

The Kronstadt Rebellion: Still Significant 90 Years On

90th Anniversary Commemoration: 18th March 1921 – 18th March 2011

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Over the last few years, many on the left have been trying to formulate a vision of socialism based on democracy. As a consequence countless papers and talks have been produced internationally about how socialism needs to be participatory if true freedom is to be achieved. Some have given this search for a form of democratic socialism evocative names, such as ‘Twenty-First Century socialism’, ‘socialism-from-below’ and ‘ecosocialism’. In South Africa the desire for a democratic socialism has also inspired initiatives such as the Conference for a Democratic Left (CDL); while even the South African Communist Party has outlined a need for a more participatory socialist agenda. What was the Kronstadt Rebellion? Ninety years ago, in March 1921, the largest naval base in Russia – Kronstadt – was the site of a brutal and bloody battle. Civilians and sailors at Kronstadt had risen up in open revolt against the Bolshevik state headed by Lenin and Trotsky. During the fighting that ensued, thousands died, over 10 000 rebels were arrested, many executed and buried in mass graves, others sent to concentration camps in Archangelsk, Vologda and Murmansk¹. Indeed, the Kronstadt rebels suffered and died for a set of demands, which they had put forward on the eve of the rebellion, in the *Petropavlovsk Manifesto*. These demands were:

- free and fair elections to the soviets;
- freedom of speech for workers, peasants, anarchists and socialists;
- free trade union activity;
- peasants to control land without employing wage labour.

These demands were drowned in blood by the Bolsheviks and without any sense of irony they celebrated the crushing of Kronstadt on the 18th March – the 50th anniversary of the Paris Commune.

Until these events, the Kronstadters had been hailed as the “pride and glory” of the Russian Revolution. They played a leading role in the 1905 and 1917 Revolutions. Yet it was these very same sailors who had embarked on a revolt against the Bolshevik state. Following Lenin and Trotsky’s own claims, the Kronstadters have been labelled “counter-revolutionaries” who sought “soviets without Bolsheviks” and capitalism². In looking at the reasons for the revolt, however, it is important to go beyond these smears by examining the actual nature of the Russian Revolution, the role the Bolsheviks played, and the Kronstadters’ aims.

Revolutionary Russia

The first phase of the Russian revolution began in February 1917, when peasants and workers rose up. This saw thousands of people surging onto the streets demanding bread and an end to the involvement in the First World War. At first soldiers obeyed the Tsarist regime and gunned down the strikers and protestors in a bid to halt a full-scale uprising. Gradually, however, various regiments crossed over to the demonstrators. A key moment occurred when soldiers in Petrograd and sailors in Kronstadt began disobeying orders and shooting their officers. Under the weight

¹ Thorndycraft, L. The Kronstadt uprising of 1921. libcom.org

² Trotsky, L. 1930. *History of the Russian Revolution*. Haymarket Books: United States

of the protests, and virtual collapse of military power, a Provisional Government took over state power as the Tsar was forced to abdicate. The main aims of the Provisional Government were to call a Constituent Assembly with the goal of implementing a parliamentary democracy³.

At the same time as this, *soviets* (soldiers, peasants and workers' councils) began springing up all over Russia. These soviets often differed from one to the next. Some were highly bureaucratized, such as the Petrograd Soviet; while others were based more on direct democracy. Nonetheless, the idea of *soviets* was generally popular amongst workers and peasants, who believed that they offered an opportunity to genuinely democratise society⁴.

Perhaps even more importantly throughout 1917 workers began to establish factory committees. At first, the aim was to use the factory committees to win demands from bosses. As the revolution began to deepen, the factory committees began to radicalise and the workers started using them, not only to monitor and pressurise bosses, but to seize factories outright. By the end of 1917 workers were beginning to implement worker self-management. Across Russia, peasants were also seizing land. Through these actions, the workers and peasants were literally taking the economy into their own hands, and they had begun the process of attempting to run it democratically. Likewise, soldiers began electing their own officers and a mass democratisation of the entire society was taking place. When a coup was attempted in August 1917, workers, peasants and soldiers armed themselves and founded democratic militia⁵. At various points, before October, there was a very real prospect that the state would be entirely overthrown and that workers and peasants themselves would implement direct democracy, not only politically but also economically.

The Role of the Bolsheviks

Although the Bolsheviks espoused the need for the revolutionary emancipation of the working class, their basic premise was that workers on their own were incapable of achieving a revolutionary consciousness. Accordingly, Lenin argued in *What is to be Done?* that workers, if left to their own devices, would only fight for higher wages and better working conditions; rather than seeking the destruction of capitalism⁶. To solve this, the Bolsheviks felt that radical intellectuals or professional revolutionaries were required, organised in a party, to inject revolutionary consciousness into the ranks of the workers. As such, for the Bolsheviks a vanguard party made up of the best elements and professional revolutionaries was needed to lead the working class towards a revolution. Because “revolutionary consciousness” was also viewed as identical to the Bolshevik party line, all other forms of socialism, and parties, were deemed inherently counter-revolutionary and anti-working class. Thus, Trotsky stated in *Terrorism and Communism*: “the revolutionary supremacy of the proletariat pre-supposes within the proletariat itself the political supremacy of a party, with a clear programme of action and a faultless internal discipline⁷”.

³ Browder, R and Kerensky, A. (eds). 1961. *The Russian Provisional Government, 1917: Documents*. Stanford: United States

⁴ Chattopadhyay, P. Did the Bolshevik seizure of power inaugurate a socialist Revolution? A Marxian inquiry. libcom.org

⁵ Zabalaza Book. The Russian Revolution Destroyed: The strategy and nature of Bolshevism. www.zabalaza.net

⁶ Lenin, V. 1902. *What is to be Done?* Socialist Party of Great Britain: United Kingdom

⁷ Trotsky, L. 1920. *Terrorism and Communism*. www.marxists.org

Once in charge of the ‘revolutionary’ process, the Bolsheviks argued that the Party should capture state power, and operate a “dictatorship of the proletariat.” The “dictatorship of the proletariat” therefore meant the dictatorship of the Party: “the dictatorship of the proletariat cannot be exercised through an organisation embracing the whole of that class ... It can be exercised only by a vanguard”⁸. In this vision, there was no need for contestation or debate; the Party had a right to sole power, no matter what the working masses did. The Bolsheviks also believed a highly centralised state was necessary, to nationalise and run all industries, and to educate the working class. Indeed, Trotsky argued in *Terrorism and Communism* that the transition to socialism will involve a period when a powerful state is necessary, and before supposedly disappearing, this state would be the most ruthless form of government imaginable⁹. These beliefs would have a profoundly negative impact on the direction of the Russian Revolution once the Bolsheviks were in power.

The February revolution caught the Bolshevik Party utterly off guard. As the revolution deepened, the entire Bolshevik premise that workers could not attain a revolutionary consciousness on their own proved completely wrong. By their own admission, workers had proved to be far more revolutionary than the Party and were, in fact, closer to anarchism in practice than Marxism.

The ideological crisis that the events in Russia caused for the Bolshevik Party saw them oscillating back and forth between different positions throughout 1917 and into 1918. Initially the Bolsheviks supported the idea of a parliamentary democracy as the maximum goal. As workers and peasants began carrying out the socialisation of land, workers’ self-management; and demanding all power to the *soviets*, some Bolsheviks were driven in a more libertarian direction. Even Lenin flirted with council democracy¹⁰. But overall Bolshevik theory remained unchanged, so, while now calling for “all for power to the *soviets*,” the Bolsheviks tried to take sole control of the *soviets* as a step to state power¹¹.

October

In October 1917, the Bolsheviks formed an alliance with various factions – such as anarchists and Left Socialist Revolutionaries – to overthrow the Provisional Government. A Military Revolutionary Committee, which was dominated by the Bolsheviks, was set up to co-ordinate these efforts. The anarchists that had become involved in this did so in the belief that the Bolsheviks would transfer all power to the *soviets*, which they hoped would become organs of self-governance that would see the working class and peasants ushering in stateless socialism¹². These hopes were soon to be dashed.

⁸ VI Lenin, *Collected Works*, volume 27, p21

⁹ Trotsky, L. 1920. *Terrorism and Communism*. www.marxists.org

¹⁰ Lenin, V. 1917. *The Tasks of the Proletariat in the Present Revolution (a.k.a. The April Theses)*. www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/

¹¹ Chattopadhyay, P. Did the Bolshevik seizure of power inaugurate a socialist Revolution? A Marxian inquiry. libcom.org

¹² Avrich, P. 1973. *The Anarchists and the Russian Revolution*. Thames and Hudson: United Kingdom

The Bolsheviks in Power

The day after the Provisional Government was overthrown, the Bolsheviks started on the path of concentrating power in their own hands. This saw Lenin appointing a Cabinet, the Soviet of People's Commissars (Sovnarkom), dominated and headed by himself, Trotsky and Stalin. Remnants of the old state (which were kept in tact and not smashed) and the *soviets* were subordinated to this newly created centralised power. The anarchists, including many of those that had been involved in the October actions, objected to this: pointing out that the establishment of entities such as the Sovnarkom was a power grab by the Bolsheviks¹³.

Within weeks of setting up Sovnarkom, and effectively seizing state power, the Bolsheviks also established a secret police, the Cheka. The Cheka was officially tasked with combating anyone viewed as counter-revolutionary and was under the direct control of the Bolshevik Central Committee. Under Bolshevik rule, however, the term counter-revolutionary took on an ominously broad definition and included revolutionaries such as the Left Socialist Revolutionaries, anarchists, and workers and peasants who disagreed with the decrees of the Party. Thus, in April 1918 anarchists came under attack from the Cheka. Various anarchist centres were raided and newspapers shut. During these raids, over 40 anarchists were killed and hundreds more taken prisoner. This, however, was merely the start of the Cheka's reign of terror: it would grow to over 250 000 members, establish concentration camps, and play a key role in silencing any and all opposition to the Bolshevik party – including killing thousands of workers, peasants and revolutionaries¹⁴. Indeed, Lenin made it clear that any real opposition would not be tolerated when he said that the Party reserves “state power for ourselves, and for ourselves alone”.¹⁵

By early 1918, the Bolsheviks faced their first major challenge when they were roundly defeated in elections to urban *soviets*. From that point on the *soviets* were purged, manipulated or dissolved; *soviet* democracy was shut down because it threatened the Party. The Bolsheviks turned the *soviets* into rubber stamps – packed with handpicked stooges – for Party orders from above. Likewise, freedom of speech was systematically suppressed. Trotsky would go on to justify such measures by condemning those who “put the right of workers to elect their own representatives above the Party, thus challenging the right of the Party to affirm its dictatorship even when the dictatorship comes into conflict with the passing moods of the workers' democracy”¹⁶.

By mid-1918 the right of soldiers to elect their officers was also removed, under the leadership of Trotsky, and over 50 000 officers of the old regime were drafted into the Red Army to install strict discipline. Differential rations were also introduced into Russia, with members of the Bolshevik Party receiving by far the best¹⁷. All of this had begun in one way or another before the Civil War broke out – in May 1918 – the advent of the war merely led to an intensification of the already authoritarian tendencies of the Bolsheviks. As had long been pointed out by anarchists, a state (which by its nature is centralised and hierarchical) and a true revolution (where the working class and peasants have direct power) were turning out to be incompatible¹⁸. Already by early

¹³ Chattopadhyay, P. Did the Bolshevik seizure of power inaugurate a socialist Revolution? A Marxian inquiry. libcom.org

¹⁴ Voline. 1947. *The Unknown Revolution, 1917–1921*. Black Rose Books: Canada

¹⁵ Lenin, V. *Collected Works*. volume 28, p. 213

¹⁶ Trotsky, L. 1925. *Sochineniya*. Gosizdat: Soviet Union, p. 136

¹⁷ Goldman, E. 1923. *My Disillusionment with Russia*. Doubleday, Page & Company: United States

¹⁸ Kropotkin, P. 1897. *The State: Its Historic Role*. Freedom Press: United Kingdom

1918, therefore, the notion of a workers' state had proven to be an oxymoron – the Bolsheviks had power; not the working class.

The Bolsheviks end worker self-management

The new Bolshevik state, once its power was solidified, systematically attacked workers and peasants. This happened as the interests of the state and the popular classes had begun to openly diverge by 1918. The workers' wanted control over their factories and working lives through self-management. To try and achieve this, the workers were using the factory committees. By 1918 moves were even underway by workers in the factory committees to begin co-coordinating the economy from the bottom up. Such a move was perceived as a direct threat to state control by the Bolsheviks¹⁹. To prevent this, and what would amount to a loss of control, the Bolsheviks started nationalising the land and factories in early 1918.

From there, the Bolsheviks began dismantling organs of worker self-management. They wanted the workers to come under their control by subordinating the factory committees to the state. As such, in January 1918 the Party attempted to completely smash the independence of the factory committees by integrating them into union structures, which were already controlled by the state. By June 1918, the Bolsheviks had gone further by decreeing that all forms of worker self-management and even workers' control needed to end. In the process, the state went about re-introducing strict hierarchies in workplaces by implementing a system of one-man management and Taylorism. Control was passed to appointed managers: the former capitalists or to state bureaucrats²⁰. Along with this, the right to strike was effectively ended. Large sections of the economy were militarised, all supplemented by forced labour camps. Land was nationalised and crops were forcefully requisitioned, including seed grain. The result of these measures was that starvation haunted Russia.

Workers and peasants fight back

By the end of 1918, workers and peasants had started to resist the authoritarian decrees of the Bolshevik Party. For example, Ukrainian peasants – like the Makhnovists – consistently resisted the encroachment of Bolshevik power; whilst also fighting the White Armies during the civil war. Indeed, the Makhnovists attempted to create an anarchist-communist society in parts of the Ukraine²¹. Across the Russian empire, peasant Green Armies emerged, some reactionary, some revolutionary.

In the cities, waves of strikes broke out in 1918, 1919 and 1921. Amongst the working class, resistance to one-man management was widespread. By 1919 strikes had taken place in cities like Moscow against the repressive conditions in the factories and unpaid wages. In these cases, the Cheka dealt with the strikers harshly²². Perhaps the fiercest resistance by the working class to Bolshevik rule occurred between 1920 and 1921 in Petrograd. The strikes in Petrograd were

¹⁹ Brinton, M. 1970. *The Bolsheviks and Workers' Control*. Black Rose Books: Canada

²⁰ libcom.org

²¹ Arshinov, P. 1974. *History of the Makhnovist Movement*. Black and Red Solidarity: United States

²² Brokvin, V. 1990. Workers unrest and the Bolshevik's response in 1919. *Slavic Review*. Vol. 49, Issue 3 pp. 350–

driven mainly by the fact that workers were being driven into starvation. In Petrograd, illegal food markets existed, which were mainly controlled by Bolshevik Party members and soldiers²³. Many people used these illegal markets to source food as the state ration system was unreliable and inadequate. In the summer of 1920, Zinoviev issued a decree forbidding any kind of commercial transactions. The result was that the majority of the people of Petrograd were plunged into starvation, as the state apparatus was in no position to supply food to the city. Workers throughout the city went out on strike demanding food supplies. Sections of the workers also demanded freedom of speech and for working class political prisoners to be released. The Bolsheviks responded with tyranny: a curfew was put in place, martial law was declared, all meetings were banned, and hundreds of striking workers arrested. Hearing about the strike and the plight of workers, the Kronstadt sailors decided to send a delegation to Petrograd to investigate the situation for themselves²⁴.

The Kronstadt rebellion begins

The Kronstadt delegation was horrified by the state repression of striking workers that they found. The Kronstadt sailors had remained loyal to the Bolshevik regime throughout the Civil War, but once it had ended they felt that the goals of 1917 – land, bread, and peace through *soviet* democracy – were being trampled by the Bolsheviks. The old excuse for Bolshevik repression, the Civil War, made no sense: the war had effectively ended in November 1920.

When the Kronstadt delegation returned from Petrograd, meetings were held to discuss what should be done to take the revolution forward. The Kronstadters, through an open *soviet* process, put forward a set of demands – the *Petropavlovsk Manifesto*. Their newspaper (now online in English) repeated their claims²⁵. The Kronstadters had hoped that their demands could be addressed peacefully – they firmly believed that the Bolsheviks would see that their demands were aimed at implementing a free form of socialism. This was not to be²⁶.

The Bolsheviks, then in congress, were busy suppressing Party dissidents infected with an “anarcho-syndicalist deviation.” And Lenin and Trotsky knew full well that *soviet* democracy would end Bolshevik power. They believed an end to the Bolsheviks as the sole power would mean an end to the revolution – although the truth was that Bolshevik actions had already destroyed the aims and gains of the 1917 Revolution. When informed of the Kronstadters’ demands, the Soviet state immediately responded by threatening them. Trotsky demanded that the Kronstadters, who had taken the step of setting up an independent *soviet* once their demands had been soundly rebuffed, surrender or be shot down like partridges²⁷. The state also took measures to isolate Kronstadt from the Petrograd workers, by providing emergency rations in the city – in a desperate bid to stunt the widespread discontent that existed²⁸. The Bolshevik propaganda machine also went into overdrive to try and convince workers across Russia that the Kronstadters were counter-revolutionaries and not socialists. On the eve of the Red Army invasion, the Kro-

²³ Goldman, E. 1923. *My Disillusionment with Russia*. Doubleday, Page & Company: United States

²⁴ Mett, I. 1967. *The Kronstadt Rebellion of 1921*. Black Rose Books: Canada

²⁵ Izvestia (1921) libcom.org 26. Thorndycraft, L. The Kronstadt uprising of 1921. libcom.org

²⁶ (Missing footnote)

²⁷ Getzler, I. 1983. *Kronstadt 1917–1921: The fate of Soviet Democracy*. Cambridge Press: United Kingdom

²⁸ Van der Walt, L. 80th anniversary of Kronstadt Uprising: 18 March 1921/ 18 March 2001. lucienvanderwalt.blogspot.com

nstadters were hoping that workers would join with them, and that a Third Revolution would take place; not just to end capitalism but also the authoritarian state in Russia. This unfortunately was a forlorn hope as on the 6th of March the first attacks on Kronstadt by the Red Army began. Initially, however, the troops refused to attack Kronstadt. In response, the Party sent 3 000 Communist cadre to persuade them. When that failed, more compliant troops were brought in, and many of the soldiers were forced to march on Kronstadt under the threat of death²⁹.

Conclusion

When Kronstadt fell, the last embers of the revolution died. The Bolsheviks failed to realise that the state – an authoritarian structure that concentrates power in the hands of a small ruling class – cannot be used to create a socialist society. Anarchists had long pointed out that a “workers’ state” was a contradiction in terms. It would simply be a one-party state based on state-capitalism. History proved them right. The only way a socialist society could have been created in Russia, or anywhere else, was by workers and peasants themselves, based on worker self-management, collectivisation, and direct democracy through organs of self-governance – in other words an anarchist society. By the time of Kronstadt, the Bolsheviks had assured that such a society would not come about and when workers and peasants tried to bring a freer, more just, society about they were crushed by the state. In the end it was not the Kronstadters who proved to be counter-revolutionaries; but the Bolsheviks.

This lesson is more important than ever. People wanting to build a truly democratic socialism need to be aware that *the state itself*, of whatever type, is neither an ally of the popular classes nor an institution they can use. Workers, the poor and peasants need to build counterpower, outside and against the state and capital, to create a new society within the shell of the old. Faith needs to be placed in workers and the poor to bring genuine socialism about – the task of revolutionaries is to encourage this, not substitute for it. As Bakunin pointed out “the authoritarian system of decrees in trying to *impose* freedom and equality obliterates both”³⁰.

²⁹ Mett, I. 1967. *The Kronstadt Rebellion of 1921*. Black Rose Books: Canada

³⁰ Bakunin, M. *Bakunin on Anarchy*, pp193-194, emphasis in original

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