave of the Toilers’ Revolution has risen and will sweep from the face of Soviet Russia the vile slanderers and tyrants with all their corruption-and your leniency, Mr. Trotsky, will not be needed.”²⁵

On March 7, an aerial bombardment was launched against the island, which continued over several days. The sound of the guns reached Alexander Berkman in Petrograd. “Days of anguish and cannonading,” he wrote in his diary. “My heart is numb with despair; something has died within me. The people on the street look bowed with grief, bewildered. No one trusts himself to speak.”²⁶

Tukachevsky ordered a first attempt to take Kronstadt by storm, on March 8. His troops advanced across the open ice with no protection against the guns of the base. They were prodded from behind by machine gunners who were instructed to shoot waverers. Hundreds were killed, many drowning in the holes made in the ice by Kronstadt’s cannons.

In the midst of this battle, the rebels found time to send a message to the working women of the world, on International Women’s Day: “May you soon accomplish your liberation from every form of violence and oppression. Long live the free revolutionary working women! Long live the Worldwide Social Revolution!”²⁷

Following his total failure on March 8, Tukachevsky took time to attain troops less likely to display ambivalence at the crucial moment. From the Asiatic parts of Russia, he brought in men who had little in common with the Kronstadters. Three hundred delegates from the Tenth Party

²³ Avrich, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

²⁴ There is some suggestion that this phrase was Zinoviev’s.

²⁵ Avrich, *ibid.* The ninth is the culminating wave of a storm at sea. dered. No one trusts himself to speak.”

²⁶ Avrich, *ibid.*, p. 152.

²⁷ Quoted in Pollack, p. 40.

Congress (which was then in session) raced to the front. Some of these were Workers' Oppositionists, anxious to display their loyalty to the Party.

Meanwhile the island entered a period of gradual starvation and demoralization. Their rebel Isvestia still urged Red Peter to rise in support, but they were less and less optimistic.

Finally on the night of March 16, the last assault began. Avrich estimates that 50,000 Communist troops were pitted against 15,000 well-entrenched defenders. By morning the battle raged within the city itself. Women as well as men fought ferociously to save Kronstadt, and at four in the afternoon they almost succeeded in a counter-offensive. But their own exhaustion and a fresh supply of Communist troops decided the day. Had they held out much longer, a plan sanctioned by Trotsky to launch a gas attack would have been carried out.

Kronstadt fell. In all, the Bolsheviks lost about 10,000 men, the rebels about 1500; about 8000 rebels fled across the ice to Finland; another 2500 were captured and either killed or sent to labor camps. "It was not a battle," said Tukachevsky later, "it was an inferno... The sailors fought like wild beasts. I cannot understand where they found the might for such rage."²⁸

CONCLUSION

"They didn't want the White Guards, but they didn't want us, either," commented Lenin at the Tenth Party Congress. Within days of the fall of Kronstadt two things happened: his New Economic Policy was adopted, granting all of the economic demands of the sailors with one very important distortion: it allowed the hiring of wage-labor. Secondly, all opposition within the Party was banned. Bukharin put it well: "Opportunists have formed the opinion that at first we make economic concessions and then political. As a matter of fact, we make economic concessions in order not to be forced to political concessions."²⁹

There are a number of differing conclusions which may be drawn from the story of Kronstadt. The rebels were certainly not the "revolution's guiltless children," as Avrich calls them. The maturity of political thought revealed in the Petropavlovsk resolution should restrain us from condescension. The real argument revolves around what could loosely be called the issue of historical necessity. An added complication is that in a real sense, there are two "Leninisms" — one motivating the Kronstadters, the other justifying their suppression.

"Socialism," said Lenin in 1917, "is not created by orders from above. State-bureaucratic automatism is alien to its spirit; socialism is alive, creative — the creation of the popular masses themselves." Written immediately prior to October, *State and Revolution* called for freedom of the press, the abolition of "special bodies of armed men" in favor of a people's militia, a state in which the workers would exercise power directly through their elected soviets, and in which all left-wing parties could agitate freely.

Was Lenin compelled by historical inevitability to abandon these hopes? Was he forced to substitute for the rule of the working class that of the "technical intelligentsia"?³⁰ In his history of the Peasant War in Germany, Engels raises a possibility which must have haunted Lenin:

The worst thing that can befall a leader of an extreme party is to be compelled to take over a government in an epoch when the movement is not yet ripe for the

²⁸ Quoted in Pollack, p. 49.

²⁹ Quoted in Pollack, p. 62.

³⁰ The phrase is R. V. Daniels'.

domination of the class he represents and for the realization of the measures which that domination would imply... He is compelled to represent not his party or his class, but the class for which conditions are ripe for domination. In the interests of the movement itself, he is compelled to defend the interests of an alien class, and to feed his own class with phrases and promises, with the assertion that the interests of that alien class are their own interests.³¹

In the suppression of Kronstadt, “the other Leninism” comes into its own, in the form of a tautology: “The proletariat of itself was held to be incapable of rising above the level of mere trade-union consciousness.” Granting this, says Daniels, Lenin had an airtight case: “Any manifestation of independent revolutionary thought among the workers... naturally had to challenge the authority of the party which purported to do the proletariat’s thinking for it. Such a challenge of the party, given the definition of true proletarian thought as complete loyalty to the authority of the party, was ipso facto evidence of “petitbourgeois,” “trade-unionist” thinking or of the “declassing” of the workers in consequence of the economic breakdown. Thus by 1921, the organizational doctrine of Bolshevism had come full circle, to the primeval Leninism of 1902.”³²

Avrich suggests that the tragedy of Kronstadt is that one can sympathize with the rebels and yet justify the Communists’ suppression of them. I suggest that the real tragedy is that so many people have for so long done just that: from Kronstadt to Berlin, to Budapest and Prague, tyranny has been justified as somehow progressive. Even if one accepts the argument that their rise to power — in situations of scarcity and underdevelopment — is inevitable, there is no need to enshrine tyrants. The Russian Revolution suffered a mortal setback in 1921. What should concern us, says Nicolas Walter, is not the “possibility that the success of Kronstadt might have led to chaos, civil war or counter-revolution, but the certainty that the failure of Kronstadt led to dictatorship, purges and counter-revolution.”³³

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Avrich, Paul. *The Anarchists in the Russian Revolution*. Cornell U. Press, 1973.
2. Avrich, Paul. *Kronstadt, 1921*. Princeton U. Press, 1970.
3. Daniels, Robert V. *The Conscience of the Revolution: Communist Opposition in Soviet Russia*. Simon & Schuster, 1969.
4. Deutscher, Isaac. *Trotsky. Vols. 1 — 3*, Oxford U. Press, 1954, 1959 and 1963.
5. Goldman, Emma. *Living My Life*, Vol. 2. Knopf, 1931.

³¹ Quoted in Daniels, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 147. The “primeval Leninism” of 1902 is that expressed in *What Is to be Done*.

³³ Walter, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

6. Goldman, Emma. *My Disillusionment in Russia*. Apollo Editions, 1970.
7. Goldman, Emma. *Trotsky Protests Too Much*. A pamphlet published by the Libertarian Education Project in England.
8. Mett, Ida. *The Kronstadt Uprising*. Black Rose Books, 1971.
9. Pollack, Emanuel. *The Kronstadt Rebellion*. Philosophical Library, 1951.
10. Serge, Victor. *Kronstadt 1921*. A pamphlet published by Solidarity, in England.
11. Shub, David. *Lenin*. Doubleday, 1948.
12. Voline. *The Unknown Revolution*. Solidarity/ Black and Red, 1974.
13. *The Kronstadt Rebellion in the Soviet Union*. A pamphlet published by the National Education Department of the Socialist Workers Party, 1973: articles by Trotsky, Wright, Serge, MacDonald, and the editors of New International.
14. *Anarchy Magazine*. March, 1971. The whole issue is devoted to Kronstadt and includes articles by Paul Avrich, Alexander Berkman, and Anton Ciliga.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Lynne Thorndycraft
The Kronstadt Uprising of 1921
Late 1970s

Retrieved on 30th August 2020 from
<https://libcom.org/library/-kronstadt-uprising-1921-thorndycraft>

[theanarchistlibrary.org](https://libcom.org/library/-kronstadt-uprising-1921-thorndycraft)