

The Kronstadt Revolt

The Gulyai-Pole Connection

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As written by whole generations of Soviet historians, the young Soviet republic was shaken at the beginning of March 1921 by news of a counterrevolutionary mutiny in the very heart of the Revolution – Kronstadt. During the more than 80 years separating us from the Kronstadt Revolt, researchers have come up with dozens of versions of its origins: from a conspiracy of White Guards or the machinations of foreign intelligence agents to a hunger revolt or the cleansing of abuses from communism. Some of these versions were quickly forgotten as they were not compatible with the ideological slant of Soviet historiography. Among these neglected versions is the one to which I am partial. Put forward by A. Pukhov, the first scholar to study the revolt, this version remained unknown to the general public for many years, and then was referred to only in specialized monographs.

Conscripts from the South

The root causes of the Kronstadt Revolt become more intelligible, and the revolt itself acquires quite a different internal meaning, if we turn to S. Kanev, the most important Soviet specialist on the history of anarchism. In his principal work, *The October Revolution and the Downfall of Anarchism*, he makes the following assertion:

“Among the 25,000 Kronstadt sailors more than 10,000 were conscripts from Ukraine, mainly from the raions [counties] where Makhno’s bands were active. These people brought to the sailors’ milieu the mood of dissatisfaction of the *seredniak* [middle peasant] with *prodrazverstka* [food requisitioning]. These peasants, many of whom had belonged to anarchist detachments, had become infected with Makhnovist ideals.”¹

This observation, crucial for understanding the Kronstadt events, is confirmed by other sources. For example, S. Uritsky, who took part in suppressing the uprising, wrote with Bolshevik venom:

“The dregs of the Petrograd waterfront, ex-students, Makhnovist and Denikenist prisoners-of-war – these were the main elements which filled the ranks of the Red Army and Navy units of Kronstadt and manned the ships in its harbour.”²

And I Sergeyev, chief of the political section of the Southern Military District (Gulf of Finland), recalled that “80% of the Kronstadt sailors of that period were peasants unhappy with *prodrazverstka*.”³

The cause of this situation was first investigated by the above-mentioned A. Pukhov. Throughout 1920 there was a significant shortage of personnel in the Baltic Fleet which was as high as 60%! Only at the end of 1920 did the Fleet receive substantial reinforcements, 80% of whom were peasants. But what sort of peasants were these? In contrast to the normal mobilizations for the Baltic Fleet, which were carried out in the north-western provinces, this replenishment “consisted of conscripted inhabitants of the South Russia and partially of Cossacks from the Kuban

¹ S. N. Kanev, *The October Revolution and the Downfall of Anarchism*, (Moscow, 1974), pp. 354–355.

² S. P. Uritsky, “Red Kronstadt in the Hands of the Enemies of the Revolution,” in *Downfall of a Counterrevolutionary Adventure*, (Leningrad, 1978), p. 47.

³ I. S. Sergeyev, “From the Notes of a Political Worker,” in *Downfall of a Counterrevolutionary Adventure*, (Leningrad, 1978), p. 162.

region.”⁴ Let’s clarify that Pukhov is referring to Ukraine here as “South Russia,” and subsequently confirms repeatedly that these recruits were Ukrainians.

“Arriving in the Fleet predominately from raions wracked by banditism during the Civil War, from raions where the bands of various batkos were active (Makhno, Struk, Marusya, Angel, Grigoriev...), these young sailors were infected with the mindset of anarcho-banditism.”⁵ Let’s note that the term “anarcho-banditism” was used by the Bolsheviks mainly to refer to the *Makhnovshchina*. And then Pukhov notes that a high percentages of the new recruits had been “active participants in partisan or bandit activities in the South in 1918–1920.” The more experienced Ukrainian recruits were openly referred to as “Makhnovists.” They were formed into four training units – “detachments of junior sailors,” after which they were dispersed to the ships and forts of the Gulf of Finland.

The raions which contributed conscripts to the 4th training unit are known. Seventy percent of the 1st regiment were natives of Odessa, Podolsk, and Volinsk provinces; 90% of the 3rd and 4th regiments had been mobilized in Kiev, Chernigov, and Poltava provinces; and the 5th regiment was made up “almost entirely of deserters from Balta uyezd in Odessa province.”⁶ Roughly the same sort of composition was found in the remaining training units. Moreover, the 1st detachment was distinguished by a high percentage of Kuban Cossacks. Pukhov states frankly that the new reinforcements made a marked change not only in the composition of the Fleet but in its political attitudes. However the mood of the Fleet had changed even before the latest reinforcements at the end of 1920.

Thus, according to a report of the Political Section of the Baltic Fleet from July 20 1919, “on board the ship [the Andrei Pervozvanny] the staff processed 150 new comrade sailors, including former troops of Grigoriev and Makhno.”⁷ We believe this was not the only case. Moreover the battleship Andrei Pervozvanny was moored in Kronstadt harbour at the beginning of the Revolt, being prepared for decommissioning⁸. Massive demobilizing of the Baltic Fleet had still not yet begun. This strongly suggests the presence of former Makhnovists in the ranks of the insurgents. The practice of inserting Makhnovists into the Baltic was well established by the time of the Revolt and the latest wave of Makhnovists encountered earlier waves of Makhnovist conscripts.

Home on Leave

This perspective is confirmed by facts from the biography of the head of the mutinous Kronstadt Revkom himself, S. Petrenko. According to the latest information, he was born in Kaluzha Province but while still a young child his family moved to Zaporozhia where he went to school and then became a metalworker. In 1913 he was called up to the Baltic Fleet. It’s true that the writer D. Prokhorov, in the spirit of the New Russia describes Petrchenko as an “honest Russian sailor,” who “never was a Makhnovist,” and describes the insurgents themselves as supporting

⁴ A. S. Pukhov, “Kronstadt and the Baltic Fleet before the Mutiny of 1921”, *Red Annals* No. 6 (1930), p. 158.

⁵ Pukhov (1930), p. 160.

⁶ Pukhov (1930), pp. 159–160.

⁷ M. V. Kuzmin, *The Kronstadt Mutiny* (Leningrad, 1931), p. 19.

⁸ S. N. Semanov, *The Kronstadt Mutiny* (Moscow, 2003), p. 70.

“equal rights for all political parties.”⁹ But we mustn’t allow the new political mode to confuse the matter. The information about Petrichenko’s home in Zaporozhia explains a lot of things.

In the first place, Aleksandrovsk (Zaporozhia) was located virtually in the centre of the Makhnovist Free Region, was frequently occupied by the Makhnovists, and had a strong underground Makhnovist organization. Secondly, according to Puchkov’s research, in April 1920 Petrichenko received a short-term furlough to visit his home, but tarried there for 3–4 months, returning only in September – October. Upon returning to his battleship “Petropavlovsk,” he, “in conversations with his comrades expressed his sympathy for Batko Makhno, considering him the leader of the Ukrainian peasantry.”¹⁰ It is possible to associate Petrichenko’s furlough with information provided by the Ukrainian historian V. Chop according to which “Petrichenko was at one time a member of the Gulyai-Pole Union of Anarchists.”¹¹ Pukhov draws the following conclusion from his research, namely that “Petrichenko in Kronstadt during the mutiny was the leader of a so-called anarcho-bandit group, which blended with another group – the officers’ group”.¹² Let’s remember that “anarcho-bandits” is a code term for Makhnovists.

Finally, the widespread view that the Makhnovists learned about the Kronstadt Revolt only after its suppression is demonstrably false. Thus, the Soviet historian Yu. Shchetinov labels as propaganda the information in Issue No. 1 of the News published by the provisional revkom of the insurgents “concerning the forthcoming aid to Kronstadt from the bandit detachments of Makhno and the SR Antonov.”¹³ Furthermore, the researcher of the *Makhnovshchina* V. Golovanov, citing V. Volkovinsky, writes that the Makhnovist staff sent greetings by radio to insurgent Kronstadt only on April 7, and “Makhno was not aware that Kronstadt was already not only dead, but six feet under.”¹⁴ However, according to the latest research of S. Semanov, not in April but “already on March 7 a bulletin from the field radio station of the Makhnovists was received in Bucharest, announcing that ‘the hour is approaching when the free cossacks will unite with the heroes of Kronstadt against the hated government of tyrants’”.¹⁵ Moreover, the Makhnovists were heard by Kronstadt, where the radio station broadcast roughly the same text.

Food Requisitioning Terror.

The Ukrainian origins of the Kronstadt Revolt can be discerned as follows. In the winter of 1919–1920 the Denikenists retreated south through Ukraine and removed any remaining food from the 1919 harvest not already removed by the White rear procurement apparatus. But in the raions of southern Right Bank Ukraine, and in part of the Left Bank, areas controlled by Makhno’s Insurgent Army, the peasants avoided this pillaging. Only because the Makhnovists disrupted the Denikinist rear areas were the Reds able to defend Moscow and, following in the wake of the Volunteer Army, occupy Ukraine. Here the Bolsheviks treacherously finished off the Insurgent Army, worn down by battles with the Denikenists and a typhus epidemic. Again, as

⁹ D. Prokhorov, “The Tragedy of a Kronstadt ‘Mutineer’”, in *Top Secret – St. Petersburg Edition*, No. 8, March 3 2003: at <http://konkretno.ru/versia.php?article=846>.

¹⁰ A. S. Pukhov, “Kronstadt under the Rule of the Counterrevolution,” in *Red Annals*, No. 1 (1931), p. 41.

¹¹ V. N. Chop, *Nestor Makhno*, (Zaporozhia, 1998), p. 60

¹² Pukhov (1931), p. 42.

¹³ Yu. A. Shchetinov, *Foiled Conspiracy* (Moscow, 1978), p. 60.

¹⁴ V. Golovanov, *Tachankas from the South* (Moscow – Zaporozhia, 1997), p. 413.

¹⁵ Semanov (2003), p. 209.

in 1919, the Bolsheviks suppressed the anarchist inclinations of the South Ukraine peasantry. In the words of the Soviet researcher Yu. Tereshchenko, “The food policy of the Soviet authorities in Ukraine in 1920 was characterized by intensification of the measures of “war communism”.”¹⁶

In practice this meant the following. According to the decree about prodrazverstka (food requisitioning) in 1920, “surpluses” were to be confiscated only from “kulak” farms larger than three dessatins. But, if the provisional quotas were not fulfilled in the allotted time, then cereal grains could be seized from any storage facility.¹⁷ Of the 158 million poods requisitioned in the whole of Ukraine, for example, the Makhnovist regions of Yekaterinoslav and Kherson provinces accounted for 37.9 and 47.16 million poods respectively! Active for the fulfilment of these quotas in October 1920 in Ukraine were 199 prodotryads [food requisitioning detachments] with a complement of 5,300 “food soldiers.”¹⁸ These figures do not take into account the widespread involvement of the Cheka in the prodrazverstka system, the foraging of rear army units, or the activities of Committees of Poor Peasants. In order to feed their own troops and the Russian provinces ruined by the previous year’s campaign by the Whites, the Bolsheviks carried a ruthless confiscation of foodstuffs. Its peak came at the end of the summer – beginning of the autumn of 1920. One can imagine the resistance of the villages if, despite all these measures the prodrazverstka quota for 1920 was only 40% fulfilled!

So long as there was a market for grain, any prodrazverstka system and State grain monopoly was bound to fail. That’s why, immediately after the final defeat of the Denikin movement, on November 1 1920 a decree was issued by All-Ukrainian Revolutionary Committee about a total prohibition of free trade in grain. The response to this was spontaneous bartering between the city and the countryside, which was referred to in Soviet terminology as “petty speculation.” Peasants and workers travelled to and from cities and villages exchanging manufactured items (made by the workers) for food. That is why a decree of the Soviet of Peoples Commissars of the Ukrainian SSR concerning the struggle with speculation, promulgated on May 6 1920, created blocking detachments. For the remainder of 1920 these detachments seized around 400,000 poods of agricultural produce.¹⁹

In response to this food terror directed against the peasantry, the Makhnovists unleashed a retaliatory “black terror.” The partisans wrecked railway lines – making difficult the transport of grain, and captured trains. While rank-and-file soldiers captured by the Makhnovists were normally released, the team members of prodotryads were frequently wiped out en masse. In population points occupied by the partisans all Soviet institutions were shut down. But severe reprisals were reserved for the Peoples Food Commissariat and its local organs. Usually the Makhnovists returned confiscated products to the peasants, for example, in the town of Zenkov (Poltava province).²⁰ One of the main goals of the long range raids by the Insurgent Army in the summer of 1920 was the annihilation of the apparatus of food terror.

¹⁶ Yu. I. Tereshchenko, *Great October and the Establishment of a Socialist Economy in Ukraine* (Kiev, 1986), p. 166.

¹⁷ S. V. Kulchitsky, *The URSS in the Period of “Military Communism” (1917–1920)* (Kiev, 1994), p. 100.

¹⁸ Tereshchenko, p. 171.

¹⁹ Tereshchenko, p. 191.

²⁰ V. Telitsin, *Nestor Makhno* (Moscow, 1998), p. 322.

A Peasant Navy

After the conclusion of the 3rd Soviet-Makhnovist Agreement in the autumn of 1920 and the beginning of the combined attack on Wrangel, the situation was somewhat ameliorated. However, after the capture of Crimea the Bolsheviks made use of their traditional tactic. As in December 1919 the Red headquarters ordered the exhausted Insurgent Army to proceed to the Polish Front. The purpose was to detach the insurgents from their supply base and the population which supported them. Once removed to an alien environment and surrounded by Red troops, the intention was to extirpate the “Makhnovist spirit” by means of squads of Chekists. Following the same scheme, immediately after the defeat of Wrangel, at the end of November, Frunze ordered the Insurgent Army to move to the Caucasus Front. In both cases the refusal of the Makhnovists “to fulfil an order” was declared to be treason.

The South Ukrainian peasants mobilized in the autumn of 1920, peasants who, in the words of S. Kanev “had spent time in anarchistic detachments,” were sent to join crews and shore units in the Baltic Fleet. The Baltic Fleet was the forge where the cadres of the Bolshevik revolution had been tempered, its main source of strength during the October coup. Located, it seemed, far from active military theatres, the Fleet would easily straighten out the rebellious Makhnovists. However, it was just at time that the Political Department of the Baltic Fleet (Pubalt) completely abandoned work among the rank-and-file. Moreover, the Bolshevik regime had not yet introduced full-scale monitoring of correspondence between military personnel and their homes. And what would former Makhnovists be reading in letters from home?

After the breaking of the Soviet-Makhnovist Agreement the Insurgent Army was subject to a criminal attack by troops of the Southern Front. But the Insurgent Army was not destroyed. The elusive Makhnovist detachments defeated the superior forces of the Reds at will. Then the idea of a military occupation of the Free Region was advanced: it was proposed to inundate it was an enormous number of troops. And, naturally, these troops would not be fed from outside the Region, they would seize the last crumbs from the families of the Red Navy recruits. Letters from the South created extreme emotional distress in the Baltic Fleet. It is probably that by the end of winter in the completely despoiled South Ukrainian villages a real famine had set in. This fact alone made the Kronstadt Revolt virtually inevitable.

Furthermore, like the recruits from the South, the veterans of Kronstadt and the ships of the Baltic Fleet were also peasants, only from north-western provinces for the most part. Because of the stresses associated with demobilization, and not being able to quickly train a large number of marine specialists, the Baltic Fleet command made another error. To relieve stress it began to releasing long-serving sailors on leave to their homes. But what these sailors were observing at home only inflamed their mutinous spirits. According to Semanov, who studied recently declassified archives, the overwhelming majority of complaints made by sailors to the Political Department of the Fleet concerned their home situation, especially with regard to the *prodrazverstka* and tyranny of provincial authorities.²¹ And now unrest began in nearby Petrograd.

²¹ Semanov 2003, pp. 76–77.

Unrest in Petrograd

The winter of 1920–21 was characterized by a fuel and transport crisis. Grain and coal were not being shipped from the South, and the winter was severe. Workers' rations were constantly being reduced and, to save themselves from the cold, they dismantled the city's wooden houses on an alarming scale. Moreover, the workers had been deprived, by their "own" worker-peasant government, not only of the right to strike, but even of the possibility of voluntarily quitting their jobs. The proletarians became prisoners in their own factories. At the same time there was an ongoing expansion of compulsory labour mobilization with Labour Army recruits and military personnel assigned to the "economic front." The two latter categories were housed in barracks. The plight of the workers was so desperate that in spite of the prohibitions of the regime, meetings and strikes began to be held at the largest Petrograd factories.

The Baltisky and Trubochny plants, the "Arsenal" and the Obukhovsky, the Rozenkrantz plant, and dozens of smaller enterprises were hit by strikes. One of the principal demands raised at spontaneous meetings was the abolishment of blocking detachments seizing goods from workers returning from the countryside, and the permitting of free trade. Only here and there did these economic demands acquire a political dimension: democratization of Soviets, convening a Constituent Assembly, etc. This shows the real course of events. At first the spontaneous movement of workers demanded only economic freedoms. Only subsequently, when agitation was begun among them by Mensheviks, SRs, and Anarchists, did their economics acquire political overtones.

The situation of the Petrograd workers and the unrest in February 1921 is described vividly and in detail in the recent work by S. Semonov. I shall limit myself to an extract from a personal letter, cited by the author, dated March 1 1921 – the day the Kronstadt Revolt started:

"The news we have to report from Kronstadt and Petrograd is all about riots, because the city inhabitants are given half a pound of bread per day per person and this is not enough. It is impossible to purchase anything for money, because the militia cracks down on any kind of free trade. So now city dwellers have murdered four of the militia and now there are riots and there is no telling where it will end. The sailors are rioting. They want free trade and will revolt in the spring against the Communists because here all the sailors and Red Army soldiers don't want communes and are howling "down with the commune and give us a free life."²²

Considering the whole wave of strikes in Petrograd in the winter of 1920–21, it would seem the event which most illuminates the Kronstadt Revolt was the demonstration on February 24. Workers of the defence industry at the Trubochny and Baltisky shipbuilding plants, supported by the women workers of the Leferme tobacco factory (2,500 – 3,000 people in total) took to the streets of Vasilevsky Island. And 300–400 demonstrators, among whom there were already sailors and soldiers, headed to the Deryabinsky barracks where the guardhouse of the Petrograd naval base was located. The demonstrators quickly disarmed the guards at the barracks and released some of the prisoners. The authorities reacted quickly: Red cadet units were dispatched to Vasilevsky Island and the demonstration was dispersed.

²² Semonov 2003, p. 113.

This was yet another omen of the inevitably uprising. The “officer” units of Red cadets were the most reliable troops of the Bolshevik regime, used in South Ukraine for special punitive operations. In particular, they were used in those cases where the questionable morality of such operations demoralized regular military units. Thus a brigade of Petrograd officer cadets took part in the treacherous seizure and shooting of the staff of the Crimean Group of the Makhnovists in November 1920 and in the punitive operation in the village of Andreyevka after the insurgents had broken out of that place in December of the same year. The breaking up of the Vasilevsky Island demonstration by units of officer cadets meant that the units of the Petrograd naval base had already been infected with mutinous sentiments and could not be trusted by the Bolsheviks. On the same day (February 24) by a decision of the Ispolkom of the Petrograd Soviet martial law was declared in the city.

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