

# What was the Kronstadt Rebellion?

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## What was the Kronstadt Rebellion?

The Kronstadt rebellion took place in the first weeks of March, 1921. Kronstadt was (and is) a naval fortress on an island in the Gulf of Finland. Traditionally, it has served as the base of the Russian Baltic Fleet and to guard the approaches to the city of St. Petersburg (which during the first world war was re-named Petrograd, then later Leningrad, and is now St. Petersburg again) thirty-five miles away.

The Kronstadt sailors had been in the vanguard of the revolutionary events of 1905 and 1917. In 1917, Trotsky called them the *"pride and glory of the Russian Revolution."* The inhabitants of Kronstadt had been early supporters and practitioners of soviet power, forming a free commune in 1917 which was relatively independent of the authorities. In the words of Israel Getzler, an expert on Kronstadt, *"it was in its commune-like self-government that Red Kronstadt really came into its own, realising the radical, democratic and egalitarian aspirations of its garrison and working people, their insatiable appetite for social recognition, political activity and public debate, their pent up yearning for education, integration and community. Almost overnight, the ship's crews, the naval and military units and the workers created and practised a direct democracy of base assemblies and committees."* [Kronstadt 1917-1921, p. 248] In the centre of the fortress an enormous public square served as a popular forum holding as many as 30,000 persons. The Kronstadters *"proved convincingly the capacity of ordinary people to use their 'heads, too' in governing themselves, and managing Russia's largest navel base and fortress."* [Getzler, **Op. Cit.**, p. 250]

The Russian Civil War had ended in Western Russia in November 1920 with the defeat of General Wrangel in the Crimea. All across Russia popular protests were erupting in the countryside and in the towns and cities. Peasant uprisings were occurring against the Communist Party policy of grain requisitioning (a policy the Bolsheviks and their argued had been thrust upon them by the circumstances but which involved extensive, barbaric and counter-productive repression). In urban areas, a wave of spontaneous strikes occurred and in late February a near general strike broke out in Petrograd.

On February 26th, in response to these events in Petrograd, the crews of the battleships *Petropavlovsk* and *Sevastopol* held an emergency meeting and agreed to send a delegation to the city to investigate and report back on the ongoing strike movement. On their turn two days later, the delegates informed their fellow sailors of the strikes (with which they had full sympathy with) and the government repression directed against them. Those present at this meeting on the *Petropavlovsk* then approved a resolution which raised 15 demands which included free elections to the soviets, freedom of speech, press, assembly and organisation to workers, peasants, anarchists and left-socialists (see [section 3](#) for full details). Of the 15 demands, only two were related to what Marxists like to term the "petty-bourgeoisie" (the peasantry and artisans) and these demanded *"full freedom of action"* for all peasants and artisans who did not hire labour. Like the Petrograd workers, the Kronstadt sailors demanded the equalisation of wages and the end of roadblock detachments restricting travel and the ability of workers to bring

food into the city.

A mass meeting of fifteen to sixteen thousand people was held in Anchor Square on March 1st and what has become known as the ***Petropavlovsk*** resolution was passed after the "*fact-finding*" delegation had made its report. Only two Bolshevik officials voted against the resolution. At this meeting it was decided to send another delegation to Petrograd to explain to the strikers and the city garrison of the demands of Kronstadt and to request that non-partisan delegates be sent by the Petrograd workers to Kronstadt to learn first-hand what was happening there. This delegation of thirty members was arrested by the Bolshevik government.

As the term of office of the Kronstadt soviet was about to expire, the mass meeting also decided to call a "*Conference of Delegates*" for March 2nd. This was to discuss the manner in which the new soviet elections would be held. This conference consisted of two delegates from the ship's crews, army units, the docks, workshops, trade unions and Soviet institutions. This meeting of 303 delegates endorsed the ***Petropavlovsk*** resolution and elected a five-person "*Provisional Revolutionary Committee*" (this was enlarged to 15 members two days later by another conference of delegates). This committee was charged with organising the defence of Kronstadt, a move decided upon in part by the threats of the Bolshevik officials there and the groundless rumour that the Bolsheviks had dispatched forces to attack the meeting. Red Kronstadt had turned against the Communist government and raised the slogan of the 1917 revolution "*All Power to the Soviets*", to which was added "*and not to parties.*" They termed this revolt the "*Third Revolution*" and would complete the work of the first two Russian Revolutions in 1917 by instituting a true toilers republic based on freely elected, self-managed, soviets.

The Communist Government responded with an ultimatum on March 2nd. This asserted that the revolt had "*undoubtedly been prepared by French counterintelligence*" and that the ***Petropavlovsk*** resolution was a "*SR-Black Hundred*" resolution (SR stood for "Social Revolutionaries", a party with a traditional peasant base and whose right-wing had sided with White forces; the "Black Hundreds" were a reactionary, indeed proto-fascist, force dating back to before the revolution which attacked Jews, labour militants, radicals and so on). They argued that the revolt had been organised by an ex-Tsarist officers led by ex-General Kozlovsky (who had, ironically, been placed in the fortress as a military specialist by Trotsky). This was the official line through-out the revolt.

During the revolt, Kronstadt started to re-organise itself from the bottom up. The trade union committees were re-elected and a Council of Trade Unions formed. The Conference of Delegates met regularly to discuss issues relating to the interests of Kronstadt and the struggle against the Bolshevik government (specifically on March 2nd, 4th and 11th). Rank and file Communists left the party in droves, expressing support for the revolt and its aim of "*all power to the soviets and not to parties.*" About 300 Communists were arrested and treated humanly in prison (in comparison, at least 780 Communists left the party in protest of the actions it was taking against Kronstadt and its general role in the revolution). Significantly, up to one-third of the delegates elected to Kronstadt's rebel conference of March 2nd were Communists. [Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 184-7 and p. 81]

The Kronstadt revolt was a non-violent one, but from the start the attitude of the authorities was not one of serious negotiation but rather one of delivering an ultimatum: either come to your senses or suffer the consequences. Indeed, the Bolsheviks issued the threat that they would shoot the rebels "like partridges" and took the families of the sailors hostage in Petrograd. Towards the end of the revolt Trotsky sanctioned the use of chemical warfare against the rebels and if they had not been crushed, a gas attack would have carried out. [Paul Avrich, **Kronstadt 1921**, p. 146 and pp. 211-2] No real attempt was made to settle the revolt peacefully. While there was at least three to four weeks before the ice was due to melt after the March 2nd "Conference of Delegates" meeting which marked the real start of the revolt, the Bolsheviks started military operations at 6.45pm on March 7th.

There were possible means for a peaceful resolution of the conflict. On March 5th, two days before the bombardment of Kronstadt had begun, anarchists led by Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman offered themselves as intermediates to facilitate negotiations between the rebels and the government (anarchist influence had been strong in Kronstadt in 1917). [Emma Goldman, **Living My Life**, vol. 2, pp. 882-3] This was ignored by the Bolsheviks. Years later, the Bolshevik Victor Serge (and eye-witness to the events) acknowledged that "*[e]ven when the fighting had started, it would have been easy to avoid the worst: it was only necessary to accept the mediation offered by the anarchists (notably Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman) who had contact with the insurgents. For reasons of prestige and through an excess of authoritarianism, the Central Committee refused this course.*" [**The Serge-Trotsky Papers**, p. 164]

Another possible solution, namely the Petrograd Soviet suggestion of March 6th that a delegation of party and non-party members of the Soviet visit Kronstadt was not pursued by the government. The rebels, unsurprisingly enough, had reservations about the **real** status of the non-party delegates and asked that the elections to the delegation take place within the factories, with observers from Kronstadt present (in itself a very reasonable request). Nothing came of this (unsurprisingly, as such a delegation would have reported the truth that Kronstadt was a popular revolt of working people so exposing Bolshevik lies and making the planned armed attack more difficult). A delegation "*sent by Kronstadt to explain the issues to the Petrograd Soviet and people was in the prisons of the Cheka.*" [Victor Serge, **Memoirs of a Revolutionary**, p. 127] According to Serge, "*right from the first moment, at a time when it was easy to mitigate the conflict, the Bolshevik leaders had no intention of using anything but forcible methods.*" [**Ibid.**] This is confirmed by latter research. The refusal to pursue these possible means of resolving the crisis peacefully is explained by the fact that the decision to attack Kronstadt had already been made. Basing himself on documents from the Soviet Archives, historian Israel Getzler states that "*[b]y 5 March, if not earlier, the Soviet leaders had decided to crush Kronstadt. Thus, in a cable to . . . [a] member of the Council of Labour and Defence, on that day, Trotsky insisted that 'only the seizure of Kronstadt will put an end to the political crisis in Petrograd.'* On the same day, acting as chairman of the RVSR [the Revolutionary Military Council of the Army and Navy of the Republic], he ordered the reformation and mobilisation of the Seventh Army 'to suppress the uprising in Kronstadt,' and appointed General Mikhail Tukhachevskii as its commander changed with suppressing the uprising in Kronstadt 'in the shortest possible time.'" ["The Communist

*Leaders' Role in the Kronstadt Tragedy of 1921 in the Light of Recently Published Archival Documents*", **Revolutionary Russia**, pp. 24-44, Vol. 15, No. 1, June 2002, p. 32]

As Alexander Berkman noted, the Communist government would *"make no concessions to the proletariat, while at the same time they were offering to compromise with the capitalists of Europe and America."* [Berkman, **The Russian Tragedy**, p. 62] While happy to negotiate and compromise with foreign governments, they treated the workers and peasants of Kronstadt (like that of the rest of Russia) as the class enemy (indeed, at the time, Lenin was publicly worrying whether the revolt was a White plot to sink these negotiations!).

The revolt was isolated and received no external support. The Petrograd workers were under martial law and could little or no action to support Kronstadt (assuming they refused to believe the Bolshevik lies about the uprising). The Communist government started to attack Kronstadt on March 7th. The first assault was a failure. *"After the Gulf had swallowed its first victims,"* Paul Avrigh records, *"some of the Red soldiers, including a body of Peterhof kursanty, began to defect to the insurgents. Others refused to advance, in spite of threats from the machine gunners at the rear who had orders to shoot any wavers. The commissar of the northern group reported that his troops wanted to send a delegation to Kronstadt to find out the insurgents' demands."* [Avrigh, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 153-4] After 10 days of constant attacks the Kronstadt revolt was crushed by the Red Army. On March 17th, the final assault occurred. Again, the Bolsheviks had to force their troops to fight. On the night of 16-17 March, for example, *"the extraordinary troika of Aleksei Nikolaev had arrested over 100 so-called instigators, 74 of whom he had publicly shot."* [Getzler, **Op. Cit.**, p. 35] Once the Bolshevik forces finally entered the city of Kronstadt *"the attacking troops took revenge for their fallen comrades in an orgy of bloodletting."* [Avrigh, **Op. Cit.**, p. 211] The next day, as an irony of history, the Bolsheviks celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the Paris Commune.

The repression did not end there. According to Serge, the *"defeated sailors belonged body and sole to the Revolution; they had voiced the suffering and the will of the Russian people"* yet *"[h]undreds of prisoners were taken away to Petrograd; months later they were still being shot in small batches, a senseless and criminal agony"* (particularly as they were *"prisoners of war . . . and the Government had for a long time promised an amnesty to its opponents on condition that they offered their support"*). *"This protracted massacre was either supervised or permitted by Dzerzhinsky"* (the head of the Cheka). The *"responsibilities of the Bolshevik Central Committee had been simply enormous"* and *"the subsequent repression . . . needlessly barbarous."* [**Memoirs of a Revolutionary**, p. 131 and p. 348]

The Soviet forces suffered over 10,000 casualties storming Kronstadt. There are no reliable figures for the rebels loses or how many were later shot by the Cheka or sent to prison camps. The figures that exist are fragmentary. Immediately after the defeat of the revolt, 4,836 Kronstadt sailors were arrested and deported to the Crimea and the Caucasus. When Lenin heard of this on the 19th of April, he expressed great misgivings about it and they were finally sent to forced labour camps in the Archangelsk, Vologda and Murmansk regions. Eight thousand sailors, soldiers and civilians escaped over the ice to Finland. The crews of the **Petropavlovsk** and

*Sevastopol* fought to the bitter end, as did the cadets of the mechanics school, the torpedo detachment and the communications unit. A statistical communiqué of the Special Section of the Extraordinary **Troikas** of 1st May stated that 6,528 rebels had been arrested, of whom 2,168 had been shot (33%), 1,955 had been sentenced to forced labour (of whom 1,486 received a five year sentence), and 1,272 were released. A statistical review of the revolt made in 1935-6 listed the number arrested as 10,026 and stated that it had "not been possible to establish accurately the number of the repressed." The families of the rebels were deported, with Siberia considered as "*undoubtedly the only suitable region*" for them. Significantly, one of the members of the **troika** judging the rebels complained that they had to rely exclusively on information provided by the Special Section of the **Vecheka** as "*neither commissars nor local Communists provided any material.*" [Israel Getzler, "*The Communist Leaders' Role in the Kronstadt Tragedy of 1921 in the Light of Recently Published Archival Documents*", **Revolutionary Russia**, pp. 24-44, Vol. 15, No. 1, June 2002, pp. 35-7]

After the revolt had been put down, the Bolshevik government reorganised the fortress. While it had attacked the revolt in the name of defending "*Soviet Power*" Kronstadt's newly appointed military commander "*abolish[ed] the [Kronstadt] soviet altogether*" and ran the fortress "*with the assistance of a revolutionary troika*" (i.e. an appointed three man committee). [Getzler, **Op. Cit.**, p. 244] Kronstadt's newspaper was renamed **Krasnyi Kronshtadt** (from *Izvestiia*) and stated in an editorial that the "*fundamental features*" of Kronstadt's restored "*dictatorship of the proletariat*" during its "*initial phases*" were "*[r]estrictions on political liberty, terror, military centralism and discipline and the direction of all means and resources towards the creation of an offensive and defensive state apparatus.*" [quoted by Getzler, **Op. Cit.**, p. 245] The victors quickly started to eliminate all traces of the revolt. Anchor square became "Revolutionary Square" and the rebel battleships *Petropavlovsk* and *Sevastopol* were renamed the *Marat* and the *Paris Commune*, respectively.

That, in a nutshell, was the Kronstadt revolt. Obviously we cannot cover all the details and we recommend readers to consult the books and articles we list at the end of this section for fuller accounts of the events. However, that presents the key points in the rebellion. Now we must analyse the revolt and indicate why it is so important in evaluating Bolshevism in both practice and as a revolutionary theory.

In the sections which follow, we indicate why the revolt is so important ([section 1](#)) and place it in historical context ([section 2](#)). We then present and discuss the Kronstadt demands, indicating their sources in working class rebellion and radicalism (see sections [3](#) and [4](#)). We indicate the lies the Bolsheviks said about the rebellion at the time ([section 5](#)), whether it was, in fact, a White plot ([section 6](#)) and indicate the revolt's real relationship to the Whites ([section 7](#)). We also disprove Trotskyist assertions that the sailors in 1921 were different from those in 1917 ([section 8](#)) or that their political perspectives had fundamentally changed ([section 9](#)). We indicate that state coercion and repression was the significant in why the Kronstadt revolt did not spread to the Petrograd workers ([section 10](#)). Then we discuss the possibility of White intervention during and after the revolt ([section 11](#)). We follow this with a discussion of arguments that the country was too exhausted to allow soviet democracy ([section 12](#)) or that soviet democracy

would have resulted in the defeat of the revolution ([section 13](#)). In the process, we will also show the depths to which supporters of Leninism will sink to defend their heroes (in particular, see [section 14](#)). Lastly, we discuss what the Kronstadt revolt tells us about Leninism ([section 15](#))

As we will hope to prove, Kronstadt was a popular uprising from below by the same sailors, soldiers and workers that made the 1917 October revolution. The Bolshevik repression of the revolt **can** be justified in terms of defending the state power of the Bolsheviks but it cannot be defended in terms of socialist theory. Indeed, it indicates that Bolshevism is a flawed political theory which cannot create a socialist society but only a state capitalist regime based on party dictatorship. This is what Kronstadt shows above all else: given a choice between workers' power and party power, Bolshevism will destroy the former to ensure the latter (see [section 15](#) in particular). In this, Kronstadt is no isolated event (as we indicate in [section 2](#)).

There are many essential resources on the revolt available. The best in depth studies of the revolt are Paul Avrich's **Kronstadt 1921** and Israel Getzler's **Kronstadt 1917-1921**. Anarchist works include Ida Mett's **The Kronstadt Uprising** (by far the best), Alexander Berkman's **The Kronstadt Rebellion** (which is a good introduction and included in his **The Russian Tragedy**), Voline's **The Unknown Revolution** has a good chapter on Kronstadt (and quotes extensively from the Kronstadters' paper *Izvestiia*) and volume two of Daniel Guerin's **No Gods, No Masters** has an excellent section on the rebellion which includes a lengthy extract from Emma Goldman's autobiography **Living my Life** on the events as well as extracts from the Kronstadters' paper. Anton Ciliga's (a libertarian socialist/Marxist) **Kronstadt Revolt** is also a good introduction to the issues relating to the uprising. Eye-witness accounts include chapters in Berkman's **The Bolshevik Myth** as well as Goldman's **My Disillusionment in Russia**. Goldman's autobiography **Living My Life** also has useful material on the events.

For the Leninist analysis, the anthology **Kronstadt** contains Lenin and Trotsky's articles on the revolt plus supplementary essays refuting anarchist accounts. This work is recommended for those seeking the official Trotskyist version of events as it contains all the relevant documents by the Bolshevik leaders. Emma Goldman's **Trotsky Protests Too Much** is a great reply to Trotsky's comments and one of his followers contained in this work. Victor Serge was another eye-witness to the Kronstadt revolt. An individualist anarchist turned Bolshevik, his **Memoirs of a Revolutionary** is worth looking at to discover why he supported what the Bolsheviks did, albeit reluctantly.

## 1 Why is the Kronstadt rebellion important?

The Kronstadt rebellion is important because, as Voline put it, it was *"the first entirely independent attempt of the people to liberate itself from all yokes and achieve the Social Revolution, an attempt made directly, resolutely, and boldly by the working masses themselves without political shepherds, without leaders or tutors. It was the first step towards the third and social revolution."* [**The Unknown Revolution**, pp. 537-8]

The Kronstadt sailors, soldiers and workers in 1917 had been the one of the first groups to



support the slogan "All power to the Soviets" as well as one of the first towns to put it into practice. The focal point of the 1921 revolt -- the sailors of the warships *Petropavlovsk* and *Sevastopol* -- had, in 1917, been supporters of the Bolsheviks. The sailors had been considered, until those fateful days in 1921, the pride and glory of the revolution and considered by all to be thoroughly revolutionary in spirit and action. They were the staunchest supporters of the Soviet system but, as the revolt showed, they were opposed to the dictatorship of any political party.

Therefore Kronstadt is important in evaluating the honesty of Leninist claims to be in favour of soviet democracy and power. The civil war was effectively over, yet the regime showed no signs of stopping the repression against working class protest or rights. Opposing re-elections to soviets, the Bolshevik regime was repressing strikers in the name of "soviet power" and "the political power of the proletariat." In the countryside, the Bolsheviks continued their futile, evil and counterproductive policies against the peasants (ignoring the fact that their government was meant to be at the head of a workers **and** peasants' state). Occurring as it did after the end of the civil war, Kronstadt played a key role in opening the eyes of anarchists like Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman to the real role of Bolshevism in the revolution. Until then, they (like many others) supported the Bolsheviks, rationalising their dictatorship as a temporary measure necessitated by the civil war. Kronstadt smashed that illusion, "broke the last thread that held me to the Bolsheviks. The wanton slaughter they had instigated spoke more eloquently against than aught else. Whatever the pretences of the past, the Bolsheviks now proved themselves the most pernicious enemies of the Revolution. I would have nothing further to do with them." [Emma Goldman, **My Disillusionment in Russia**, p. 200]

The events at Kronstadt cannot be looked at in isolation, but rather as part of a general struggle of the Russian working people against "their" government. Indeed, as we indicate in the [next section](#), this repression **after** the end of the Civil War followed the same pattern as that started **before** it. Just as the Bolsheviks had repressed soviet democracy in Kronstadt in 1921 in favour of party dictatorship, they had done so regularly elsewhere in early 1918.

The Kronstadt revolt was a popular movement from below aiming at restoring soviet power. As Alexander Berkman notes, the "spirit of the Conference [of delegates which elected the Provisional Revolutionary Committee] was thoroughly Sovietist: Kronstadt demanded Soviets free from interference by any political party; it wanted non-partisan Soviets that should truly reflect the needs and express the will of the workers and peasants. The attitude of the delegates was antagonistic to the arbitrary rule of bureaucratic commissars, but friendly to the Communist Party as such. They were staunch adherents of the Soviet **system** and they were earnestly seeking to find, by means friendly and peaceful, a solution of the pressing problems" facing the revolution. [**The Russian Tragedy**, p. 67] The attitude of the Bolsheviks indicated that, for them, soviet power was only useful in so far as it ensured their party's power and if the two came into conflict then the latter must survive over the corpse of the former. Thus Berkman:

*"But the 'triumph' of the Bolsheviks over Kronstadt held within itself the defeat of Bolshevism. It exposes the true character of the Communist dictatorship. The Communists proved themselves willing to sacrifice Communism, to make almost any*



*compromise with international capitalism, yet refused the just demands of their own people -- demands that voiced the October slogans of the Bolsheviks themselves: Soviets elected by direct and secret ballot, according to the Constitution of the Russian Socialist Federal Soviet Republic; and freedom of speech and press for the revolutionary parties."* [Op. Cit., p. 90]

Investigating the Kronstadt revolt forces intelligent and honest minds into a critical examination of Bolshevik theories and practices. It exploded the Bolshevik myth of the Communist State being the "Workers' and Peasants' Government". It proved that the Communist Party dictatorship and the Russian Revolution are opposites, contradictory and mutually exclusive. While it may be justifiable to argue that the repression directed by the Bolsheviks against working class people **during** the civil war could be explained by the needs of the war, the same cannot be said for Kronstadt. Similarly, the Leninist justifications for their power and actions at Kronstadt have direct implications for current activity and future revolutions. As we argue in [section 15](#), the logic of these rationales simply mean that modern day Leninists will, if in the same position, destroy soviet democracy to defend "soviet power" (i.e. the power of their party).

In effect, Kronstadt was the clash between the reality of Leninism and its image or rhetoric. It raises many important issues as regards Bolshevism and the rationale it has produced to justify certain actions. *"The Kronstadt experience,"* as Berkman argues, *"proves once more that government, the State -- whatever its name or form -- is ever the mortal enemy of liberty and popular self-determination. The state has no soul, no principles. It has but one aim -- to secure power and hold it, at any cost. That is the political lesson of Kronstadt."* [Op. Cit., p. 89]

Kronstadt is also important in that it, like most of the Russian Revolution and Civil War, confirmed anarchist analysis and predictions. This can be seen when *Izvestiia* (the paper produced during the rebellion by the Provisional Revolutionary Committee) argued that in Kronstadt *"there have been laid the foundations of the Third Revolution, which will break the last chains of the workers and lay open the new highway to socialist construction."* [quoted by Voline, **The Unknown Revolution**, p. 508]

This confirmed the arguments of Russian anarchists in 1917, who had predicted that *"if the 'transfer of power to the soviets' comes in fact to signify the seizure of political authority by a new political party with the aim of guiding reconstruction from above, 'from the centre'"* then *"there is no doubt that this 'new power' can in no way satisfy even the most immediate needs and demands of the people, much less begin the task of 'socialist reconstruction' . . . Then, after a more or less prolonged interruption, the struggle will inevitably be renewed. Then will begin a third and last stage of the Great Revolution. There will begin a struggle between the living forces arising from the creative impulse of the popular masses on the spot, on the one hand, namely the local workers' and peasants' organisations acting directly . . . and the centralist Social Democratic power defending its existence, on the other; a struggle between authority and freedom."* [quoted by Paul Avrich, **Anarchists in the Russian Revolution**, p. 94]

Thus Kronstadt is a symbol of the fact that state power cannot be utilised by the working class and always becomes a force for minority rule (in this case of former workers and revolutionaries,

as Bakunin predicted).

There is another reason why the study of Kronstadt is important. Since the suppression of the revolt, Leninist and Trotskyist groups have continually **justified** the acts of the Bolsheviks. Moreover, they have followed Lenin and Trotsky in slandering the revolt and, indeed, have continually lied about it. When Trotskyist John Wright states that the supporters of Kronstadt have "*distort[ed] historical facts, monstrously exaggerat[ed] every subsidiary issue or question . . . and throw[n] a veil . . . over the **real** program and aims of the mutiny*" he is, in fact, describing his and his fellow Trotskyists. [Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, p. 102] Indeed, as we will prove, anarchist accounts have been validated by later research while Trotskyist assertions have been exploded time and time again. Indeed, it would be a useful task to write a companion to Trotsky's book **The Stalin School of Falsification** about Trotsky and his followers activities in the field of re-writing history.

Similarly, when Trotsky argues that anarchists like Goldman and Berkman "*do not have the slightest understanding of the criteria and methods of scientific research*" and just "*quote the proclamations of the insurgents like pious preachers quoting Holy Scriptures*" he is, in fact, just describing himself and his followers (as we shall see, the latter just repeat his and Lenin's assertions regardless of how silly or refuted they are). Ironically, he states that "*Marx has said that it is impossible to judge either parties or peoples by what they say about themselves.*" [Lenin and Trotsky, **Op. Cit.**, p. 88] As Emma Goldman argued, "*[h]ow pathetic that he does not realise how much this applies to him!*" [**Trotsky Protests Too Much**] Kronstadt shows what the Bolsheviks said about their regime was the opposite of what it really was, as show by its actions.

What will also become clear from our discussion is the way Trotskyists have doctored the academic accounts to fit their ideological account of the uprising. The reason for this will become clear. Simply put, the supporters of Bolshevism cannot help lie about the Kronstadt revolt as it so clearly exposes the **real** nature of Bolshevik ideology. Rather than support the Kronstadt call for soviet democracy, the Bolsheviks crushed the revolt, arguing that in so doing they were defending "soviet power." Their followers have repeated these arguments.

This expression of Leninist double-think (the ability to know two contradictory facts and maintain both are true) can be explained. Once it is understood that "*workers' power*" and "*soviet power*" actually mean **party power** then the contradictions disappear. Party power had to be maintained at all costs, including the destruction of those who desired real soviet and workers' power (and so soviet democracy).

For example, Trotsky argued that in 1921 "*the proletariat had to hold political power in its hands*" yet later Trotskyists argue that the proletariat was too exhausted, atomised and decimated to do so. [Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, p. 81] Similarly, the Trotskyist Pierre Frank states that for the Bolsheviks, "*the dilemma was posed in these terms: either keep the workers' state under their leadership, or see the counterrevolution begin, in one or other political disguise, ending in a counterrevolutionary reign of terror that would leave not the slightest room for democracy.*" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 15] Of course the fact that there was "*not the slightest room for democracy*" under Lenin is not mentioned, nor is the fact that the "*dictatorship of the party*" had been a fundamental

aspect of Bolshevik ideology since early 1919 and practice since mid-1918 (by the latest). Nor does Frank consider it important to note that a *"reign of terror"* did develop under Stalin from the terror, repression and dictatorship practised in 1921 by Lenin and Trotsky.

Most Leninists follow Frank and argue that the suppression of the rebellion was essential to defend the *"gains of the revolution."* What exactly were these gains? Not soviet democracy, freedom of speech, assembly and press, trade union freedom and so on as the Kronstadters were crushed for demanding these. No, apparently the "gains" of the revolution was a Bolshevik government pure and simple. Never mind the fact it was a one-party dictatorship, with a strong and privileged bureaucratic machine and no freedom of speech, press, association or assembly for working people. The fact that Lenin and Trotsky were in power is enough for their followers to justify the repression of Kronstadt and subscribe to the notion of a "workers' state" which excludes workers from power.

Thus the double-think of Bolshevism is clearly seen from the Kronstadt events. The Bolsheviks and their supporters argue that Kronstadt was suppressed to defend soviet power yet argue that the Kronstadt demand for free soviet elections was *"counter-revolutionary"*, *"backward"*, *"petty-bourgeois"* and so on. How soviet power could mean anything without free elections is never explained. Similarly, they argue that it was necessary to defend the *"workers state"* by slaughtering those who called for workers to have some kind of say in how that state operated. It appears that the role of workers in a workers' state was simply that of following orders without question (indeed, Trotsky was arguing in the 1930s that the Russian working class was still the ruling class under Stalin -- *"So long as the forms of property that have been created by the October Revolution are not overthrown, the proletariat remains the ruling class."* [**The Class Nature of the Soviet State**]).

How can the Bolshevik repression be justified in terms of defending workers power when the workers were powerless? How can it be defended in terms of soviet power when the soviets were rubber stamps of the government?

The logic of the Bolsheviks and their latter-day apologists and supporters is the same character as that of the U.S. Officer during the Vietnam War who explained that in order to save the village, they first had to destroy it. In order to save soviet power, Lenin and Trotsky had to destroy soviet democracy.

One last point, while the Kronstadt revolt is a key event in the Russian Revolution, one that signified its end, we must not forget that it is just one in a long series of Bolshevik attacks on the working class. As we indicated in the appendix on ["What happened during the Russian Revolution?"](#) (and provide an overview in the [next section](#)), the Bolshevik state had proven itself to be anti-revolutionary continually since October 1917. However, Kronstadt is important simply because it so clearly pitted soviet democracy against "soviet power" and occurred **after** the end of the civil war. As it brings the Russian Revolution to an end, it deserves to be remembered, analysed and discussed by all revolutionaries who seek to understand the past in order not to repeat the same mistakes again.

## 2 What was the context of the Kronstadt revolt?

The Kronstadt revolt cannot be understood in isolation. Indeed, to do so misses the real reason why Kronstadt is so important. Kronstadt was the end result of four years of revolution and civil war, the product of the undermining of soviet democracy by a combination of Bolshevism and war. The actions of the Bolsheviks in 1921 and their ideological justifications for their actions (justifications, of course, when they got beyond lying about the revolt -- see [section 5](#)) merely reproduced in concentrated form what had been occurring ever since they had seized power.

Therefore it is necessary to present a short summary of Bolshevik activities before the events of Kronstadt (see ["What happened during the Russian Revolution?"](#) for fuller details). In addition, we have to sketch the developing social stratification occurring under Lenin and the events immediate before the revolt which sparked it off (namely the strike wave in Petrograd). Once this has been done, we will soon see that Kronstadt was not an isolated event but rather an act of solidarity with the oppressed workers of Petrograd and an attempt to save the Russian Revolution from Communist dictatorship and bureaucracy.

Alexander Berkman provides an excellent overview of what had happened in Russia after the October Revolution:

*"The elective system was abolished, first in the army and navy, then in the industries. The Soviets of peasants and workers were castrated and turned into obedient Communist Committees, with the dreaded sword of the Cheka [political para-military police] ever hanging over them. The labour unions governmentalised, their proper activities suppressed, they were turned into mere transmitters of the orders of the State. Universal military service, coupled with the death penalty for conscientious objectors; enforced labour, with a vast officialdom for the apprehension and punishment of 'deserters'; agrarian and industrial conscription of the peasantry; military Communism in the cities and the system of requisitioning in the country . . . ; the suppression of workers' protests by the military; the crushing of peasant dissatisfaction with an iron hand. . ." [The Russian Tragedy, p. 27]*

We discussed each of these features in more detail in the appendix on ["What happened during the Russian Revolution?"](#). Here we will simply indicate that the Bolsheviks had systematically undermined the effective power of the soviets. Both locally and nationally, post-October power was centralised into the hands of the soviet executives rather than the general assemblies. At the top, power was concentrated even further with the creation of a Bolshevik government **above** the Central Executive Council elected by the (then) quarterly soviet congress. This is not all. Faced with growing opposition to their policies, the Bolsheviks responded in two ways. Either the soviet was gerrymandered to make the workplace soviet elections irrelevant (as in, say, Petrograd) or they simply disbanded any soviet elected with a non-Bolshevik majority (as in **all** provincial soviets for which records exist). So Bolshevik opposition to the soviet democracy demanded by the Kronstadt revolt had a long pedigree. It had started a few months after the Bolsheviks seizure of power in the name of the soviets.

They repressed opposition parties to maintain their position (for example, suppressing their newspapers). Similarly, the Bolsheviks attacked the anarchists in Moscow on the 11-12 of April, 1918, using armed detachments of the Cheka (the political police). The Kronstadt soviet, incidentally, condemned the action by a vote of 81 to 57 against (with 15 abstentions). [Getzler, **Kronstadt 1917-1921**, p. 186] This repression was political in nature, aiming to neutralise a potential political threat and was not the only example of political repression in this period (see the appendix on ["What happened during the Russian Revolution?"](#)).

This is just a summary of what was happening in Russia in early 1918 (see [section 3](#) of the appendix on ["What caused the degeneration of the Russian Revolution?"](#) for more details). This Bolshevik assault on the soviets occurred during the spring of 1918 (i.e. in March, April and May). That is **before** the Czech rising and the onset of full scale civil war which occurred in late May. Clearly, any attempt to blame the Civil War for the elimination of soviet power and democracy seems woefully weak given the actions of the Bolsheviks in the spring of 1918. And, equally clearly, the reduction of local soviet influence cannot be fully understood without factoring in the Bolshevik prejudice in favour of centralisation (as codified in the Soviet Constitution of 1918) along with this direct repression. Indeed, the net effect of the Russian Civil War helped the Bolsheviks as it would make many dissident workers support the Bolsheviks during the war. This, however, did not stop mass resistance and strikes breaking out periodically during the war when workers and peasants could no longer put up with Bolshevik policies or the effects of the war (see [section 5](#) of the appendix on ["What caused the degeneration of the Russian Revolution?"](#)).

Which, incidentally, answers Brian Bambery's rhetorical question of *"why would the most militant working class in the world, within which there was a powerful cocktail of revolutionary ideas, and which had already made two revolutions (in 1905 and in February 1917), allow a handful of people to seize power behind its back in October 1917?"* [*"Leninism in the 21st Century"*, **Socialist Review**, no. 248, January 2001] Once the Russian workers realised that a handful of people **had** seized power they **did** protest the usurpation of their power and rights by the Bolsheviks. The Bolsheviks repressed them. With the start of the Civil War, the Bolsheviks played their trump card -- *"Us or the Whites."* This ensured their power as the workers had few choices but to agree. Indeed, it may explain why the Bolsheviks finally eliminated opposition parties and groups **after** the end of the Civil War and only repressed them during it. With the Whites gone, the opposition were rising in influence again and the *"White card"* could no longer be played.

Economically, the Bolshevik regime imposed a policy later called *"War Communism"* (although, as Victor Serge noted, *"any one who, like myself, went so far as to consider it purely temporary was locked upon with disdain."* [**Memoirs of a Revolutionary**, p. 115] This regime was marked by extreme hierarchical and dictatorial tendencies. The leading lights of the Communist Party were expressing themselves on the nature of the "socialist" regime they desired. Trotsky, for example, put forward ideas for the *"militarisation of labour"* (as expounded in his infamous work **Terrorism and Communism**). Here are a few representative selections from that work:

*"The very principle of compulsory labour service is for the Communist quite unquestionable. . . . But hitherto it has always remained a mere principle. Its application has always had an accidental, impartial, episodic character. Only now, when along the whole line we have reached the question of the economic re-birth of the country, have problems of compulsory labour service arisen before us in the most concrete way possible. The only solution of economic difficulties that is correct from the point of view both of principle and of practice is to treat the population of the whole country as the reservoir of the necessary labour power . . . and to introduce strict order into the work of its registration, mobilisation, and utilisation."* [**Terrorism and Communism** p. 135]

*"The introduction of compulsory labour service is unthinkable without the application, to a greater or less degree, of the methods of militarisation of labour."* [**Op. Cit.**, p. 137]

*"Why do we speak of militarisation? Of course, this is only an analogy -- but an analogy very rich in content. No social organisation except the army has ever considered itself justified in subordinating citizens to itself in such a measure, and to control them by its will on all sides to such a degree, as the State of the proletarian dictatorship considers itself justified in doing, and does."* [**Op. Cit.**, p. 141]

*"Both economic and political compulsion are only forms of the expression of the dictatorship of the working class in two closely connected regions . . . under Socialism there will not exist the apparatus of compulsion itself, namely, the State: for it will have melted away entirely into a producing and consuming commune. None the less, the road to Socialism lies through a period of the highest possible intensification of the principle of the State . . . Just as a lamp, before going out, shoots up in a brilliant flame, so the State, before disappearing, assumes the form of the dictatorship of the proletariat, i.e., the most ruthless form of State, which embraces the life of the citizens authoritatively in every direction. . . No organisation except the army has ever controlled man with such severe compulsion as does the State organisation of the working class in the most difficult period of transition. It is just for this reason that we speak of the militarisation of labour."* [**Op. Cit.**, pp. 169-70]

This account was written as a policy to be followed now that the *"internal civil war is coming to an end."* [**Op. Cit.**, p. 132] It was not seen as a temporary policy imposed upon the Bolsheviks by the war but rather, as can be seen, as an expression of *"principle"* (perhaps because Marx and Engels had written about the *"[e]stablishment of industrial armies"* in the **Communist Manifesto**? [Selected Writings, p. 53]).

In the same work, Trotsky justified the elimination of soviet power and democracy by party power and dictatorship (see sections [10](#) and [15](#)). Thus we have the application of state serfdom by the Bolsheviks (indeed, Trotsky was allowed to apply his ideas on the militarisation of labour to the railways).

This vision of strict centralisation and top-down military structures built upon Bolshevik policies of the first months after the October revolution. The attempts at workers' self-management



organised by many factory committees was opposed in favour of a centralised state capitalist system, with Lenin arguing for appointed managers with "*dictatorial*" powers (see Maurice Brinton's **The Bolsheviks and Workers' Control** for full details as well as "[What happened during the Russian Revolution?](#)").

Strikes were repressed by force. In early May, 1918, a major wave of labour protest started which climaxed in early July. In Petrograd it included strikes, demonstrations and anti-Bolshevik factory meetings. Of the meetings unconnected to the Petrograd Soviet elections, "*the greatest number by far were protests against some form of Bolshevik repression: shootings, incidents of 'terrorist activities', and arrests.*" During the opposition organised strike of July 2nd, "*Zinoviev and others took quick counteraction . . . Any sign of sympathy for the strike was declared a criminal act. More arrests were made . . . On July 1 . . . machine guns were set up at main points throughout Petrograd and Moscow railroad junctions, and elsewhere in both cities as well. Controls were tightened in the factories. Meetings were forcefully dispersed.*" [William G. Rosenberg, **Russian Labour and Bolshevik Power**, pp. 123-4 and p. 127]

In 1918, workers who took strike action "*were afraid to lose their jobs*" as "*a strike inevitably led to a closure of the factory, a dismissal of the workers, and a careful screening of those rehired to determine their political preferences.*" By 1920, as well as these methods, workers also faced arrest by the Cheka and "*internment in a concentration camp.*" During the first six months of 1920 there were strikes in 77 percent of the medium- and large-size enterprises in Russia. As an example of the policies used to crush strikes, we can take the case of a strike by the workers of the Ryazan-Urals railroad in May 1921 (i.e. **after** the end of the Civil War). The authorities "*shut down the depot, brought in troops, and arrested another hundred workers*" in addition to the strikers delegates elected to demand the release of a railroad worker (whose arrest had provoked the strike). Ironically, those "*who had seized power in 1917 in the name of the politically conscious proletariat were in fact weeding out all these conscious workers.*" [V. Brovkin, **Behind the Front Lines of the Civil War**, pp. 287-8, pp. 290-1 and p. 298]

In the Red Army and Navy, anti-democratic principles were again imposed. At the end of March, 1918, Trotsky reported to the Communist Party that "*the principle of election is politically purposeless and technically inexpedient, and it has been, in practice, abolished by decree.*" Soldiers did not have to fear this system of top-down appointment as "*political power is in the hands of the same working class from whose ranks the Army is recruited*" (i.e. in the hands of the Bolshevik party). There could "*be no antagonism between the government and the mass of the workers, just as there is no antagonism between the administration of the union and the general assembly of its members, and, therefore, there cannot be any grounds for fearing the **appointment** of members of the commanding staff by the organs of the Soviet Power.*" [**Work, Discipline, Order**] Of course, as any worker in struggle can tell you, they almost always come into conflict with the union's bureaucracy (as Trotskyists themselves often point out).

In the Navy, a similar process occurred -- much to the disgust and opposition of the sailors. As Paul Avrich notes, "*Bolshevik efforts to liquidate the ship committees and impose the authority of the centrally appointed commissars aroused a storm of protest in the Baltic Fleet. For the*



sailors, whose aversion to external authority was proverbial, any attempt to restore discipline meant a betrayal of the freedoms for which they had struggled in 1917." [Kronstadt 1921, p. 66] This process "began in earnest on 14 May 1918 with the **appointment** of Ivan Flerovsky as general commissar of the Baltic Fleet and chairman of its Council of Commissars, a body which replaced the disbanded elective Central Committee of the Baltic Fleet. Flerovsky promptly appointed bridge commissars to whom all ships' committees were subordinated . . . Naval democracy was finally destroyed on 18 January 1919 when Trotsky . . . decreed the abolition of all ships' committees, the appointment of commissars to all ships, and the setting up of revolutionary tribunals to maintain discipline, a function previously vested in elected 'comradely courts.'" [I. Getzler, **Kronstadt 1917-1921**, p. 191]

In the countryside, grain requisitioning was resulting in peasant uprisings as food was taken from the peasants by force. While the armed detachments were "instructed to leave the peasants enough for their personal needs, it was common for the requisitioning squads to take at gun-point grain intended for personal consumption or set aside for the next sowing." The villagers predictably used evasive tactics and cut back on the amount of land they tilled as well as practising open resistance. Famine was a constant problem as a result. [Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 9-10]

Thus Voline:

*"the Bolshevik government evidently understood the slogan 'power to the soviets' in a peculiar way. It applied it in reverse. Instead of giving assistance to the working masses and permitting them to conquer and enlarge their own autonomous activity, it began by taking all 'power' from them and treating them like subjects. It bent the factories to its will and liberated the workers from the right to make their own decisions; it took arbitrary and coercive measures, without even asking the advice of the workers' concerned; it ignored the demands emanating from the workers' organisations. And, in particular, it increasingly curbed, under various pretexts, the freedom of action of the Soviets and of other workers' organisations, everywhere imposing its will arbitrarily and even by violence."* [The Unknown Revolution, pp. 459-60]

From before the start of Civil War, the Russian people had been slowly but surely eliminated from any meaningful say in the progress of the revolution. The Bolsheviks undermined (when not abolishing) workers' democracy, freedom and rights in the workplaces, the soviets, the unions, the army and the navy. Unsurprisingly, the lack of any real control from below heightened the corrupting effects of power. Inequality, privilege and abuses were everywhere in the ruling party and bureaucracy ("*Within the party, favouritism and corruption were rife. The Astoria Hotel, where many high officials lived, was the scene of debauchery, while ordinary citizens went without the bare necessities.*") [Paul Avrich, **Bolshevik Opposition to Lenin: G. T. Miasnikov and the Workers' Group**].

With the end of the Civil War in November 1920, many workers expected a change of policy. However, months passed and the same policies were followed. "*The Communist State,*" as Alexander Berkman summarised, "*showed no intention of loosening the yoke. The same policies*

continued, with labour militarisation still further enslaving the people, embittering them with added oppression and tyranny, and in consequence paralysing every possibility of industrial revival." [The Russian Tragedy, p. 61] Finally, in the middle of February, 1921, "a rash of spontaneous factory meetings" began in Moscow. Workers called for the immediate scrapping of War Communism. These meetings were "succeeded by strikes and demonstrations." Workers took to the streets demanding "free trade", higher rations and "the abolition of grain requisitions." Some demanded the restoration of political rights and civil liberties. Troops had to be called in to restore order. [Paul Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 35-6]

Then a far more serious wave of strikes and protests swept Petrograd. The Kronstadt revolt was sparked off by these protests. Like Moscow, these "street demonstrations were heralded by a rash of protest meetings in Petrograd's numerous but depleted factories and shops." Like Moscow, 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. [Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 37-8]

The strikers started to organise themselves. "As in 1918, workers from various plants elected delegates to the Petrograd Assembly of Plenipotentiaries." [V. Brovkin, **Behind the Front Lines of the Civil War**, p. 393]

A three-man Defence Committee was formed and Zinoviev "proclaimed martial law" on February 24th. [Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, p. 39] 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." [Ida Mett, **The Kronstadt Uprising**, p. 37]

The workers "were ordered to return to their factories, failing which they would be denied their rations. That, however, had no impact: but in addition, a number of trade unions was disbanded, their leaders and the most die-hard strikers tossed into prison." [Emma Goldman, **No Gods, No Masters**, vol. 2, p. 168]

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. [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. [Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 48-9]

Thus a combination of force, propaganda and concessions was used to defeat the strike (which quickly reached a near general strike level). As Paul Arvich 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."* [**Op. Cit.**, p. 50]

This indicates the immediate context of the Kronstadt rebellion. Yet Trotskyist J. G. Wright wonders whether the Kronstadt's paper *"lied when in the very first issue . . . it carried a sensational headline: 'General Insurrection in Petrograd'"* and states that people *"spread . . . lies about the insurrection in Petrograd."* [Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, p. 109] Yes, of course a near general strike, accompanied by mass meetings and demonstrations and repressed by force and martial law, is a everyday occurrence and has nothing in common with an *"insurrection"*! If such events occurred in a state not headed by Lenin and Trotsky it is unlikely Mr. Wright would have such difficulty in recognising them for what there were. Historian V. Brovkin states the obvious when he wrote *"[t]o anyone who had lived through the events of February 1917, this chain of events appeared strikingly similar. It looked as if a popular insurrection had begun."* [Brovkin, **Op. Cit.**, p. 393]

It was these 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 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."* [Gelzter, **Kronstadt 1917-1921**, p. 212]

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 (see [next section](#)). The Kronstadt revolt had started.

### 3 What was the Kronstadt Programme?

It is rare for a Trotskyist to actually list the demands of the Kronstadt revolt in their entirety. For example, John Rees does not provide even a summary of the 15 point programme. 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." ["In Defence of October", pp. 3-82, **International Socialism**, no. 52, p. 63] Similarly, it is only the "Editorial Preface" in the Trotskyist work **Kronstadt** which presents even a summary of the demands. This summary states:

*"The resolution demanded free elections in the soviets with the participation of anarchists and Left SRs, legalisation of the socialist parties and the anarchists, abolition of the Political Departments [in the fleet] and the Special Purpose Detachments, removal of the **zagraditelnye ottyady** [Armed troops used to prevent unauthorised trade], restoration of free trade, and the freeing of political prisoners."* [Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, pp. 5-6]

They assert in the "Glossary" that it "demanded political and economic changes, many of which were soon realised with the adoption of the NEP." [Op. Cit., p. 148] Which, ironically enough, contradicts Trotsky who claimed that it was an "illusion" to think "it would have been sufficient to inform the sailors of the NEP decrees to pacify them." Moreover, the "insurgents did not have a conscious program, and they could not have had one because of the very nature of the petty bourgeoisie. They themselves did not clearly understand that their fathers and brothers needed first of all was free trade." [Op. Cit., p. 91-2]

So we have a uprising which was peasant in nature, but whose demands did not have anything in common with other peasant revolts. It apparently demanded free trade and did not demand it. It was similar to the NEP, but the NEP decrees would not have satisfied it. It produced a platform of political and economic demands but did not, apparently, have a "conscious program." The contradictions abound. Why these contradictions exist will become clear after we list the 15 demands.

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.*
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.*" [quoted by Ida Mett, **The Kronstadt Revolt**, pp. 37-8]

This is the program described by the Soviet government as a "*SR-Black Hundreds resolution*"! This is the program which Trotsky maintains was drawn up by "*a handful of reactionary peasants and soldiers.*" [Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, p. 65 and p. 98] As can be seen, it was nothing of the kind. Indeed, this resolution is largely in the spirit of the political slogans of the Bolsheviks before they seized of power in the name of the soviets. Moreover, it reflected ideals expounded in 1917 and were formalised in the Soviet State's 1918 constitution. In the words of Paul Avrich, "*[i]n effect, the **Petropavlovsk** resolution was an appeal to the Soviet government to live up to its own constitution, a bold statement of those very rights and freedom which Lenin himself had professed in 1917. In spirit, it was a throwback to October, evoking the old Leninist watchword of 'All power to the soviets.'*" [**Kronstadt 1921**, pp. 75-6] Hardly an example of "*reactionary*" politics, unless the slogans of 1917 and the 1918 constitution of the U.S.S.R. are

also "reactionary."

While these fifteen demands are central to the revolt, looking at the paper produced by the revolt helps us understand the nature of these demands and place them in a fuller political context. *"The pages of Izvestiia,"* as Voline argued, *"give abundant proof of th[e] general enthusiasm, which re-appeared once the masses felt they had regained, in the free Soviets, the true road to emancipation and the hope of achieving the real revolution."* [Unknown Revolution, p. 495] For example, food rations were equalised, except for the sick and to children, who received a larger one. Left-wing political parties were legalised. The Provisional Revolutionary Committee was elected by a *"Conference of Delegates"* made up of over two hundred delegates from military units and workplaces. This body elected the Provisional Revolutionary Committee on March 2nd and enlarged it (again by election) on March 4th.

The March 4th Conference of Delegates also *"decided that all workers, without exception, should be armed and put in charge of guarding the interior of the city"* and to organise re-elections for *"the administrative commissions of all the unions and also of the Council of Unions"* (which could *"become the principle organ of the workers"*). [Izvestiia quoted by Voline, The Unknown Revolution, p. 494]

In the article *"The Goals for Which We Fight,"* the rebels argue that *"[w]ith the aid of state unions"* the Communists have *"chained the workers to the machines, and transformed work into a new slavery instead of making it pleasant."* Moreover, to the *"protests of the peasants, which have gone so far as spontaneous revolts, to the demands of the workers, compelled by the very conditions of their life to resort to strikes, they reply with mass shootings and a ferocity that the Tsarist generals might have envied."* An *"inevitable third revolution"* was coming, shown by *"increasing"* workers' strikes, which will be *"achieved by the labouring masses themselves."* This would be based on *"freely elected soviets"* and the reorganisation of *"the state unions into free associations of workers, peasants and intellectuals."* [Izvestiia quoted by Voline, Op. Cit., pp. 507-8]

Thus the rebels saw clearly the real nature of nationalisation. Rather than being the basis of socialism, it simply produced more wage slavery, this time to the state (*"From a slave of the capitalist the worker was transformed into a slave of state enterprises."* [Izvestiia quoted by Voline, Op. Cit., p. 518]). They clearly saw the need to replace wage slavery to the state (via nationalised property) with free associations of free workers and peasants. Such a transformation would come from the collective direct action and self-activity of working people, as expressed in the strikes which had so recently swept across the country.

This transformation from the bottom up was stressed elsewhere. The unions, *Izvestiia* argued, would *"fulfil the great and urgent task of educating the masses for an economic and cultural renovation of the country. . . The Soviet Socialist Republic cannot be strong unless its administration be exercised by the working class, with the help of renovated unions."* These should *"become real representatives of the interests of the people."* The current unions did *"nothing"* to promote *"economic activity of a co-operative nature"* or the *"cultural education"* of their members due centralised system imposed by the Communist regime. This would change

with "true union activity by the working class." [*Izvestiia* quoted by Voline, **Op. Cit.**, p. 510] A strong syndicalist perspective clearly can be seen here, urging self-managed unions to be at the forefront of transforming the economy into a free association of producers. They opposed any "socialist" system in which the peasant "has been transformed into a serf in the 'soviet' economy," the worker "a simple wage-worker in the State factories" and those who protest are "thrown into the jails of the Cheka." [*Izvestiia* quoted by Voline, **Op. Cit.**, p. 512]

The rebels saw that soviet power cannot exist while a political party dominated the soviets. They argued that Russia was just "State Socialism with Soviets of functionaries who vote docilely what the authorities and their infallible commissars dictate to them." Without real working class power, without "the will of the worker" expressed in their free soviets, corruption had become rampant ("Communists . . . live in ease and the commissars get fat."). Rather than a "time of free labour in the fields, factories and workshops," where "power" was in "the hands of the workers," the "Communists ha[d] brought in the rule of the commissars, with all the despotism of personal power." [*Izvestiia*, quoted by Voline, **Op. Cit.**, p. 519, p. 518, p. 511 and p. 518]

In opposition to this, the rebels argued that "Revolutionary Kronstadt . . . fights for the true Soviet Republic of the workers in which the producer himself will be owner of the products of his labour and can dispose of them as he wishes." They desired "a life animated by free labour and the free development of the individual" and so proclaimed "All power to the Soviets and not to the parties" and "the power of the free soviets." [*Izvestiia* quoted by Voline, **Op. Cit.**, p. 519]

As can be seen, while the 15 demands are the essence of the revolt, looking at *Izvestiia* confirms the revolutionary nature of the demands. The rebels of 1921, as in 1917, looked forward to a system of free soviets in which working people could transform their society into one based on free associations which would encourage individual freedom and be based on working class power. They looked to a combination of renewed and democratic soviets and unions to transform Russian society into a **real** socialist system rather than the system of state capitalism the Bolsheviks had imposed (see Maurice Brintin's **The Bolsheviks and Workers' Control** for details of Lenin's commitment to building state capitalism in Russia from 1917 onwards).

Clearly, Kronstadt's political programme was deeply socialist in nature. It opposed the new wage slavery of the workers to the state and argued for free associations of free producers. It was based on the key slogan of 1917, "All power to the soviets" but built upon it by adding the rider "but not to parties." The sailors had learned the lesson of the October revolution, namely that if a party held power the soviets did not. The politics of the revolt were not dissimilar to those of libertarian socialists and, as we argue in [section 9](#), identical to the dominant ideas of Kronstadt in 1917.

The question now arises, whose interests did these demands and politics represent. According to Trotskyists, it is the interests of the peasantry which motivated them. For anarchists, it is an expression of the interests of all working people (proletarian, peasant and artisan) against those who would exploit their labour and govern them (be it private capitalists or state bureaucrats). We discuss this issue in the [next section](#).



## 4 Did the Kronstadt rebellion reflect "*the exasperation of the peasantry*"?

This is a common argument of Trotskyists. While rarely providing the Kronstadt demands, they always assert that (to use John Rees' words) that the sailors "*represented the exasperation of the peasantry with the War Communist regime.*" ["*In Defence of October*", **International Socialism** no. 52, p. 63]

As for Trotsky, the ideas of the rebellion "*were deeply reactionary*" and "*reflected the hostility of the backward peasantry toward the worker, the self-importance of the soldier or sailor in relation to 'civilian' Petrograd, the hatred of the petty bourgeois for revolutionary discipline.*" The revolt "*represented the tendencies of the land-owning peasant, the small speculator, the kulak.*" [Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, p. 80 and p. 81]

How true is this? Even a superficial analysis of the events of the revolt and of the **Petropavlovsk** resolution (see [last section](#)) can allow the reader to dismiss Trotsky's assertions.

Firstly, according to the definition of "*kulak*" proved by the Trotskyists' themselves, we discover that kulak refers to "*well-to-do peasants who owned land and hired poor peasants to work it.*" [Lenin and Trotsky, **Op. Cit.**, p. 146] Point 11 of the Kronstadt demands explicitly states their opposition to rural wage labour. How could Kronstadt represent "*the kulak*" when it called for the abolition of hired labour on the land? Clearly, the revolt did not represent the "*small speculator, the kulak*" as Trotsky asserted. Did it represent the land-owning peasant? We will return to this issue shortly.

Secondly, the Kronstadt revolt started after the sailors at Kronstadt sent delegates to investigate the plight of striking workers in Petrograd. Their actions were inspired by solidarity for these workers and civilians. This clearly shows that Trotsky's assertion that the revolt "*reflected the hostility of the backward peasantry toward the worker, the self-importance of the soldier or sailor in relation to 'civilian' Petrograd*" to be utter and total nonsense.

As for the being "*deeply reactionary*," the ideas that motivated the revolt clearly were not. They were the outcome of solidarity with striking workers and called for soviet democracy, free speech, assembly and organisation for workers and peasants. These express the demands of most, if not all, Marxist parties (including the Bolsheviks in 1917) before they take power. They simply repeat the demands and facts of the revolutionary period of 1917 and of the Soviet Constitution. As Anton Ciliga argues, these demands were "*impregnated with the spirit of October; and no calumny in the world can cast a doubt on the intimate connection existing between this resolution and the sentiments which guided the expropriations of 1917.*" ["*The Kronstadt Revolt*", **The Raven**, no. 8, pp. 330-7, p. 333] If the ideas of the Kronstadt revolt are reactionary, then so is the slogan "*all power to the soviets.*"

Not that the Kronstadters had not been smeared before by their opponents. The ex-Bolshevik turned Menshevik Vladimir Voitinsky who had visited the base in May 1917 later remembered

them as being "*degraded and demoralised*" and "*lack[ing] proletarian class-consciousness. It has the psychology of a Lumpenproletariat, a stratum that is a danger to a revolution rather than its support.*" They were "*material suitable for a rebellion a la Bakunin.*" [quoted by I. Getzler, **Kronstadt 1917-1921**, p. 253]

So did the demands represent the interests of the (non-kulak) peasantry? To do so we must see whether the demands reflected those of industrial workers or not. If the demands do, in fact, match those of striking workers and other proletarian elements then we can easily dismiss this claim. After all, if the demands of the Kronstadt rebellion reflected those of proletarians then it is impossible to say that they simply reflected the needs of peasants (of course, Trotskyists will argue that these proletarians were also "*backward*" but, in effect, they are arguing that any worker who did not quietly follow Bolshevik orders was "*backward*" -- hardly a sound definition of the term!!).

We can quickly note that 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 manifesto which appeared (unsigned but bore earmarks of Menshevik origin) 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. [Avrich, **Kronstadt 1921**, pp. 42-3]

In the strikes of 1921, according to Lashevich (a Bolshevik Commissar) the "*basic demands are everywhere the same: free trade, free labour, freedom of movement, and so on.*" Two key demands raised in the strikes dated back to at least 1920. These were "*for free trade and an end to privilege.*" In March 1919, "*the Rechkin coach-building plant demanded equal rations for all workers*" and that one of the "*most characteristic demands of the striking workers at that time were for the free bringing-in of food.*" [Mary McAuley, **Bread and Justice**, p. 299 and p. 302]

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 Paul 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 a 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." [Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 74-5] Simply put, the Kronstadt resolution "merely reiterated long standing workers' demands." [V. Brovkin, **Behind the Front Lines of the Civil War**, p. 395]*

Which means, of course, that Ida Mett had been correct to argue that the "*Kronstadt revolution had the merit of stating things openly and clearly. But it was breaking no new ground. Its main ideas were being discussed everywhere. For having, in one way or another, put forward precisely such ideas, workers and peasants were already filling the prisons and the recently set up concentration camps.*" [**The Kronstadt Uprising**, p. 39]

Nor can it be claimed that these workers were non-proletarians (as if class is determined by thought rather than social position). Rather than being those workers with the closest relations with the countryside who were protesting, the opposite was the case. By 1921 "*[a]ll who had relatives in the country had rejoined them. The authentic proletariat remained till the end, having the most slender connections with the countryside.*" [Ida Mett, **Op. Cit.**, p. 36]

Thus the claims that the Kronstadt demands reflected peasant needs is mistaken. They reflected the needs of the whole working population, including the urban working class who raised these demands continually throughout the Civil War period in their strikes. Simply put, the policies of the Bolsheviks as regards food were not only evil, they did not work and were counter-productive. As many of the Russian working class recognised from the start and took strike action over again and again.

Moreover, by focusing on the "*free trade*" issue, Leninists distort the real reasons for the revolt. As Ida Mett points out, the Kronstadt rebellion did not call for "*free trade*" as the Trotskyists argue, but rather something far more important:

*"In the Kronstadt Isvestia of March 14th we find a characteristic passage on this subject. The rebels proclaimed that 'Kronstadt is not asking for freedom of trade but for genuine power to the Soviets.' The Petrograd strikers were also demanding the reopening of the markets and the abolition of the road blocks set up by the militia. But they too were stating that freedom of trade by itself would not solve their problems."* [**Op. Cit.**, p. 77]

Thus we have the Petrograd (and other) workers calling for "*free trade*" (and so, presumably, expressing their economic interests or those of their fathers and brothers) while the Kronstadt sailors were demanding first and foremost soviet power! Their programme called for 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.*" This was point 11 of the 15 demands, which showed the importance it ranked in their eyes. This would have been the basis of trade between town and village, but trade between worker and peasant and not between worker and kulak. So rather than call for "*free trade*" in the abstract (as many of the workers were) the Kronstadters (while reflecting the needs of both workers and peasants) were calling for the free exchange of products between workers, not workers and rural capitalists (i.e. peasants

who hired wage slaves). This indicates a level of political awareness, an awareness of the fact that wage labour is the essence of capitalism.

Thus Ante Ciliga:

*"People often believe that Kronstadt forced the introduction of the New Economic Policy (NEP) -- a profound error. The Kronstadt resolution pronounced in favour of the defence of the workers, not only against the bureaucratic capitalism of the State, but also against the restoration of private capitalism. This restoration was demanded -- in opposition to Kronstadt -- by the social democrats, who combined it with a regime of political democracy. And it was Lenin and Trotsky who to a great extent realised it (but without political democracy) in the form of the NEP. The Kronstadt resolution declared for the opposite since it declared itself against the employment of wage labour in agriculture and small industry. This resolution, and the movement underlying, sought for a revolutionary alliance of the proletarian and peasant workers with the poorest sections of the country labourers, in order that the revolution might develop towards socialism. The NEP, on the other hand, was a union of bureaucrats with the upper layers of the village against the proletariat; it was the alliance of State capitalism and private capitalism against socialism. The NEP is as much opposed to the Kronstadt demands as, for example, the revolutionary socialist programme of the vanguard of the European workers for the abolition of the Versailles system, is opposed to the abrogation of the Treaty of Versailles achieved by Hitler." [Op. Cit., pp. 334-5]*

Point 11 did, as Ida Mett noted, *"reflected the demands of the peasants to whom the Kronstadt sailors had remained linked -- as had, as a matter of fact, the whole of the Russian proletariat . . . In their great majority, the Russian workers came directly from the peasantry. This must be stressed. The Baltic sailors of 1921 were, it is true, closely linked with the peasantry. But neither more nor less than had been the sailors of 1917."* To ignore the peasantry in a country in which the vast majority were peasants would have been insane (as the Bolsheviks proved). Mett stresses this when she argued that a *"workers and peasants' regime that did not wish to base itself exclusively on lies and terror, had to take account of the peasantry."* [Op. Cit., p. 40]

Given that the Russian industrial working class were also calling for free trade (and often without the political, anti-capitalist, riders Kronstadt added) it seems dishonest to claim that the sailors purely expressed the interests of the peasantry. Perhaps this explains why point 11 becomes summarised as *"restoration of free trade"* by Trotskyists. [*"Editorial Preface"*, Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, p. 6] John Rees does not even mention any of the demands (which is amazing in a work which, in part, tries to analyse the rebellion).

Similarly, the working class nature of the resolution can be seen from who agreed to it. The resolution passed by the sailors on the battleships was ratified by a mass meeting and then a delegate meeting of workers, soldiers and sailors. In other words, by workers **and** peasants.

J.G. Wright, following his guru Trotsky without question (and using him as the sole reference for his "facts"), stated that *"the incontestable facts"* were the *"sailors composed the bulk of the*

*insurgent forces*" and *"the garrison and the civil population remained passive."* [Lenin and Trotsky, **Op. Cit.**, p. 123] This, apparently, is evidence of the peasant nature of the revolt. Let us contest these *"incontestable facts"* (i.e. assertions by Trotsky).

The first fact we should mention is that the meeting of 1st March in Anchor Square involved *"some fifteen to sixteen thousand sailors, soldiers and civilians."* [Getzler, **Op. Cit.**, p. 215] This represented over 30% of Kronstadt's total population. This hardly points to a "passive" attitude on behalf of the civilians and soldiers.

The second fact is that the conference of delegates had a *"membership that fluctuated between which two and three hundred sailors, soldiers, and working men."* This body remained in existence during the whole revolt as the equivalent of the 1917 soviet and, like that soviet, had delegates from Kronstadt's *"factories and military units."* It was, in effect, a *"prototype of the 'free soviets' for which the insurgents had risen in revolt."* In addition, a new Trade Union Council was created, free from Communist domination. [Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, p. 159 and p. 157] Trotsky expects us to believe that the soldiers and civilians who elected these delegates were "passive"? The very act of electing these delegates would have involved discussion and decision making and so active participation. It is extremely doubtful that the soldiers and civilians would have so apathetic and apolitical to not have taken an active part in the revolt.

Thirdly, the declarations by sailors, soldiers and workers printed in *Izvestiia* which expressed their support for the revolt and those which announced they had left the Communist Party also present evidence which clearly contests Trotsky's and Wright's *"incontestable facts."* One declaration of the *"soldiers of the Red Army from the fort Krasnoarmeietz"* stated they were *"body and soul with the Revolutionary Committee."* [quoted by Voline, **The Unknown Revolution**, p. 500]

Lastly, given that the Red Army troops manned the main bastion and the outlying forts and gun emplacements at Kronstadt and that the Bolshevik troops had to take these forts by force, we can safely argue that the Red Army soldiers did not play a "passive" role during the rebellion. [Paul Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, p. 54 and pp. 205-6]

This is confirmed by later historians. Based on such facts, Paul Avrich states that the townspeople *"offered their active support"* and the Red Army troops *"soon fell into line."* [**Op. Cit.**, p. 159] Fedotoff-White notes that the *"local land forces of the Kronstadt garrison . . . fell in and joined the seamen."* [**The Growth of the Red Army**, p. 154] Getzler notes that elections were held for the Council of Trade Unions on the 7th and 8th of March and this was a *"Council committee consisting of representatives from all trade unions."* He also notes that the Conference of Delegates *"had been elected by Kronstadt's body politic at their places of work, in army units, factories, workshops and Soviet institutions."* He adds that the revolutionary troikas (the equivalent of the commissions of the Executive Committee of the Soviet in 1917) were also *"elected by the base organisations."* Likewise, *"the secretariats of the trade unions and the newly founded Council of Trade Unions were both elected by the entire membership of trade unions."* [**Op. Cit.**, pp. 238-9 and p. 240]

That is a lot of activity for "passive" people.

In other words, the *Petropavlovsk* resolution not only reflected the demands of proletarians in Petrograd, it gained the support of proletarians in Kronstadt in the fleet, the army and the civilian workforce. Thus the claim that the Kronstadt resolution purely reflected the interests of the peasantry is, yet again, refuted.

As can be seen, the Kronstadters' (like the Petrograd workers) raised economic and political demands in 1921 just as they had four years earlier when they overthrew the Tsar. Which, again, refutes the logic of defenders of Bolshevism. For example, Wright excelled himself when he argued the following:

*"The supposition that the soldiers and sailors could venture upon an insurrection under an abstract political slogan of 'free soviets' is absurd in itself. It is doubly absurd in the view of the fact [!] that the rest of the Kronstadt garrison consisted of backward and passive people who could not be used in the civil war. These people could have been moved to an insurrection only by profound economic needs and interests. These were the needs and interests of the fathers and brothers of these sailors and soldiers, that is, of peasants as traders in food products and raw materials. In other words the mutiny was the expression of the petty bourgeoisie's reaction against the difficulties and privations imposed by the proletarian revolution. Nobody can deny this class character of the two camps."* [Lenin and Trotsky, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 111-2]

Of course, no worker or peasant could possibly reach beyond a trade union consciousness by their own efforts, as Lenin so thoughtfully argued in **What is to be Done?** Neither could the experience of two revolutions have an impact on anyone, nor the extensive political agitation and propaganda of years of struggle. Indeed, the sailors were so backward that they had no "*profound economic needs and interests*" of their own but rather fought for their fathers and brothers interests! Indeed, according to Trotsky they did not even understand that ("*They themselves did not clearly understand that what their fathers and brothers needed first of all was free trade.*") [Lenin and Trotsky, **Op. Cit.**, p. 92])! And these were the sailors the Bolsheviks desired to man some of the most advanced warships in the world?

Sadly for Wright's assertions history has proven him wrong time and time again. Working people have constantly raised political demands which were far in advance of those of the "professional" revolutionaries (a certain German and the Paris Commune springs to mind, never mind a certain Russian and the soviets). The fact that the Kronstadt sailors not only "*venture[d] upon an insurrection under an abstract political slogan of 'free soviets'*" but actually **created** one (the conference of delegates) goes unmentioned. Moreover, as we prove in [section 8](#), the majority of sailors in 1921 had been there in 1917. This was due to the fact that the sailors could not be quickly or easily replaced due to the technology required to operate Kronstadt's defences and battleships.

Given that the "*a smaller proportion of the Kronstadt sailors were of peasant origin than was the case of the Red Army troops supporting the government,*" perhaps we will discover Trotskyists

arguing that because "ordinary Red Army soldiers . . . were reluctant and unreliable fighters against Red Kronstadt, although driven at gunpoint onto the ice and into battle" that also proves the peasant nature of the revolt? [Sam Farber, **Op. Cit.**, p. 192; Israel Getzler, **Kronstadt 1917-1921**, p. 243] Given the quality of the previous arguments presented, it is only a matter of time before this one appears!

Indeed, Trotskyists also note this non-peasant nature of the Kronstadt demands (as indicated in the [last section](#)). Thus was have John Rees pathetically noting that "*no other peasant insurrection reproduced the Kronstadters' demands.*" [Rees, **Op. Cit.**, p. 63] As we have indicated above, **proletarian** strikes, resolutions and activists all produced demands similar or identical to the Kronstadt demands. These facts, in themselves, indicate the truth of Trotskyist assertions on this matter. Rees mentions the strikes in passing, but fails to indicate that Kronstadt's demands were raised after a delegation of sailors had returned from visiting Petrograd. Rather than their "*motivation*" being "*much closer to that of the peasantry*" than to the "*dissatisfaction of the urban working class*" the facts suggest the opposite (as can be seen from the demands raised). [Rees, **Op. Cit.**, p. 61] The motivation for the resolution was a product of the strikes in Petrograd and it also, naturally enough, included the dissatisfaction of the peasantry (in point 11). For the Kronstadters, it was a case of the needs of **all** the toilers and so their resolution reflected the needs and demands of both.

Unfortunately for Rees, another revolt **did** reproduce the Kronstadt demands and it was by urban workers, **not** peasants. This revolt took place in Ekaterinoslavl (in the Ukraine) in May, 1921. It started in the railway workshops and became "*quickly politicised,*" with the strike committee raising a "*series of political ultimatums that were very similar in content to the demands of the Kronstadt rebels.*" Indeed, many of the resolutions put to the meeting almost completely coincided with the Kronstadt demands. The strike "*spread to the other workshops*" and on June 1st the main large Ekaterinoslavl factories joined the strike. The strike was spread via the use of trains and telegraph and soon an area up to fifty miles around the town was affected. The strike was finally ended by the use of the Cheka, using mass arrests and shootings. Unsurprisingly, the local communists called the revolt a *little Kronstadt.*" [Jonathan Aves, **Workers Against Lenin**, pp. 171-3]

Therefore to claim that Kronstadt solely reflected the plight or interests of the peasantry is nonsense. Nor were the **economic** demands of Kronstadt alarming to the Bolshevik authorities. After all, Zinoviev was about to grant the removal of the roadblock detachments (point 8) and the government was drafting what was to become known as the New Economic Policy (NEP) which would satisfy point 11 partially (the NEP, unlike the Kronstadters, did not end wage labour and so, ironically, represented the interests of the Kulaks!). It was the **political** demands which were the problem. They represented a clear challenge to Bolshevik power and their claims at being the "*soviet power.*"

## 5 What lies did the Bolsheviks spread about Kronstadt?

From the start, the Bolsheviks lied about the uprising. Indeed, Kronstadt provides a classic



example of how Lenin and Trotsky used slander against their political opponents. Both attempted to paint the revolt as being organised and led by the Whites. At every stage in the rebellion, they stressed that it had been organised and run by White guard elements. As Paul Avrich notes, *"every effort was made to discredit the rebels"* and that the *"chief object of Bolshevik propaganda was to show that the revolt was not a spontaneous outbreak of mass protest but a new counterrevolutionary conspiracy, following the pattern established during the Civil War. According to the Soviet press, the sailors, influenced by Mensheviks and SR's in their ranks, had shamelessly cast their lot with the 'White Guards,' led by a former tsarist general named Kozlovsky . . . This, in turn, was said to be part of a carefully laid plot hatched in Paris by Russian emigres in league with French counterintelligence."* [Op. Cit., p. 88 and p. 95]

Lenin, for example, argued in a report to the Tenth Congress of the Communist Party on March 8th that *"White Guard generals were very active over there. There is ample proof of this"* and that it was *"the work of Social Revolutionaries and White Guard emigres."* [Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, p. 44]

The first government statement on the Kronstadt events was entitled *"The Revolt of Ex-General Kozlovsky and the Warship Petropavlovsk"* and read, in part, that the revolt was *"expected by, and undoubtedly prepared by, French counterintelligence."* It continues by stating that on the morning of March 2 *"the group around ex-General Kozlovsky . . . had openly appeared on the scene . . . [he] and three of his officers . . . have openly assumed the role of insurgents. Under their direction . . . a number of . . . responsible individuals, have been arrested. . . Behind the SRs again stands a tsarist general."* [Op. Cit., pp. 65-6]

Victor Serge, a French anarchist turned Bolshevik, 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"* (we should note that Serge, a few pages previously, mentions *"the strenuous calumnies put out by the Communist Press"* about Nestor Makhno, *"which went so far as to accuse him of signing pacts with the Whites at the very moment when he was engaged in a life-and-death struggle against them"* which suggests that Kronstadt was hardly the first time the Party had lied to them). [Memoirs of a Revolutionary, pp. 124-6 and p. 122] (In the interests of honesty, it should be noted that Serge himself contributed to the Bolshevik lie machine about Kronstadt. For example, in March 1922 he happily repeated the Soviet regime's falsifications about the rebels. [The Serge-Trotsky Papers, pp. 18-9]).

Even Isaac Deutscher, Trotsky's biographer said that the Bolsheviks *"denounced the men of*

*Kronstadt as counter-revolutionary mutineers, led by a White general. The denunciation appears to have been groundless.*" [The Prophet Armed, p. 511]

Thus the claim that the Kronstadt rebellion was the work of Whites and led by a White/Tzarist General was a lie -- a lie deliberately and consciously spread. This was concocted to weaken support for the rebellion in Petrograd and in the Red Army, to ensure that it did not spread. Lenin admitted as much on the 15th of March when he stated at the Tenth Party Conference that in Kronstadt *"they did not want the White Guards, and they do not want our power either."* [quoted by Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, p. 129]

If you agree with Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci that *"to tell the truth is a communist and revolutionary act"* then its clear that the Bolsheviks in 1921 (and for a long time previously) were not communist or revolutionary (and as the subsequent Leninist accounts of Kronstadt show, Bolshevism is still neither). In stark contrast to the Bolsheviks, the Kronstadt paper *Izvestiia* published Bolshevik leaflets, paper articles and radio broadcasts so that the inhabitants of the island could see exactly what lies the Bolsheviks were telling about them.

The Trotskyist editors of **Kronstadt** show the same contempt for their readers as the Bolsheviks showed for the truth. They include an *"Introduction"* to their work by Pierre Frank in which he argues that the Bolsheviks merely *"state that [White] generals, counterrevolutionaries, sought to manipulate the insurgents"* and that anarchists *"turn this into a claim that these generals had launched the rebellion and that 'Lenin, Trotsky and the whole Party leadership knew quite well that this was no mere 'generals' revolt.'"* [quoting Ida Mett] This apparently shows how *"[a]nything having to do with the facts"* gets treated by such authors. He states that Mett and others *"merely distort the Bolsheviks' positions."* [Lenin and Trotsky, **Op. Cit.**, p. 22]

This is argued in the same work that quotes Lenin actually stating on March 8th, 1921, that *"the familiar figures of White Guard generals"* were *"very quickly revealed,"* that *"White generals were very active"* there, that it was *"quite clear that it is the work of Social Revolutionaries and White Guard emigres"* and that Kronstadt was *"bound up initially"* with *"the White Guards."* Lenin is also quoted, on March 9th, arguing that *"the Paris newspapers reported the events two weeks before they actually occurred, and a White general appeared on the scene. That is what actually happened."* [**Op. Cit.**, pp. 44-5 and p. 48] This is stated in spite of presenting the government statement we have quoted above in which the Bolshevik government clearly argued that two Communist leaders had been arrested under Kozlovsky's *"direction"* and he *"stands"* behind the right-SRs whose agitation had started the revolt (according to the Bolsheviks).

Nor can it be said that Ida Mett claims that the Lenin and Trotsky had said a general had *"launched"* the revolt. She quotes Moscow radio as stating that the revolt (*"Just like other White Guard insurrections"*) was in fact *"the mutiny of ex-General Kozlovsky and the crew of the battle ship 'Petropavlovsk'"* had been organised by Entene spies, while Socialist Revolutionaries had *"prepared"* the ground and that their real master was a *"Tsarist general"* on the page **before** that quoted by Frank, so indicating who the Bolsheviks did claim had launched the revolt. [Mett, **Op. Cit.**, p. 43] It seems strange that Frank complains that others *"distort"* the Bolsheviks position when, firstly, the person he quotes does not and, secondly, he distorts that persons' actual

position.

Mett simply acknowledging the Bolshevik lies spewed out at the time. Then she said that "*Lenin, Trotsky and the whole Party leadership knew quite well that this was no mere 'generals' revolt.*" [Op. Cit., p. 43] She **then** turns to General Kozlovsky whom the Bolsheviks indicated by name as the leader of the revolt and had outlawed in the statement of March 2nd quoted above. Who was he and what part did he play? Mett sums up the evidence:

*"He was an artillery general, and had been one of the first to defect to the Bolsheviks. He seemed devoid of any capacity as a leader. At the time of the insurrection he happened to be in command of the artillery at Kronstadt. The communist commander of the fortress had defected. Kozlovsky, according to the rules prevailing in the fortress, had to replace him. He, in fact, refused, claiming that as the fortress was now under the jurisdiction of the Provisional Revolutionary Committee, the old rules no longer applied. Kozlovsky remained, it is true, in Kronstadt, but only as an artillery specialist. Moreover, after the fall of Kronstadt, in certain interviews granted to the Finnish press, Kozlovsky accused the sailors of having wasted precious time on issues other than the defence of the fortress. He explained this in terms of their reluctance to resort to bloodshed. Later, other officers of the garrison were also to accuse the sailors of military incompetence, and of complete lack of confidence in their technical advisers. Kozlovsky was the only general to have been present at Kronstadt. This was enough for the Government to make use of his name.*

*"The men of Kronstadt did, up to a point, make use of the military know how of certain officers in the fortress at the time. Some of these officers may have given the men advice out of sheer hostility to the Bolsheviks. But in their attack on Kronstadt, the Government forces were also making use of ex-Tsarist officers. On the one side there were Kozlovsky, Salomianov, and Arkannihov; On the other, ex-Tsarist officers and specialists of the old regime, such as Toukhatchevsky, Kamenev, and Avrov. On neither side were these officers an independent force." [Op. Cit., p. 44]*

Not that this is good enough for Trotskyists. Wright, for example, will have none of it. He quotes Alexander Berkman's statement that there was "*a former general, Kozlovsky, in Kronstadt. It was Trotsky who had placed him there as an Artillery specialist. He played no role whatever in the Kronstadt events.*" [The Russian Tragedy, p. 69]

Wright protests that this is not true and, as evidence, quotes from an interview by Kozlovsky and states that "*[f]rom the lips of the counterrevolutionary general himself . . . we get the unambiguous declaration that **from the very first day**, he and his colleagues had openly associated themselves with the mutiny, had elaborated the 'best' plans to capture Petrograd . . . If the plan failed it was only because Kozlovsky and his colleagues were unable to convince the 'political leaders', i.e. his SR allies [!], that the moment was propitious for exposing their true visage and program.*" [Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, p. 119]

In other words, because the Provisional Revolutionary Committee **failed** to take the advice of the military specialists it proves that, in fact, they were in league! That is very impressive. We

wonder if the Kronstaders **had** taken their advice then this would have proved that they were not, in fact, in league with them after all? Similarly, by failing to take over the command of the fortress Kozlovsky **must** have shown how he was leading the revolt as the Bolshevik radio said!

Every non-Leninist account agrees that Kozlovsky played no part in the revolt. Paul Avrich notes that when trouble erupted "*the Bolsheviks at once denounced him as the evil genius of the movement, "outlawed" him and seized his family as hostages. He confirms that the military specialists "threw themselves into the task of planning military operations on behalf of the insurrection" and that Kozlovsky had refused to succeed as the commander of the fortress after the old one had fled to the mainland (as demanded by military rules). He stresses that "the officers remained in a purely advisory capacity throughout the rebellion. They had no share, as far as one can tell, in initiating or directing the revolt, or in framing its political program, which was alien to their way of thinking." Their role "was confined to providing technical advice, just as it had been under the Bolsheviks." The Provisional Revolutionary Committee "showed its distrust of the specialists by repeatedly rejecting their counsel, however sound and appropriate it might be." And, of course, we should mention that "[f]or all the government's accusations that Kronstadt was a conspiracy of White Guard generals, ex-tsarist officers played a much more prominent role in the attacking force than among the defenders."* [Op. Cit., p. 99, p. 100, p. 101 and p. 203]

Indeed, Kozlovsky "*had served the Bolsheviks so loyally that on 20 October 1920 the chief commander of the Baltic Fleet . . . had awarded him a watch 'for courage and feat of arms in the battle against Yudenich'"* [I. Getzler, **Kronstadt 1917-1921**, p. 219] This was simply officially confirming the award made on the 3rd of December, 1919, by the Petrograd Soviet "*for military feats and energetic activities during the attack of the Yudenich bands on Petrograd.*" Indeed, he was one of the first generals who entered into service of the Bolsheviks and the Kronstadt soviet had elected him Chief-of-Staff of the fortress in the wake of the February revolution. All this did not stop the Bolsheviks claiming on March 3rd, 1921, that Kozlovsky was a "*supporter of Yudenich and Kolchak*"! [quoted by Israel Getzler, "*The Communist Leaders' Role in the Kronstadt Tragedy of 1921 in the Light of Recently Published Archival Documents*", **Revolutionary Russia**, pp. 24-44, Vol. 15, No. 1, June 2002, p. 43 and p. 31]

Berkman was clearly correct. Kozlovsky took no role in the revolt. What he did do was offer his expertise to the Kronstadt rebels (just as he had to the Bolsheviks) and make plans which were rejected. If associating yourself with an event and making plans which are rejected by those involved equals a role in that event then Trotsky's role in the Spanish revolution equalled that of Durruti's!

Finally, it should be noted that Victor Serge reported that it "*was probably [the leading Bolshevik] Kalinin who, on his return to Petrograd [from attending the initial rebel meetings at Kronstadt], invented 'the White General Kozlovsky.'*" [Memoirs of a Revolutionary, p. 127] The ironic thing is, if the Kronstadt rebels **had** been following Kozlovsky and the other Bolshevik appointed "military specialists" then the defences of Kronstadt would have been strengthened considerably. However, as Kozlovsky later explained, the sailors refused to co-

operate because of their congenital mistrust of officers. [Paul Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 138-9]

It is hard to find a Leninist who subscribes to this particular Bolshevik lie about Kronstadt. It has, for the main, been long abandoned by those who follow those who created it, despite the fact it was the cornerstone of the official Bolshevik account of the rebellion. As the obvious falseness of the claims became more and more well-known, Trotsky and his followers turned to other arguments to slander the uprising. The most famous is the assertion that the "*Kronstadt sailors were quite a different group from the revolutionary heroes of 1917.*" [Wright, **Op. Cit.**, p. 129] We turn to this question in the [section 8](#) and indicate that research has refuted it (and how Trotskyists have misused this research to present a drastically false picture of the facts). However, first we must discuss whether the Kronstadt revolt was, in fact, a White conspiracy (the [next section](#)) and its real relationship to the Whites ([section 7](#)).

## 6 Was the Kronstadt revolt a White plot?

At the time, the Bolsheviks portrayed the Kronstadt revolt as a White plot, organised by the counter-revolution (see [last section](#) for full details). In particular, they portrayed the revolt as a conspiracy, directed by foreign spies and executed by their SR and White Guardist allies.

For example, Lenin argued on March 8th that "*White Guard generals were very active*" at Kronstadt. "*There is ample proof of this. Two weeks before the Kronstadt events, the Paris newspapers reported a mutiny at Kronstadt. It is quite clear that it is the work of Social Revolutionaries and White Guard emigres.*" [Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, p. 44]

Trotsky, on March 16th, made the same point, arguing that "*in a number of foreign newspapers . . . news of an uprising in Kronstadt appeared as far back as the middle of February . . . How [to] explain this? Very simply . . . The Russian counterrevolutionary organisers promised to stage a mutiny at a propitious moment, while the impatient yellow and financial press write about it as an already accomplished fact.*" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 68]

This appears to be the greatest "evidence" for Lenin and Trotsky as regards the White-Guardist nature of the revolt. Indeed, Trotsky on the "*basis of the dispatch . . . sent a warning to Petrograd to my naval colleagues.*" [**Ibid.**]

However, to see the truth of these claims it is simply a case of looking at how the Bolsheviks reacted to this announcement of an uprising in Kronstadt. They did nothing. As the Trotskyist editors of a book justifying the repression note, the "*Red Army command was caught unprepared by the rebellion.*" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 6] J.G. Wright, in his defence of Trotsky's position (a defence recommended by Trotsky himself), acknowledged that the "*Red Army command*" was "*[c]aught off guard by the mutiny.*" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 123] This clearly shows how little weight the newspaper reports were held **before** the rebellion. Of course, **during** and **after** the rebellion was a different matter and they quickly became a focal point for Bolshevik smears.

Moreover, as proof of a White plot, this evidence is pathetic. As Ida Mett argued out, the "*publication of false news about Russia was nothing exceptional. Such news was published*

before, during and after the Kronstadt events. . . To base an accusation on a 'proof' of this kind is inadmissible and immoral." [Mett, **The Kronstadt Uprising**, p. 76]

Even Trotsky admitted that *"the imperialist press . . . prints . . . a great number of fictitious reports about Russia"* but maintained that the reports on Kronstadt were examples of *"forecasts"* of *"attempts at overturns in specific centres of Soviet Russia"* (indeed, the *"journalistic agents of imperialism only 'forecast' that which is entrusted for execution to other agents of this very imperialism."*). Lenin also noted, in an article entitled *"The Campaign of Lies"*, that *"the West European press [had] indulged in such an orgy of lies or engaged in the mass production of fantastic inventions about Soviet Russia in the last two weeks"* and listed some of them (such as *"Petrograd and Moscow are in the hands of the insurgents"*). [Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, p. 69, p. 50 and p. 51]

Yet this same press can be used as evidence for a White conspiracy in Kronstadt? Unsurprisingly, as Mett notes, *"[i]n 1938 Trotsky himself was to drop this accusation."* [Mett, **Op. Cit.**, p. 76] Little wonder, given its pathetic nature -- although this does not stop his loyal follower John G. Wright from asserting these reports are the *"irrefutable facts"* of the *"connection between the counterrevolution and Kronstadt."* [Lenin and Trotsky, **Op. Cit.**, p. 115] The question of **why** the counterrevolutionary plotters would give their enemies advance notice of their plans never crossed his mind.

As can be seen, at the time **no** evidence was forthcoming that the Whites organised or took part in the revolt. As Ida Mett argues:

*"If, at the time the Bolshevik Government had proofs of these alleged contacts between Kronstadt and the counter-revolutionaries why did it not try the rebels publicly? Why did it not show the working masses of Russia the 'real' reasons for the uprising? If this wasn't done it was because no such proofs existed."* [Mett, **Op. Cit.**, p. 77]

Unsurprisingly, the first soviet investigation into the revolt came to the conclusion that it was spontaneous. Iakov Agranov, a special plenipotentiary of the Secret-Operation Department of the **Vecheka** (and later to become its head), was sent the presidium of that body to Kronstadt soon after the crushing of the uprising. His mandate was *"to ascertain the role of various parties and groups in the start and development of the uprising and the ties of its organisers and inspirers with counter-revolutionary parties and organisations operating both in and outside Soviet Russia."* He produced a report on the 5th of April, 1921, which expressed his considered opinion that the *"uprising was entirely spontaneous in origin and drew into its maelstrom almost the entire population and the garrison of the fortress. . . the investigation failed to show the outbreak of the mutiny was preceded by the activity of any counter-revolutionary organisation at work among the fortress's command or that it was the work of the entente. The entire course of the movement speaks against that possibility. Had the mutiny been the work of some secret organisation which predated its outbreak, then that organisation would not have planned it for a time when the reserves of fuel and provisions were hardly sufficient for two weeks and when the thawing of the ice was still far off."* He notes that the *"masses"* in Kronstadt *"were fully aware of the spontaneity of their movement."* [quoted by Israel Getzler, *"The Communist Leaders' Role in*

*the Kronstadt Tragedy of 1921 in the Light of Recently Published Archival Documents*", **Revolutionary Russia**, pp. 24-44, Vol. 15, No. 1, June 2002, p. 25]

Agranov's conclusion was also that of Aleksei Nikolaev's, who, as chairman of the Extraordinary **Troika** of the First and Second Special Section, was given the double assignment of *"the punishment of the mutineers and the unmasking of all the organisations that prepared and led the mutiny."* He reported on April 20th, 1921, that *"in spite of all efforts we have been unable to discover the presence of any organisation and to seize any agents."* [quoted by Getzler, **Op. Cit.**, p. 26] Ironically enough, a prominent SR leader and head of the SR Administrative Centre in Finland wrote a letter on the 18th of March that stated the revolt was *"absolutely spontaneous,"* that the *"movement began spontaneously, without any organisation and quite unexpectedly. After all, a month later, Kronstadt would have been inaccessible to the Bolsheviks and a hundred times more dangerous to them."* [quoted by Getzler, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 25-6]

This did not stop the Bolsheviks reiterating the official line that the revolt was a White plot, with SR help (nor has it stopped their latter-day supporters repeating these lies since). For example, Bukharin was still pedalling the official lies in July 1921, stating that, as regards Kronstadt, the *"documents which have since been brought to light show clearly that the affair was instigated by purely White Guard centres."* [contained in **In Defence of the Russian Revolution**, Al Richardson (ed.), p. 192] It is redundant to note that said "documents" were not "brought to light" then or since.

It should be noted here that the Bolsheviks were quite willing to invent "evidence" of a conspiracy. Trotsky, for example, raised, on the 24th of March 1921, the possibility of a *"Political Trial of Kronstadters and Makhnovites."* This show trial would be part of the *"struggle" against "anarchism (Kronstadt and Makhno)."* This was *"presently an important task"* and so it *"seems . . . appropriate to organise trials of Kronstadters . . . and of Makhnovites."* The *"effect of the reports and the speeches of the prosecutor etcetera would be far more powerful than the effects of brochures and leaflets about . . . anarchism."* [quoted by Getzler, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 39] While Trotsky's show trial was never staged, the fact that the idea was taken seriously can be seen from the invented summaries of the testimonies of three men considered by the Bolsheviks as ringleaders of the revolt. Perhaps the fact that the three (Kozlovsky, Petrichenko, Putilin) managed to escape to Finland ensured that Trotsky's idea was never carried out. Stalin, of course, utilised the *"powerful"* nature of such trials in the 1930s.

Decades later historian Paul Avrich **did** discover an unsigned hand written manuscript labelled *"Top Secret"* and entitled *"Memorandum on the Question of Organising an Uprising in Kronstadt."* Trotskyist Pierre Frank considered it *"so convincing"* that he *"reproduced it in its entirety"* to prove a White Conspiracy existed behind the Kronstadt revolt. Indeed, he considers it as an *"indisputable"* revelation and that Lenin and Trotsky *"were not mistaken in their analysis of Kronstadt."* [Lenin and Trotsky, **Op. Cit.**, p. 26 and p. 32]

However, reading the document quickly shows that Kronstadt was not a product of a White conspiracy but rather that the White *"National Centre"* aimed to try and use a spontaneous *"uprising"* it thought was likely to *"erupt there in the coming spring"* for its own ends. The



report notes that *"among the sailors, numerous and unmistakable signs of mass dissatisfaction with the existing order can be noticed."* Indeed, the *"Memorandum"* states that *"one must not forget that even of the French Command and the Russian anti-Bolshevik organisations do not take part in the preparation and direction of the uprising, a revolt in Kronstadt will take place all the same during the coming spring, but after a brief period of success it will be doomed to failure."* [quoted by Avrich, **Kronstadt 1921**, p. 235 and p. 240]

As Avrich notes, an *"underlying assumption of the Memorandum is that the revolt would not occur until after the springtime thaw, when the ice had melted and Kronstadt was immune from an invasion from the mainland."* [**Kronstadt 1921**, pp. 106-7] Voline stated the obvious when he argued that the revolt *"broke out spontaneously"* for if it *"had been the result of a plan conceived and prepared in advance, it would certainly not have occurred at the beginning of March, the least favourable time. A few weeks later, and Kronstadt, freed of ice, would have become an almost impregnable fortress . . . The greatest opportunity of Bolshevik government was precisely the spontaneity of the movement and the absence of any premeditation, of any calculation, in the action of the sailors."* [**The Unknown Revolution**, p. 487] As can be seen, the *"Memorandum"* also recognised this need for the ice to thaw and it was the basic assumption behind it. In other words, the revolt **was** spontaneous and actually undercut the assumptions behind the *"Memorandum."*

Avrich rejects the idea that the *"Memorandum"* 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."* [**Op. Cit.**, pp. 111-2]

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."* 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."* [**Op. Cit.**, pp. 126-7]

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. Avrigh 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." [Paul Avrigh, **Op. Cit.**, p. 212 and p. 123]

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

Clearly, the attempts of certain later-day Trotskyists to justify and prove their heroes slanders against Kronstadt are pathetic. No evidence of a White-Guardist plot existed until 1970 when Paul Avrigh produced his study of the revolt and the single document in question clearly does not support the claim that the Whites organised the revolt. Rather, the Whites aimed to use a sailors "uprising" to further their cause, an "uprising" which they predicted would occur in the spring (with or without them). The predicted revolt **did** take place, but earlier than expected and was not a product of a conspiracy. Indeed, the historian who discovered this document explicitly argues that it proves nothing and that the revolt was spontaneous in nature.

Therefore, the claim that Kronstadt was a White plot cannot be defended with anything but assertions. No evidence exists to back up such claims.

## **7 What was the real relationship of Kronstadt to the Whites?**

As we proved in the [last section](#), the Kronstadt revolt was not a White conspiracy. It was a popular revolt from below. However, some Trotskyists still try and smear the revolt by arguing that it was, in fact, really or "objectively" pro-White. We turn to this question now.

We must first stress that 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.*" [Getzler, **Kronstadt 1917-1921**, p. 235]

Avrigh 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. [Avrigh, **Op. Cit.**, p. 187, p. 112 and p. 123]

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

Needless to say, the Whites **were** extremely happy that Kronstadt revolted. There is no denying that. However, it would be weak politics indeed that based itself on the reactions of reactionaries to evaluate social struggles. If we did then we would have to conclude that the overthrow of Stalinism in 1989 was nothing more than a counter-revolution rather than a popular revolt against a specific form of capitalism (namely state capitalism). Indeed, many orthodox Trotskyists took this position (and supported the attempted coup organised by a section of the Stalinist bureaucracy to re-impose its dictatorship).

Indeed, the Kronstaders themselves acknowledged that the Whites were happy to support their actions (indeed, **any** actions against the Bolsheviks) but that this joy was for different reasons than theirs:

*"The . . . Kronstadt sailors and workers have wrested the tiller from the Communists' hands and have taken over the helm . . . Comrades, keep a close eye upon the vicinity of the tiller: enemies are even now trying to creep closer. A single lapse and they will wrest the tiller from you, and the soviet ship may go down to the triumphant laughter from tsarist lackeys and henchmen of the bourgeoisie.*

*"Comrades, right now you are rejoicing in the great, peaceful victory over the Communists' dictatorship. Now, your enemies are celebrating too.*

*"Your grounds for such joy, and theirs, are quite contradictory.*

*"You are driven by a burning desire to restore the authentic power of the soviets, by a noble hope of seeing the worker engage in free labour and the peasant enjoy the right to dispose, on his land, of the produce of his labours. **They** dream of bringing back the tsarist knout and the privileges of the generals.*

*"Your interests are different. They are not fellow travellers with you.*

*"You needed to get rid of the Communists' power over you in order to set about creative work and peaceable construction. Whereas they want to overthrow that power to make the workers and peasants their slaves again.*

*"You are in search of freedom. They want to shackle you as it suits them. Be vigilant! Don't let the wolves in sheep's clothing get near the tiller." [No Gods, No Masters, vol. 2, pp. 187-8]*

Of course, this is not enough for the followers of Lenin and Trotsky. John Rees, for example, quotes Paul Avrich to support his assertion that the Kronstadt revolt was, in fact, pro-White. He argues as follows:

*"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.'"*  
[Op. Cit., p. 64]

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." [Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, p. 111] 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." [**Op. Cit.**, p. 129] Seeing you friends and fellow toilers murdered by dictators may affect your judgement, unsurprisingly enough.

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?

Firstly, 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."* [Getzler, **Op. Cit.**, p. 217] 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.

And Rees does just that and reduces the Kronstadt revolt and its "ideology" down to just one person (Petrichenko). Perhaps we can evaluate Bolshevism with this method? Or Italian Socialism. After all, influential figures in both these movements ended up making contacts and deals with extremely suspect organisations and acting in ways we (and the movements they sprang from) would oppose. Does that mean we gain an insight into their natures by mentioning Stalin's or Mussolini's later activities? Or evaluating their revolutionary nature from such individuals? Of course not. Indeed, Rees's article is an attempt to argue that objective circumstances rather than Bolshevism as such lead to Stalinism. Rather than do the same for Kronstadt, he prefers to concentrate on an individual. This indicates a distinctly bourgeois perspective:

*"What passes as socialist history is often only a mirror image of bourgeois historiography, a percolation into the ranks of the working class movement of typically bourgeois methods of thinking. In the world of this type of 'historian' leaders of genius replace the kings and queens of the bourgeois world. . . . The masses never appear independently on the historic stage, making their own history. At best they only 'supply the steam', enabling others to drive the locomotive, as Stalin so delicately put it . . . This tendency to identify working class history with the history of its organisations, institutions and leaders is not only inadequate -- it reflects a typically bourgeois vision of mankind, divided in almost pre-ordained manner between **the few** who will manage and*

*decide, and **the many**, the malleable mass, incapable of acting consciously on its own behalf. . . Most histories of the degeneration of the Russian Revolution rarely amount to more than this.*" ["Solidarity's Preface" to Ida Mett's **The Kronstadt Uprising**, pp. 18-9]

Secondly, the question is one of whether workers are in struggle and what they aim for and definitely **not** one of whether some of the "leaders" are fine upstanding citizens. Ironically, Trotsky indicates why. In 1934, he had argued "[a]nyone who had proposed that we not support the British miners' strike of 1926 or the recent large-scale strikes in the United States with all available means on the ground that the leaders of the strikes were for the most part scoundrels, would have been a traitor to the British and American workers." ["No Compromise on the Russian Question", **Writings of Leon Trotsky: Supplement (1934-40)**, p. 539]

The same applies to Kronstadt. Even if we assume that some of the "leadership" did have links with the National Centre (an assumption we must stress has no evidence to support it), this in no way invalidates the Kronstadt revolt. The movement was not produced by the so-called "leaders" of the revolt but rather came from below and so reflected the demands and politics of those involved. If it was proved, as KGB and other soviet sources argued, that some of the "leaders" of the Hungary uprising of 1956 had CIA links or were CIA agitators, would that make the revolution and its workers' councils somehow invalid? Of course not. If some of the "leadership" were scoundrels, as Trotsky argued, this does not invalid the revolt itself. The class criteria is the decisive one.

(As an aside, we must point out that Trotsky was arguing against those claiming, correctly, that to unconditionally defend the Soviet Union was to give an endorsement to Stalinism. He stated immediately after the words we have quoted above: "*Exactly the same thing applies to the USSR!*" However, there was a few obvious differences which invalidates his analogy. Firstly, the Stalinist leadership was exploiting and oppressing the workers by means of state power. Trade Union bureaucrats, for all their faults, are not mass murdering butchers at a head of a dictatorship defended by troops and secret police. Secondly, strikes are examples of proletarian direct action which can, and do, get out of control of union structures and bureaucrats. They can be the focal point of creating new forms of working class organisation and power which can end the power of the union bureaucrats and replace it with self-managed strikers assemblies and councils. The Stalinist regime was organised to repress any attempts at unseating them and was not a form of working class self-defence in even the limited form that trade unions are.)

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 events was pushing the sailors into the arms of the Whites, just as the latter had always suspected it would."* [Op. Cit., p. 64]

We should note that it was due to the "*food situation in Kronstadt . . . growing desperate*" that Petruchenko contacted Grimm. [Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, p. 121] 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 (see [section 10](#)). As historian V. Brovkin notes, the "*key here is that the Communists suppressed the workers uprising in Petrograd in the first days of March. The sailors' uprising in Kronstadt, which was an outgrowth of the uprising in Petrograd, was now cut off from its larger social base and localised on a small island. From this moment on the Kronstadt sailors were on the defensive.*" [**Behind the Lines during the Civil War**, pp. 396-7]

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. Few revolutionaries would evaluate these struggles on such a illogical and narrow basis but Rees wants us to do so with Kronstadt.

The logic of Rees arguments was used by the Stalinists later. Indeed, he would have to agree with Stalinists that the fact the Hungarian revolution of 1956 called on Western aid against the Red Army shows that it was objectively counter-revolutionary and pro-capitalist, just as the Communist Party bureaucrats had argued. The fact that during that revolt many messages of support for the rebels also preached bourgeois values would also, according to Rees's logic, damn that revolt in the eyes of all socialists. Similarly, the fact that the Polish union **Solidarity** got support from the West against the Stalinist regime does not mean that its struggle was counter-revolutionary. So the arguments used by Rees are identical to those used by Stalinists to support their repression of working class revolt in the Soviet Empire. Indeed, orthodox Trotskyists also called "*Solidarnosc*" a company union of the CIA, bankers, the Vatican and Wall Street for capitalist counterrevolution in Poland and considered the fall of the Soviet Union as a defeat for the working class and socialism, in other words, a counterrevolution. As evidence they pointed to the joy and support each generated in Western elite circles (and ignored the popular nature of those revolts).

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 a **revolutionary** revolt 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.

Lastly, we must comment upon the fact that members of Kronstadt's revolutionary Committee took refuge in Finland along with "[s]ome 8,000 people (some sailors and the most active part of the civilian population)." [Mett, **Op. Cit.**, p. 57] This was as the Bolsheviks had predicted on March 5th ("At the last minute, all those generals, the Kozlovskvs, the Bourksers, and all that riff raff, the Petrichenkos, and the Tourins will flee to Finland, to the White guards" [cited by Mett, **Op. Cit.**, p. 50]). However, this does not indicate any "White guardist" connections. After all, where else **could** they go? Anywhere else would have been in Soviet Russia and so a Bolshevik prison and ultimately death. The fact that active participants in the revolt ended up in the only place they could end up to avoid death has no bearing to that nature of that revolt nor can it be used as "evidence" of a "white conspiracy."

In other words, the attempts of Trotskyists to smear the Kronstadt sailors with having White links is simply false. The actions of some rebels **after** the Bolsheviks had crushed the revolt cannot be used to discredit the revolt itself. The real relationship of the revolt to the Whites is clear. It was one of hatred and opposition.

## **8 Did the rebellion involve new sailors?**

The most common Trotskyist assertion to justify the repression of the Kronstadt revolt is that of Trotsky. It basically consists of arguing that the sailors in 1921 were different than those in 1917. Trotsky started this line of justification during the revolt when he stated on March 16th that the Baltic Fleet had been "*inevitably thinned out with respect to personnel*" and so a "*great many of the revolutionary sailors*" of 1917 had been "*transferred*" elsewhere. They had been "*replaced in large measure by accidental elements.*" This "*facilitated*" the work of the "*counterrevolutionary organisers*" who had "*selected*" Kronstadt. He repeated this argument in 1937 and 1938 [Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, pp. 68-9, p. 79, p. 81 and p. 87]

His followers repeated his assertions. Wright argues that "*the personnel of the fortress could not possibly have remained static throughout the years between 1917 and 1921.*" He doubts that the revolutionary sailors of 1917 could have remained behind in the fortress while their comrades fought the Whites. [**Op. Cit.**, pp. 122-3] These sailors had been replaced by peasant conscripts. John Rees, continuing this line of rationale, argued that "*the composition of the garrison had changed . . . it seems likely that the peasants had increased their weight in the Kronstadt, as Trotsky suggested.*" [Rees, **Op. Cit.**, p. 61]

As can be seen, the allegation that the Kronstadt sailors were a "*grey mass*" and had changed in social composition is a common one in Trotskyist circles. What are we to make of these claims?

Firstly, we must evaluate what are the facts as regards the social composition and turnover of

personnel in Kronstadt. Secondly, we must see how Trotskyists have misused these sources in order to indicate how far they will abuse the truth.

The first task is now, thanks to recent research, easy to do. Were the majority of the sailors during the uprising new recruits or veterans from 1917? The answer is that it was predominantly the latter. Academic Israel Getzler investigated this issue and demonstrated that of those serving in the Baltic fleet on 1st January 1921 at least 75.5% were drafted before 1918. Over 80% were from Great Russian areas, 10% from the Ukraine and 9% from Finland, Estonia, Latvia and Poland. He argues that the *"veteran politicised Red sailor still predominated in Kronstadt at the end of 1920"* and presents more *"hard statistical data"* like that just quoted. He investigated the crews of the two major battleships, the *Petropavlovsk* and the *Sevastopol* (both renowned since 1917 for their revolutionary zeal and revolutionary allegiance and, in Paul Avrigh's words, *"the powder kegs of the rising."* [Avrigh, **Op. Cit.**, p. 93]). His findings are conclusive, showing that of the 2,028 sailors where years of enlistment are known, 93.9% were recruited into the navy before and during the 1917 revolution (the largest group, 1,195, joined in the years 1914-16). Only 6.8% of the sailors were recruited in the years 1918-21 (including three who were conscripted in 1921) and they were the only ones who had not been there during the 1917 revolution. [Getzler, **Kronstadt 1917-1921**, pp. 207-8] Historian Fedotoff-White indicates that the cruiser **Rossiia** had joined in the decision to re-elect the Kronstadt Soviet and its *"crew consisted mostly of old seamen."* [**The Growth of the Red Army**, p. 138]

Moreover, the majority of the revolutionary committee were veterans of the Kronstadt Soviet and the October revolution. [Ida Mett, **Op. Cit.**, p. 42] *"Given their maturity and experience, not to speak of their keen disillusionment as former participants in the revolution, it was only natural that these seasoned bluejackets should be thrust into the forefront of the uprising."* [Avrigh, **Op. Cit.**, p. 91]

Getzler stresses that it was *"certainly the case"* that the *"activists of the 1921 uprising had been participants of the 1917 revolutions"* for the *"1,900 veteran sailors of the Petropavlovsk and the Sevastopol who spearheaded it. It was certainly true of a majority of the Revolutionary Committee and of the intellectuals . . . Likewise, at least three-quarters of the 10,000 to 12,000 sailors -- the mainstay of the uprising -- were old hands who had served in the navy through war and revolution."* [**Op. Cit.**, p. 226]

Little wonder, then, that Paul Avrigh argues (in a review of Getzler's book) that *"Getzler draws attention to the continuity in institutions, ideology, and personnel linking 1921 with 1917. In doing so he demolishes the allegation of Trotsky and other Bolshevik leaders that the majority of veteran Red sailors had, in the course of the Civil War, been replaced by politically retarded peasant recruits from the Ukraine and Western borderlands, thereby diluting the revolutionary character of the Baltic fleet. He shows, on the contrary, that no significant change had taken place in the fleet's political and social composition, that at least three-quarters of the sailors on active duty in 1921 had been drafted before 1918 and were drawn predominantly from Great Russian areas."* [**Soviet Studies**, vol. XXXVI, 1984, pp. 139-40]

Other research confirms Getzler's work. Evan Mawdsley argues that *"it seems reasonable to*



*challenge the previous interpretation" that there had been a "marked change in the composition of the men in the fleet . . . particularly . . . at the Kronstadt Naval Base." "The composition of the DOT [Active Detachment]," he concludes, "had not fundamentally changed, and anarchistic young peasants did not predominate there. The available data suggests that the main difficulty was not . . . that the experienced sailors were being demobilised. Rather, they were not being demobilised rapidly enough." The "relevant point is length of service, and available information indicates that as many as three-quarters of the DOT ratings -- the Kronstadt mutineers -- had served in the fleet at least since the World War." In a nutshell, "the majority of men seem to have been veterans of 1917." He presents data which shows that of the "2,028 ratings aboard the DOT battleships **Petropavlovsk** and **Sevastopol** at the time of the uprising, 20.2% had begun service before 1914, 59% between 1914 and 1916, 14% in 1917, and 6.8% from 1918 to 1921." For the DOT as a whole on 1st January, 1921, 23.5% could have been drafted before 1911, 52% from 1911 to 1918 and 24.5% after 1918. ["The Baltic Fleet and the Kronstadt Mutiny", pp. 506-521, **Soviet Studies**, vol. 24, no. 4, pp. 508-10]*

This is not the end of the matter. Unfortunately for Trotsky recently released documents from the Soviet Archives also refutes his case. A report by Vasili Sevei, Plenipotentiary of the Special Section of the **Vecheka**, dated March 7th, 1921, stated that a "large majority" of the sailors of Baltic Fleet "were and still are professional revolutionaries and could well form the basis for a possible third revolution." He notes that the "disease from which they suffer has been too long neglected." What is significant about this social-political profile of the "large majority" of sailors was that it was **not** written in response of the Kronstadt revolt but that it was formulated well before. As its author put it in the report, "I stated these views more than a month ago in my memorandum to comrade Krestinskii" (then secretary of the Communist Party). [quoted by Israel Getzler, "The Communist Leaders' Role in the Kronstadt Tragedy of 1921 in the Light of Recently Published Archival Documents", **Revolutionary Russia**, pp. 24-44, Vol. 15, No. 1, June 2002, pp. 32-3]

In other words, some time in January, 1921, a leading member of the Cheka was of the opinion that the "large majority" of sailors in the Baltic fleet "were and still are professional revolutionaries." No mention was made of new recruits, indeed the opposite is implied as the sailors' "disease" had been "too long neglected." And the recipient of this March 7th, 1921, report? Leon Trotsky. Unsurprisingly, Trotsky did not mention this report during the crisis or any time afterward.

Needless to say, this statistical information was unavailable when anarchists and others wrote their accounts of the uprising. All they could go on were the facts of the uprising itself and the demands of the rebels. Based on these, it is little wonder that anarchists like Alexander Berkman stressed the continuity between the Red Kronstadters of 1917 and the rebels of 1921. Firstly, the rebels in 1921 took action in **solidarity** with the striking workers in Petrograd. In the words of Emma Goldman, it was "after the report of their Committee of the real state of affairs among the workers in Petrograd that the Kronstadt sailors did in 1921 what they had done in 1917. They immediately made common cause with the workers. The part of the sailors in 1917 was hailed as the red pride and glory of the Revolution. Their identical part in 1921 was denounced to the

*whole world as counter-revolutionary treason" by the Bolsheviks. [Trotsky Protests Too Much] Secondly, their demands were thoroughly in-line with the aspirations and politics of 1917 and clearly showed a socialist awareness and analysis. Thirdly, Emma Goldman spoke to some of those wounded in the attack on Kronstadt. She records how one "had realised that he had been duped by the cry of 'counter-revolution.' There were no Tsarist generals in Kronstadt, no White Guardists -- he found only his own comrades, sailors and soldiers who had heroically fought for the Revolution." [My Disillusionment in Russia, pp. 199-200]*

The later research has just confirmed what is obvious from an analysis of such facts, namely that the rebels in 1921 were acting in the spirit of their comrades of 1917 and this implies a significant continuity in personnel (which perhaps explains the unwillingness of Leninists to mention that the revolt was in solidarity with the strikers or the demands of the rebels). Thus the research provides empirical evidence to support the political analysis of the revolt conducted by revolutionaries like Berkman, Voline and so on.

In summary, the bulk of the sailors at the start of 1921 had been there since 1917. Even if this was not the case and we assume that a majority of the sailors at Kronstadt were recent recruits, does this invalidate the rebellion? After all, the Red sailors of 1917 were once raw recruits. They had become politicised over time by debate, discussion and struggle. So had the workers in Petrograd and elsewhere. Would Leninists have denounced strikers in 1905 or 1917 if it was discovered that most of them were recent peasant arrivals in the city? We doubt it.

Indeed, the Bolsheviks were simply repeating old Menshevik arguments. Between 1910 and 1914, the industrial workforce grew from 1,793,000 workers to 2,400,000. At the same time, the influence of the Bolsheviks grew at Menshevik expense. The Mensheviks considered this a *"consequence of the changes that were taking place in the character of urban Russia"* with peasants joining the labour force. [*"introduction"*, **The Mensheviks in the Russian Revolution**, Abraham Archer (Ed.), p. 24] Somewhat ironically, given later Leninist arguments against Kronstadt, the Mensheviks argued that the Bolsheviks gained their influence from such worker-peasant industrial *"raw recruits"* and not from the genuine working class. [Orlando Figes, **A People's Tragedy**, p. 830] As Robert Service noted in his study of the Bolshevik party during the 1917 revolution, *"Menshevik critics were fond of carping that most Bolshevik newcomers were young lads fresh from the villages and wanting in long experience of industrial life and political activity. It was not completely unknown for Bolshevik spokesmen to come close to admitting this."* [**The Bolshevik Party in Revolution**, p. 44] And, of course, it was the industrial *"raw recruits"* who had taken part in the 1905 and 1917 revolutions. They helped formulate demands and organise soviets, strikes and demonstrations. They helped raised slogans which were to the left of the Bolsheviks. Does this process somehow grind to a halt when these *"raw recruits"* oppose Trotsky? Of course not.

Given the political aspects of the Kronstadt demands we can safely argue that even if the rebellion had been the work of recent recruits they obviously had been influenced by the veteran sailors who remained. They, like the peasant-workers of 1905 and 1917, would have been able to raise their own political demands and ideas while, at the same time, listening to those among

them with more political experience. In other words, the assumption that the sailors could not raise revolutionary political demands if they were "raw recruits" only makes sense if we subscribe to Lenin's dictum that the working class, by its own efforts, can only reach a trade union consciousness (i.e. that toiling people cannot liberate themselves). In other words, this Trotsky inspired sociology misses the point. Sadly, we have to address it in order to refute Leninist arguments.

Therefore, Getzler's research refutes the claims of Trotskyists such as Chris Harman who follow Trotsky and argue that "*Kronstadt in 1921 was not Kronstadt of 1917. The class composition of its sailors had changed. The best socialist elements had long ago gone off to fight in the army in the front line. They were replaced in the main by peasants whose devotion to the revolution was that of their class.*" [quoted by Sam Farber, **Before Stalinism**, p. 192] As can be seen, the ship crews were remarkably consistent over the period in question. It is, however, useful to discuss this question further in order to show what passes as analysis in Trotskyist circles.

Harman is, of course, following Trotsky. Writing in 1937 Trotsky argued that Kronstadt had "*been completely emptied of proletarian elements*" as "*[a]ll the sailors*" belonging to the ships' crews "*had become commissars, commanders, chairmen of local soviets.*" Later, realising the stupidity of this claim, he changed it to Kronstadt being "*denuded of all revolutionary forces*" by "*the winter of 1919.*" He also acknowledged that "*a certain number of qualified workers and technicians*" remained to "*take care of the machinery*" but these were "*politically unreliable*" as proven by the fact they had not been selected to fight in the civil war. As evidence, he mentions that he had wired a "*request at the end of 1919, or in 1920, to 'send a group of Kronstadt sailors to this or that point'*" and they had answered "*No one left to send.*" [Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, p. 87, p. 90 and p. 81] Obviously, the Communist commander at Kronstadt had left his fortress and its ships totally unmanned! Such common sense is sadly lacking from Trotsky (as indicated above, the evidence supports the common sense analysis and not Trotsky's claims).

Moreover, does this claim also apply to the Communist Party membership at Kronstadt? Is Trotsky **really** arguing that the Bolsheviks in Kronstadt after the winter of 1919 were not revolutionary? Given that the bulk of them had joined the CP during or after this time, we must obviously conclude that the recruiters let anyone join. Moreover, there had been a "*rigorous local purge*" of the party conducted in the autumn of 1920 by the commander of the Baltic Fleet. [I. Getzler, **Kronstadt 1917-1921**, p. 211 and p. 205] Must we also conclude that this purge did not have revolutionary politics as a factor when determining whether a party member should be expelled or not?

Trotsky claims too much. Based on his claims we must conclude one of two possibilities. The first possibility is that the Kronstadt Communist Party was not revolutionary and was made up of politically backward individuals, careerists and so on. If that was the case in Kronstadt then it must also have been the case elsewhere in Russia and this discredits any attempt to argue that the Bolshevik party dictatorship was revolutionary. The second possibility is that it **did** have revolutionary elements. If so, then the fact that hundreds of these members left the party during the revolt and only a minority of them opposed it makes the claim that the rebellion was

"counter-revolutionary" difficult (indeed, impossible) to maintain (of the 2,900 members of the Communist Party in Kronstadt, 784 officially resigned and 327 had been arrested). And it also makes Trotsky's claims that Kronstadt was "denuded" of revolutionary elements false.

J.G. Wright, as noted above, thought that it was "impossible" to believe that the sailors of 1917 could leave their comrades to fight the Whites while they stayed at Kronstadt. This may have been a valid argument **if** the Soviet armed forces were democratically run. However, as we indicated in [section 2](#), it was organised in a typically bourgeois fashion. Trotsky had abolished democratic soldiers and sailors councils and the election of officers in favour of appointed officers and hierarchical, top-down, military structures. This meant that the sailors would have stayed in Kronstadt if they had been ordered to. The fact that they had to defend Petrograd combined with the level of technical knowledge and experience required to operate the battleships and defences at Kronstadt would have meant that the 1917 sailors would have been irreplaceable and so had to remain at Kronstadt. This is what, in fact, did happen. In the words of Israel Gelzter:

*"One reason for the remarkable survival in Kronstadt of these veteran sailors, albeit in greatly diminished numbers, was precisely the difficulty of training, in war-time conditions, a new generation competent in the sophisticated technical skills required of Russia's ultra-modern battleships, and, indeed, in the fleet generally." [Op. Cit., p. 208]*

We should also note here 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."* [Getzler, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 197-8] Thus the idea that the sailors left and did not come back is not a valid one.

Trotsky obviously felt that this (recently refuted) argument of changing social composition of the sailors would hold more water than claims White Guards organised it. He continued this theme:

*"The best, most self-sacrificing sailors were completely withdrawn from Kronstadt and played an important role at the fronts and in the local soviets throughout the country. What was left was the grey mass with big pretensions ('We are from Kronstadt'), but without the political education and unprepared for revolutionary sacrifice. The country was starving. The Kronstadters demanded privileges. The uprising was dictated by a desire to get privileged food rations." [Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, p. 79]*

This was Trotsky's first comment on the uprising for 16 years and it contained a lie. As Ida Mett notes, *"[s]uch a demand was never put forward by the men of Kronstadt"* and so Trotsky *"started his public accusations with a lie."* [**The Kronstadt Uprising**, p. 73] He repeated the claim again, six months later [Lenin and Trotsky, **Op. Cit.**, p. 92] Unfortunately for him, the opposite was the case. Point 9 of the Kronstadt demands explicitly called for an **end** of privileges by the *"equalisation of rations for all workers."* This was implemented during the uprising.

As an aside, Trotsky later states that *"[w]hen conditions became very critical in hungry Petrograd, the Political Bureau more than once discussed the possibility of securing an 'internal*

*loan' from Kronstadt, where a quantity of old provisions still remained. But delegates of the Petrograd workers answered: 'You will get nothing from them by kindness. They speculate in cloth, coal, and bread. At present in Kronstadt every kind of riffraff has raised its head.'*" [Lenin and Trotsky, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 87-8] As Ida Mett pointed out, "*[w]e should add that before the insurrection these 'stores' were in the hands of communist functionaries and that it was upon these people alone that consent to the proposed 'loan' depended. The rank and file sailor, who took part in the insurrection, had no means open to him whereby he could have opposed the loan, even if he had wanted to.*" [**The Kronstadt Uprising**, pp. 74-5] If Trotsky's words were true, then they were a crushing indictment of Bolshevik practice, **not** the Kronstadt sailors.

As for Trotsky's claim of a "*lack of political education,*" the 15 point resolution voted upon by the sailors exposes this as nonsense and the fact the sailors fought the Red Army to the end indicates that there were prepared to die for their ideals. Similarly, Trotsky's argument that "*in 1917-18, the Kronstadt sailor stood considerably higher than the average level of the Red Army*" but by 1921 they "*stood . . . on a level considerably lower, in general, than the average level of the Red Army.*" In fact, as we indicate in [section 9](#), the political programme of the revolt was fundamentally the same as Kronstadt's soviet democracy of 1917 and, we should note, opposed the introduction of wage labour, a basic socialist idea (and one missing from the Bolshevik's NEP policies). Moreover, the mass meeting that agreed the resolution did so unanimously, meaning old and new sailors agreed to it. So much for Trotsky's assertions.

Others have pointed out the weak nature of Trotsky's arguments as regards the changing nature of the sailors. We will quote Emma Goldman's evaluation of Trotsky's assertions. As will be seen, Trotsky's assertions seem to be based on expediency (and, significantly, were not uttered before the revolt):

*"Now, I do not presume to argue what the Kronstadt sailors were in 1918 or 1919. I did not reach Russia until January, 1920. From that time on until Kronstadt was 'liquidated' the sailors of the Baltic fleet were held up as the glorious example of valour and unflinching courage. Time on end I was told not only by Anarchists, Mensheviks and social revolutionists, but by many Communists, that the sailors were the very backbone of the Revolution. On the 1st of May, 1920, during the celebration and the other festivities organised for the first British Labour Mission, the Kronstadt sailors presented a large clear-cut contingent, and were then pointed out as among the great heroes who had saved the Revolution from Kerensky, and Petrograd from Yudenich. During the anniversary of October the sailors were again in the front ranks, and their re-enactment of the taking of the Winter Palace was wildly acclaimed by a packed mass.*

*"Is it possible that the leading members of the party, save Leon Trotsky, were unaware of the corruption and the demoralisation of Kronstadt, claimed by him? I do not think so. Moreover, I doubt whether Trotsky himself held this view of the Kronstadt sailors until March, 1921. His story must, therefore, be an afterthought, or is it a rationalisation to justify the senseless 'liquidation' of Kronstadt?"* [**Trotsky Protests Too Much**]

Ante Ciliga quoted the testimony regarding Kronstadt of a fellow political prisoner in Soviet

Russia:

*"It is a myth that, from the social point of view, Kronstadt of 1921 had a wholly different population from that of 1917,' [a] man from Petrograd, Dv., said to me in prison. In 1921 he was a member of the Communist youth, and was imprisoned in 1932 as a 'decist' (a member of Saprnov's group of 'Democratic Centralists')." [Op. Cit., pp. 335-6]*

Since then, both Paul Avrich and Israel Gelzter have analysed this question and confirmed the arguments and accounts of Goldman and Ciliga. Moreover, continuity between the sailors of 1917 and 1921 can also be seen from their actions (rising in solidarity with the Petrograd workers) and in their politics (as expressed in their demands and in their paper).

Now we turn to our second reason for looking into this issue, namely the misuse of these sources to support their case. This indicates well the nature of Bolshevik ethics. *"While the revolutionaries,"* argued Ciliga with regards to the Bolsheviks, *"remaining such only in words, accomplished in fact the task of the reaction and counter-revolution, they were compelled, inevitably, to have recourse to lies, to calumny and falsification."* [Op. Cit., p. 335] Defending these acts also pays its toll on those who follow this tradition, as we shall see.

Needless to say, such evidence as provided by Avrich and Getzler is rarely mentioned by supporters of Bolshevism. However, rather than ignore new evidence, the Trotskyists use it in their own way, for their own purposes. Every new work about Kronstadt has been selectively quoted from by Trotskyists to support their arguments, regardless of the honesty of such activity. We can point to two works, Paul Avrich's **Kronstadt 1921** and **Kronstadt 1917-1921** by Israel Getzler, which have been used to support Bolshevik conclusions when, in fact, they do the opposite. The misuse of these references is quite unbelievable and shows the mentality of Trotskyism well.

Pierre Frank argues that Paul Avrich's work has *"conclusions"* which are *"similar to Trotsky's"* and *"confirms the changes in the composition of the Kronstadt garrison that took place during the civil war, although with a few reservations."* [Lenin and Trotsky, **Op. Cit.**, p. 25] A quick look at these reservations shows how false Frank is. It is worth quoting Avrich at length to show this:

*"There can be little doubt that during the Civil War years a large turnover had indeed taken place within the Baltic Fleet, and that many of the old-timers had been replaced by conscripts from rural districts who brought with them the deeply felt discontent of the Russian peasantry. By 1921, according to official figures, more than three-quarters of the sailors were of peasant origin, a substantially higher proportion than in 1917 . . . Yet this does not necessarily mean that the behavioural patterns of the fleet had undergone any fundamental change. On the contrary, alongside the technical ratings, who were largely drawn from the working class, there had always been a large and unruly peasant element among the sailors . . . Indeed, in 1905 and 1917 it was these very youths from the countryside who had given Kronstadt its reputation as a hotbed of revolutionary extremism. And throughout the Civil War the Kronstadters had remained an independent*

*and headstrong lot, difficult to control and far from constant in their support for the government. It was for this reason so many of them . . . had found themselves transferred to new posts remote from the centres of Bolshevik powers. Of those who remained, many hankered for the freedoms they had won in 1917 before the new regime began to establish its one-party dictatorship throughout the country.*

*"Actually, there was little to distinguish the old-timers from the recent recruits in their midst. Both groups were largely of peasant background . . . Not unexpectedly, when the rebellion finally erupted, it was the older seamen, veterans of many years of service (dating in some cases before the First World War) who took the lead . . . Given their maturity and experience, not to speak of their keen disillusionment as former participants of the revolution, it was only natural that these seasoned bluejackets should be thrust into the forefront of the uprising . . . The proximity of Petrograd, moreover, with its intense intellectual and political life, had contributed towards sharpening their political awareness, and a good many had engaged in revolutionary activity during 1917 and after. . .*

*"As late as the autumn of 1920, Emma Goldman recalled, the sailors were still held up by the Communists themselves as a glowing example of valour and unflinching courage; on November 7, the third anniversary of the Bolshevik seizure of power, they were in the front ranks of the celebrations . . . No one at the time spoke of any 'class degeneration' at Kronstadt. The allegation that politically retarded **muzhiks** had diluted the revolutionary character of the fleet, it would seem, was largely a device to explain away dissident movements among the sailors, and had been used as such as early as October 1918, following the abortive mutiny at the Petrograd naval station, when the social composition of the fleet could not yet have undergone any sweeping transformation." [Kronstadt 1921, pp. 89-92]*

As can be seen, Avrich's "reservations" are such as to make clear he does **not** share Trotsky's "conclusions" as regards the class make-up of Kronstadt and, indeed, noted the ideological bias in this "explanation."

Moreover, Avrich points to earlier revolts which the Bolsheviks had also explained in terms of a diluting of the revolutionary sailors of the Baltic Fleet by peasants. In April 1918 *"the crews of several Baltic vessels passed a strongly worded resolution" which "went so far as to call for a general uprising to dislodge the Bolsheviks and install a new regime that would adhere more faithfully to the principles of the revolution."* In October that year, *"a mass meeting at the Petrograd naval base adopted a resolution" which included the sailors going "on record against the Bolshevik monopoly of political power. Condemning the suppression of the anarchists and opposition socialists, they called for free elections to the soviets . . . [and] denounced the compulsory seizure of gain."* Their demands, as Avrich notes, *"strikingly anticipated the Kronstadt programme of 1921, down to the slogans of 'free soviets' and 'Away with the commissarocracy.'" He stresses that a "glance at the behaviour of the Baltic Fleet from 1905 to 1921 reveals many elements of continuity."* [Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 63-4]

However, a worse example of Trotskyist betrayal of the truth is provided by the British SWP's John Rees. 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. Rees argues as follows:

*"In September and October 1920 the writer and the Bolshevik party lecturer Ieronimus 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'." [Op. Cit., p. 61]*

This quote is referenced to Israel Getzler's **Kronstadt 1917-1921**. Rees account is a fair version of the first half of Yasinskys' 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.'" [Getzler, Op. Cit., p. 207]*

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.

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.*" [Op. Cit., p. 61 and p. 78] 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** [our emphasis] that the Bolshevik party was more working class in composition than the base as a whole, then it seems **likely** [our emphasis] that the peasants had increased their weight in the Kronstadt, as Trotsky suggested.*" [Op. Cit., p. 61]



So on the basis of an assumption, it may be "*likely*" that Trotsky was correct! Impressive "*evidence*" indeed!

The figures Rees uses are extracted from D. Fedotoff-White's **The Growth of the Red Army**. Significantly, Rees fails to mention that the Kronstadt communists had just undergone a "*re-registration*" which saw about a quarter of the 4,435 members in August 1920 voluntarily resigning. By March 1921, the party had half as many members as in the previous August and during the rebellion 497 members (again, about one-quarter of the total membership) voluntarily resigned, 211 were excluded after the defeat of the rebellion and 137 did not report for re-registration. [Fedotoff-White, **The Growth of the Red Army**, p. 140] It seems strange that the party leadership had not taken the opportunity to purge the Kronstadt party of "excessive" peasant influence in August 1920 when it had the chance.

Other questions arise from Rees' argument. He uses the figures of Communist Party membership in an attempt to prove that the class composition of Kronstadt had changed, favouring the peasantry over the workers. Yet this is illogical. Kronstadt was primarily a military base and so its "class composition" would be skewed accordingly. Since the Bolshevik military machine was made up mostly of peasants, can we be surprised that the Communist Party in Kronstadt had a higher percentage of peasants than the national average? Significantly, Rees does not ponder the fact that the percentage of workers in the Kronstadt Communist Party was around the national average (indeed, Fedotoff-White notes that it "*compares favourably in that respect with some of the large industrial centres.*" [Op. Cit., p. 142]).

Also, given that Rees acknowledges that by December 1920 only 1,313 new recruits had arrived in the Baltic Fleet, his pondering of the composition of the Communist organisation at Kronstadt smacks more of desperation than serious analysis. By arguing that we "*do not know how many more new recruits arrived in the three months before Kronstadt erupted,*" Rees fails to see that this shows the irrelevance of his statistical analysis. [Op. Cit., p. 61] After all, how many of these "*new recruits*" would be allowed to join the Communist Party in the first place? Given that the Bolshevik membership had halved between August 1920 and March 1921, his analysis is simply pointless, a smokescreen to draw attention away from the weakness of his own case.

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. Simply put, 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. As noted above, Getzler 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. These figures are 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! [Op. Cit., p. 61]

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" [Op. Cit., p. 62] Why should he when he has the appropriate figures for the sailors? Here is Farber's account of the facts:

*"this [Trotsky's 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 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."* [Before Stalinism, pp. 192-3]

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!

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." [Op. Cit., p. 62]

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! Very impressive.

So, what of this argument? 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 (Rees himself acknowledges that the Kronstadt demands were not reproduced by any other "peasant" insurrection). The political aspects of these ideas 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 (see [section 9](#) for details). In other words, the **political** composition of the garrison was the same as in 1917. Rees is clearly clutching at straws.

The fact that the class composition of the sailors was similar in 1917 and in 1921 **and** that the bulk of the sailors at the heart of the revolt were veterans of 1917, means that Trotskyists can only fall back on their ideological definition of class. This perspective involves defining a specific "proletarian" political position (i.e. the politics of Bolshevism) and arguing that anyone who does not subscribe to that position is "petty-bourgeois" regardless of their actual position in society (i.e. their class position). As Ida Mett notes:

*"When Trotsky asserts that all those supporting the government were genuinely proletarian and progressive, whereas all others represented the peasant counterrevolution, we have a right to ask of him that he present us with a serious factual analysis in support of his contention."* [Op. Cit., pp. 75-6]

As we show in the [next section](#), the political composition of the Kronstadt rebels, like their class composition, was basically unchanged in 1921 when compared to that which pre-dominated in 1917.

## 9 Was Kronstadt different politically?

As we proved in the [last section](#), the Kronstadt garrison had not fundamentally changed by 1921. On the two battleships which were the catalyst for the rebellion, over 90% of the sailors for whom years of enlistment are known had been there since 1917. However, given that most Leninists mean "support the party" by the term "class politics," it is useful to compare the political perspectives of Kronstadt in 1917 to that expressed in the 1921 revolt. As will soon become clear, the political ideas expressed in 1921 were essentially similar to those in 1917. This similarly also proves the continuity between the Red sailors of 1917 and the rebels of 1921.

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"* (*"externally Kronstadt was a loyal stronghold of the Bolshevik regime"*). [I. Getzler, **Kronstadt 1917-1921**, p. 179] In 1917 Trotsky even stated that the Kronstadters *"are anarchists."* [quoted by Getzler, **Op. Cit.**, p. 98] Kronstadt was in favour of soviet power and, unsurprisingly, supported those parties which claimed to support that goal.

Politically, the climate in Kronstadt was *"very close to the politics of the Socialist Revolutionary Maximalists, a left-wing split-off from the SR Party, politically located somewhere between the Left SRs and the Anarchists."* [Farber, **Before Stalinism**, p. 194] In Kronstadt this group was led

by Anatolii Lamanov and according to Getzler, "*it rejected party factionalism*" and "*stood for pure sovietism*". They sought an immediate agrarian and urban social revolution, calling for the "*socialisation of power, of the land and of the factories*" to be organised by a federation of soviets based on direct elections and instant recall, as a first step towards socialism. [Getzler, **Op. Cit.**, p. 135] The similarities with anarchism are clear.

During the October revolution, the Bolsheviks did not prevail in the Kronstadt soviet. Instead, the majority was made up of SR Maximalists and Left SRs. Kronstadt's delegates to the third Congress of Soviets were an Left-SR (157 votes), a SR-Maximalist (147 votes) and a Bolshevik (109 votes). It was only in the January elections in 1918 that the Bolsheviks improved their position, gaining 139 deputies compared to their previous 96. In spite of gaining their highest ever vote during the era of multi-party soviets the Bolsheviks only gained 46 percent of seats in the soviet. Also elected at this time were 64 SRs (21 percent), 56 Maximalists (19 percent), 21 non-party delegates (7 percent), 15 Anarchists (5 percent) and 6 Mensheviks (2 percent). The soviet elected a Left SR as its chairman and in March it elected its three delegates to the Fourth Congress of Soviets, with the Bolshevik delegate receiving the lowest vote (behind a Maximalist and an anarchist with 124, 95 and 79 votes respectively). [I. Getzler, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 182-4]

By the April 1918 elections, as in most of Russia, the Bolsheviks found their support had decreased. Only 53 Bolsheviks were elected (29 per cent) as compared to 41 SR Maximalists (22 percent), 39 Left SRs (21 percent), 14 Menshevik Internationalists (8 percent), 10 Anarchists (5 percent) and 24 non-party delegates (13 percent). Indeed, Bolshevik influence at Kronstadt was so weak that on April 18th, the Kronstadt soviet denounced the Bolsheviks attack against the anarchists in Moscow, April 12th by a vote of 81 to 57. The "*Bolshevisation*" 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.*" [Getzler, **Op. Cit.**, p. 186]

Thus the dominant political perspective in 1917 was one of "*sovietism*" -- namely, all power to the soviets and not to parties. This was the main demand of the 1921 uprising. Politically, Kronstadt had not changed.

In addition to the soviet, there was the "*general meetings in Anchor square, which were held nearly every day.*" [Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, p. 57] The Kronstadt Soviet was itself constantly pressurised by mass meetings, generally held in Anchor Square. For example, on 25 May 1917, a large crowd, inspired by Bolshevik and anarchist speakers, marched to the Naval Assembly and forced the leaders of the Soviet to rescind their agreement with the more moderate Petrograd Soviet. In February 1921, the Kronstadt rebels met in Anchor square to pass the *Petropavlovsk* resolution -- just as happened before in 1917. And as in 1917, they elected a "*conference of delegates*" to manage the affairs of the Kronstadt. In other words, the sailors re-introduced exactly the same political forms they practised in 1917.

These facts suggest that any claims that the majority of sailors, soldiers and workers in Kronstadt had changed ideas politically are unfounded. This, ironically enough, is confirmed by Trotsky.

Trotsky's memory (which, after all, seems to be the basis of most of his and his followers

arguments) does play tricks on him. He states that there "*were no Mensheviks at all in Kronstadt.*" As for the anarchists, "*most*" of them "*represented the city petty bourgeoisie and stood at a lower level than the SRs.*" The Left SRs "*based themselves on the peasant part of the fleet and of the shore garrison.*" All in all, "*in the days of the October insurrection the Bolsheviks constituted less than one-half of the Kronstadt soviet. The majority consisted of SRs and anarchists.*" [Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, p. 86]

So we have Trotsky arguing that the majority of the "*pride and glory*" of the revolution in 1917 voted for groups of a "*lower level*" than the Bolsheviks (and for a party, the Mensheviks, Trotsky said did not exist there!).

Looking at the politics of these groups, we discover some strange inconsistencies which undermine the validity of Trotsky's claims.

For example, in the beginning of 1918, "*the working population of Kronstadt, after debating the subject at many meetings, decided to proceed to socialise dwelling places. . . A final monster meeting definitely instructed several members of the Soviet -- Left Social-Revolutionaries and Anarcho-Syndicalists -- to raise the question at the next [soviet] plenary session.*" While the Bolshevik delegates tried to postpone the decision (arguing in the soviet that the decision was too important and should be decided by the central government) the "*Left Social-Revolutionaries, Maximalists and Anarcho-Syndicalists asked for an immediate discussion and carried the vote.*" [Voline, **The Unknown Revolution**, pp. 460-1]

This fits in exactly with the communist-anarchist programme of socialisation but it is hardly an expression of representatives of "*the city petty bourgeoisie.*"

Let us quote a "*representative*" of the "*city petty bourgeoisie*":

*"I am an anarchist because contemporary society is divided into two opposing classes: the impoverished and dispossessed workers and peasants . . . and the rich men, kings and presidents . . .*

*"I am an anarchist because I scorn and detest all authority, since all authority is founded on injustice, exploitation and compulsion over the human personality. Authority dehumanises the individual and makes him a slave.*

*"I am an opponent of private property when it is held by individual capitalist parasites, for private property is theft. . .*

*"I am an anarchist because I believe only in the creative powers and independence of a united proletariat and not of the leaders of political parties of various kinds.*

*"I am an anarchist because I believe that the present struggle between the classes will end only when the toiling masses, organised as a class, gain their true interests and conquer, by means of a violent social revolution, all the riches of the earth . . . having abolished all institutions of government and authority, the oppressed class must proclaim*

*a society of free producers . . . The popular masses themselves will conduct their affairs on equal and communal lines in free communities.*" [N. Petrov, cited by Paul Avrich, **Anarchists in the Russian Revolution**, pp. 35-6]

Very "petty bourgeois"! Of course Trotsky could argue that this represented the minority of "*real revolutionaries*," the "*elements most closely linked to the Bolsheviks*" among the anarchists, but such an analysis cannot be taken seriously considering the influence of the anarchists in Kronstadt. [Lenin and Trotsky, **Op. Cit.**, p. 86] For example, a member of the Petrograd Committee and the Helsingfors party organisation in 1917 recalled that the Anarchist-Communists had great influence in Kronstadt. Moreover, according to historian Alexander Rabinowitch, they had an "*undeniable capacity to influence the course of events*" and he speaks of "*the influential Anarcho-Syndicalist Communists [of Kronstadt] under Iarchuk.*" Indeed, anarchists "*played a significant role in starting the July uprising*" in 1917. [**Prelude to Revolution**, p. 62, p. 63, p. 187 and p. 138] This confirms Paul Avrich's comments that the "*influence of the anarchists . . . 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). [Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, p. 168 and p. 169]

A similar analysis of the Maximalists would produce the same results for Trotsky's claims. Paul Avrich provides a useful summary of their politics. He notes the Maximalists occupied "*a place in the revolutionary spectrum between the Left SR's and the anarchists while sharing elements of both.*" They "*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 Kronstaders [in 1921], and 'Power to the soviets but not the parties' had originally been a Maximalist rallying-cry.*" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 171]

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.*" [Paul Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 171-2]

Indeed, "*[o]n nearly every important point the Kronstadt program, as set forth in the rebel *Izvestiia*, coincided with that of the Maximalists.*" [Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, p. 171] This can be quickly seen from reading both the *Petropavlovsk* resolution and the Kronstadt newspaper *Izvestiia* (see **No Gods, No Masters**, vol. 2, pp. 183-204). The political continuity is striking between 1917 and 1921.

As can be seen, the Maximalists were in advance of the Bolsheviks too. They argued for soviet power, not party power, as well as workers' self-management to replace the state capitalism of the Bolsheviks.

Clearly, the political outlook of the Kronstadt rebels had not changed dramatically. Heavily influenced by anarchist and semi-anarchists in 1917, in 1921 the same political ideas came to the fore again once the sailors, soldiers and civilians had freed themselves from Bolshevik dictatorship and created the "*conference of delegates*."

According to the logic of Trotsky's argument, the Kronstadt sailors were revolutionary simply because of the actions of the Bolshevik minority, as a "*revolution is 'made' directly by a minority. The success of a revolution is possible, however, only where this minority finds more or less support . . . on the part of the majority. The shift in different stages of the revolution . . . is directly determined by changing political relations between the minority and the majority, between the vanguard and the class.*" It is this reason that necessitates "*the dictatorship of the proletariat*" as the level of the masses cannot be "*equal*" and of "*extremely high development.*" Trotsky argued that the "*political composition of the Kronstadt Soviet reflected the composition of the garrison and the crews.*" [Lenin and Trotsky, **Op. Cit.**, p. 85, p. 92 and p. 86]

In other words, with the vanguard (the minority of Bolsheviks) gone, the majority of the Kronstadters fell back to their less developed ways. So, if the political composition of the revolt reflected the composition of the crews, then Trotsky's argument suggests that this composition was remarkably unchanged! It also suggests that this "*composition*" had changed in the early months of 1918 as the Bolsheviks saw their vote nearly half between late January and April 1918!

Similarly, we find John Rees, in contradiction to his main argument, mentioning that the "*ideology of the Kronstadt garrison was one factor*" in the revolt because "*in its heroic days the garrison had an ultra-left air.*" [Rees, **Op. Cit.**, p. 62] If, as he maintains, the sailors **were** new, how could they had time to be influenced by this ideology, the ideology of sailors he claims were not there? And if the new recruits he claims were there **had** been influenced by the sailors of 1917 then it is hard to maintain that the revolt was alien to the spirit of 1917.

This can also be seen from Rees' comment that while we did not know the composition of the sailors, we did "*know about the composition of some of the other units based at Kronstadt, like the 2,500 Ukrainians of the 160th Rifle Regiment, recruited from areas particularly friendly to the Makhno guerrillas and with less than 2 percent of Bolsheviks in its ranks.*" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 61] In other words, we know the origin of **one** other unit at Kronstadt, not the class "*composition*" of "*some of the other units*" there. However, Rees does not see how this fact undermines his argument. Firstly, Rees does not think it important to note that Communists numbered less than 2 per cent of metal-workers in Petrograd and only 4 per cent of 2,200 employed in metal works in Moscow. [D. Fedotoff-White, **The Growth of the Red Army**, p. 132] As such the low figure for Communists in the 160th Rifle Regiment does not tell us much about its class composition. Secondly, as Fedotoff-White (the source of Rees' information) notes, while "*the soldiers were also disaffected and had no love of the Communists and the commissars,*" they were "*unable to formulate their grievances clearly and delineate the issues at stake . . . They did not have it in them to formulate a plan of action. All that was done at Kronstadt was the work of the bluejackets [the sailors], who were the backbone of the movement.*" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 154]

If, as Rees argues, that "new recruits" explain the uprising, then how can we explain the differences between the army and navy? We cannot. The difference can be explained only in terms of what Rees is at pains to deny, namely the existence and influence of sailors who had been there since 1917. As Fedotoff-White speculates, "*the younger element among the seamen*" would "*easily [fall] under the spell of the . . . older men they served with on board ships*" and of the "*large number of old-ex-sea men, employed in the industrial enterprises of Kronstadt.*" He notes that "*a good many*" of the rebels "*had had ample experience in organisational and political work since 1917. A number had long-standing associations with Anarchists and the Socialist Revolutionaries of the Left.*" Thus the "*survival of the libertarian pattern of 1917 . . . made it possible for the bluejackets not only to formulate, but carry out a plan of action, no doubt under a certain amount of influence of the Anarchists, and those who had left the party in such great numbers during the September 1920 re-registration.*" [Op. Cit., p. 155] The political continuity of the Kronstadt rebellion is clear from the way the revolt developed and who took a leading role in it.

All of which raises an interesting question. If revolutions are made by a minority who gain the support of the majority, what happens when the majority reject the vanguard? As we indicate in sections [13](#) and [15](#), Trotsky was not shy in providing the answer -- party dictatorship. In this he just followed the logic of Lenin's arguments. In 1905, Lenin argued (and using Engels as an authority) "*the principle, 'only from below' is an anarchist principle.*" For Lenin, Marxists must be in favour of "*From above as well as from below*" and "*renunciation of pressure also from above is anarchism.*" According to Lenin, "*[p]ressure from below is pressure by the citizens on the revolutionary government. Pressure from above is pressure by the revolutionary government on the citizens.*" [Marx, Engels and Lenin, **Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism**, p. 192, p. 196 and pp. 189-90]

As Kronstadt shows, "*pressure from above*" has a slight advantage over "*pressure from below*" as it has the full power of the state apparatus to use against the citizens. In other words, the seeds for Bolshevick dictatorship and the repression of Kronstadt lie in Trotsky's argument and arguments like it (see [section 15](#) for further details).

Simply put, the evidence shows that the political ideas dominant in Kronstadt, like the bulk of the personnel themselves, had not changed (indeed, it is these politics which visibly show the statistical evidence we present in the [last section](#)). The revolt of 1921 reflected the politics and aspirations of those active in 1917. It were these politics which had made Kronstadt the "*pride and glory*" of the revolution in 1917 and, four years later, made it so dangerous to the Bolsheviks.

## 10 Why did the Petrograd workers not support Kronstadt?

For Trotskyists, the inaction of the Petrograd workers during the revolt is a significant factor in showing its "*backward peasant*" character. Trotsky, for example, argued that from "*the class point of view*" it is "*extremely important to contrast the behaviour of Kronstadt to that of Petrograd in those critical days.*" He argues that the "*uprising did not attract the Petrograd*



*workers. It repelled them. The stratification proceeded along class lines. The workers immediately felt that the Kronstadt mutineers stood on the opposite side of the barricades -- and they supported the Soviet power. The political isolation of Kronstadt was the cause of its internal uncertainty and its military defeat.*" [Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, pp. 90-1]

Firstly, it should be noted that Trotsky's claims in 1937 are at odds with his opinion during the crisis. In a cable dated March 5th, 1921, to a member of the Council of Labour and Defence Trotsky insisted that *"only the seizure of Kronstadt will put an end to the political crisis in Petrograd."* [quoted by Israel Getzler, *"The Communist Leaders' Role in the Kronstadt Tragedy of 1921 in the Light of Recently Published Archival Documents"*, **Revolutionary Russia**, pp. 24-44, Vol. 15, No. 1, June 2002, p. 32] Thus, in 1921, Trotsky was well aware of the links between the Kronstadt revolt and the Petrograd strikes, seeing the destruction of the former as a means to defeating the latter. Simply put, the crushing of Kronstadt would give the rebel workers in Petrograd a clear message of what to expect if they persisted in their protests.

Secondly, needless to say, Trotsky's later arguments leave a lot to be desired. For example, he fails to note (to use Victor Serge's words -- see [section 5](#)) that the state and Communist Press *"was positively berserk with lies."* The press and radio campaign directed against Kronstadt stated that the revolt had been organised by foreign spies and was led by ex-Tsarist generals.

On 5th March the Petrograd Defence Committee put out a call to the insurgents, inviting them to surrender. It stated:

*"You are being told fairy tales when they tell you that Petrograd is with you or that the Ukraine supports you. These are impertinent lies. The last sailor in Petrograd abandoned you when he learned that you were led by generals like Kozlovskv. Siberia and the Ukraine support the Soviet power. Red Petrograd laughs at the miserable efforts of a handful of White Guards and Socialist Revolutionaries."* [cited by Mett, **The Kronstadt Uprising**, p. 50]

These lies would, of course, alienate many workers in Petrograd. Two hundred emissaries were sent from Kronstadt to distribute their demands but only a few avoided capture. The Party had brought the full weight of its propaganda machine to bear, lying about the revolt and those taking part in it. The government also placed a *"careful watch"* on the *"trains from Petrograd to mainland points in the direction of Kronstadt to prevent any contact with the insurgents."* [Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, p. 140 and p. 141]

Unsurprising, in such circumstances many workers, soldiers and sailors would have been loath to support Kronstadt. Isolated from the revolt, the Petrograd workers had to reply on official propaganda (i.e. lies) and rumours to base any judgement on what was happening there. However, while this is a factor in the lack of active support, it is by no means the key one. This factor, of course, was state repression. Emma Goldman indicates the situation in Petrograd at the time:

*"An exceptional state of martial law was imposed throughout the entire province of*

*Petrograd, and no one except officials with special passes could leave the city now. The Bolshevik press launched a campaign of calumny and venom against Kronstadt, announcing that the sailors and soldiers had made common cause with the 'tsarist General Kozlovsky;' they were thereby declaring the Kronstadters outlaws." [No Gods, No Masters, vol. 2, p. 171]*

Given what everyone knew what happened to people outlawed by the Bolsheviks, is it surprising that many workers in Petrograd (even if they knew they were being lied to) did not act? Moreover, the threat made against Kronstadt could be seen on the streets of Petrograd:

*"On March 3 [the day after the revolt] the Petrograd Defence Committee, now vested with absolute power throughout the entire province, took stern measures to prevent any further disturbances. The city became a vast garrison, with troops patrolling in every quarter. Notices posted on the walls reminded the citizenry that all gatherings would be dispersed and those who resisted shot on the spot. During the day the streets were nearly deserted, and, with the curfew now set at 9 p.m., night life ceased altogether." [Avrich, Op. Cit., p. 142]*

Berkman, an eyewitness to the repression, states that:

*"The Petrograd committee of defence, directed by Zinoviev, its chairman, assumed full control of the city and Province of Petrograd. The whole Northern District was put under martial law and all meetings prohibited. Extraordinary precautions were taken to protect the Government institutions and machine guns were placed in the Astoria, the hotel occupied by Zinoviev and other high Bolshevik functionaries. The proclamations posted on the street bulletin boards ordered the immediate return of all strikers to the factories, prohibited suspension of work, and warned the people against congregating on the streets. 'In such cases', the order read, 'the soldiery will resort to arms. In case of resistance, shooting on the spot.'*

*"The committee of defence took up the systematic 'cleaning of the city.' Numerous workers, soldiers and sailors suspected of sympathising with Kronstadt, placed under arrest. All Petrograd sailors and several Army regiments thought to be 'politically untrustworthy' were ordered to distant points, while the families of Kronstadt sailors living in Petrograd were taken into custody as **hostages**." [The Russian Tragedy, p. 71]*

However, part of the Petrograd proletariat continued to strike during the Kronstadt events. Strikes were continuing in the biggest factories of Petrograd: Poutilov, Baltisky, Oboukhov, Nievskaja Manoufactura, etc. However, the Bolsheviks acted quickly shut down some of the factories and started the re-registration of the workers. For workers to be locked out of a factory meant to be *"automatically deprived of their rations."* [Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, p. 41]

At the "Arsenal" factory, *"the workers organised a mass meeting on 7th March, (the day the bombardment of Kronstadt began). This meeting adopted a resolution of the mutinous sailors! It elected a commission which was to go from factory to factory, agitating for a general strike."*

[Mett, **Op. Cit.**, p. 52] The Cheka confirms this event, reporting to Zinoviev on March 8th that "*[a]t a rally of workers of the Arsenal Plant a resolution was passed to join the Kronstadt uprising. The general meeting had elected a delegation to maintain contact with Kronstadt.*" This delegation had already been arrested. This was a common practice and during this period the Cheka concentrated its efforts on the leaders and on disrupting communication: all delegates to other workplaces, all Mensheviks and SRs who could be found, all speakers at rallies were being arrested day after day. On the day the Bolsheviks attacked Kronstadt (March 7th) the Cheka reported that it was launching "*decisive actions against the workers.*" [quoted by Brovkin, **Behind the Front Lines of the Civil War**, p. 396]

These "*decisive actions*" involved a "*massive purge of Petrograd factories and plants.*" The Communists "*suppressed the workers' uprising in Petrograd in the first days of March.*" Unlike the Kronstadt sailors, the workers did not have weapons and "*were essentially defenceless vis-a-vis the Cheka.*" [Brovkin, **Op. Cit.**, p. 396]

The state of siege was finally lifted on the 22nd of March, five days after the crushing of Kronstadt.

In these circumstances, is it surprising that the Petrograd workers did not join in the rebellion?

Moreover, the Petrograd workers had just experienced the might of the Bolshevik state. As we noted in [section 2](#), the events in Kronstadt were in solidarity with the strike wave in Petrograd at the end of February. Then the Bolsheviks had repressed the workers with "*arrests, the use of armed patrols in the streets and in the factories, and the closing and re-registration of an enterprise labour force.*" [Mary McAuley, **Op. Cit.**, p. 409]

A three-man Defence Committee was formed and Zinoviev "*proclaimed martial law*" on February 24th (this was later "*vested with absolute power throughout the entire province*" on March 3rd). [Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, p. 39 and p. 142] As part of this process, they 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. [Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 46-7]

As can be seen, Trotsky is insulting the intelligence of his readers by arguing that the lack of support in Petrograd for Kronstadt reflected "*class lines.*" Indeed, by failing to mention (to use Emma Goldman's words) "*the campaign of slander, lies and calumny against the sailors*" conducted by the Soviet Press (which "*fairly oozed poison against the sailors*") or that "*Petrograd was put under martial law*" Trotsky, quite clearly, "*deliberately falsifies the facts.*" [**Trotsky Protests Too Much**]

Ida Mett states the obvious:

*"Here again Trotsky is saying things which are quite untrue. Earlier on we showed how the wave of strikes had started in Petrograd and how Kronstadt had followed suit. It was against the strikers of Petrograd that the Government had to organise a special General Staff: the Committee of Defence. The repression was first directed against the Petrograd workers and against their demonstrations, by the despatch of armed detachments of Koursantys.*

*"But the workers of Petrograd had no weapons. They could not defend themselves as could the Kronstadt sailors. The military repression directed against Kronstadt certainly intimidated the Petrograd workers. The demarcation did not take place 'along class lines' but according to the respective strengths of the organs of repression. The fact that the workers of Petrograd did not follow those of Kronstadt does not prove that they did not sympathise with them. Nor, at a later date, when the Russian proletariat failed to follow the various 'oppositions' did this prove that they were in agreement with Stalin! In such instances it was a question of the respective strengths of the forces confronting one another." [Mett, **Op. Cit.**, p. 73]*

So, unlike the Kronstadt sailors, the Petrograd workers did not have arms and so could not take part in an "armed revolt" against the well armed Red Army unless part of that force sided with the strikers. The Communist leaders recognised this danger, with untrustworthy troops being confined to their barracks and in place of regular troops they had shipped in *kursanty* (they had obviously learned the lessons of the 1917 February revolution!). Ultimately, the city was "appeased by concessions and cowed by the presence of troops." [Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, p. 200]

Not that this was the first time Trotsky confused force with class. In his infamous work **Terrorism and Communism** he defended the fact of Communist Party dictatorship (i.e. "of having substituted for the dictatorship of the Soviets the dictatorship of our party"). He argued 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" and that there is "no substitution at all" when the "power of the party" replaces that of the working class. The rule of the party "has afforded to the Soviets the possibility of becoming transformed from shapeless parliaments of labour into the apparatus of the supremacy of labour." [**Terrorism and Communism**, p. 109] He continued by arguing:

*"But where is your guarantee, certain wise men ask us, that it is just your party that expresses the interests of historical development? Destroying or driving underground the other parties, you have thereby prevented their political competition with you, and consequently you have deprived yourselves of the possibility of testing your line of action.*

*"This idea is dictated by a purely liberal conception of the course of the revolution. In a period in which all antagonisms assume an open character, and the political struggle swiftly passes into a civil war, the ruling party has sufficient material standard by which to test its line of action, without the possible circulation of Menshevik papers. Noske crushes the Communists, but they grow. We have suppressed the Mensheviks and the S.R.s-and they have disappeared. This criterion is sufficient for us." [Op. Cit., pp. 109-*

10]

An interesting criterion, to say the least. The faulty logic he displayed with regards to Petrograd and Kronstadt had a long history. By this logic Hitler expressed the *"interests of historical development"* when the German Communists and Trotskyists *"disappeared"* by leaps and bounds. Similarly, the Trotskyists in Russia *"disappeared"* under Stalin. Is this a Trotskyist justification of Stalinism? All it proves is the power of the repressive system -- just as the *"passivity"* of the Petrograd workers during the Kronstadt revolt indicates the power of the Bolshevik regime rather than the class basis of the Kronstadt uprising.

On this theme, we can see the depths which Trotskyists go to re-write history from Pierre Frank's *"Introduction"* to the work **Kronstadt**. He decides to quote Paul Avrigh's work (after, of course, warning the reader that Avrigh *"is not a Bolshevik or a Trotskyist"* and his *"political features are blurred"*). Frank states that Avrigh *"done his work conscientiously, without skipping over the facts."* It is a shame that the same cannot be said of Frank! Frank states that Avrigh *"discusses the strikes in Petrograd preceding Kronstadt and comes to the following conclusion"*:

*"For many intellectuals and workers, moreover, the Bolsheviks, with all their faults, were still the most effective barrier to a White resurgence and the downfall of the revolution.*

*"For these reasons, the strikes in Petrograd were fated to lead a brief existence. Indeed, they ended almost as suddenly as they had begun, never having reached the point of armed revolt against the regime."* [Lenin and Trotsky, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 24-35]

It is the *"moreover"* in the first paragraph that gives the game away. Avrigh lists a few more reasons than the one listed by Frank. Here is what Avrigh actually lists as the reasons for the end of the strike wave:

*"after several days of tense excitement, the Petrograd disturbances petered out . . . The concessions had done their work, for more than anything else it was cold and hunger which had stimulated popular disaffection. Yet 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 . . .*

*"Then, too, the collapse of the movement would not have come so soon but for the utter demoralisation of Petrograd's inhabitants. The workers were simply too exhausted to keep up any sustained political activity . . . What is more, they lacked effective leadership and a coherent program of action. In the past these had been supplied by the radical intelligentsia . . . [but they] were themselves in no condition to lend the workers any meaningful support, let alone active guidance . . . they now felt too weary and terrorised . . . to raise their voices in opposition. With most of their comrades in prison or exile, and some already executed, few of the survivors were willing to risk the same fate, especially*

*when the odds against them were so overwhelming and when the slightest protest might deprive their families of their rations. For many intellectuals and workers, moreover, the Bolsheviks, with all their faults, were still the most effective barrier to a White resurgence and the downfall of the revolution.*

*"For these reasons, the strikes in Petrograd were fated to lead a brief existence. Indeed, they ended almost as suddenly as they had begun, never having reached the point of armed revolt against the regime." [Paul Avrich, **Kronstadt**, pp. 49-51]*

As can be seen, Frank "skips over" most of Avrich's argument and the basis of his conclusion. Indeed, what Frank calls Avrich's "conclusion" cannot be understood by providing, as Frank does, the **last** reason Avrich gives for it.

The dishonesty is clear, if not unexpected nor an isolated case. John Rees, to use another example, states that the revolt was "*preceded by a wave of serious but quickly resolved strikes.*" [Rees, **Op. Cit.**, p. 61] No mention that the strikes were "*resolved*" by force nor that the Kronstadt revolt was not only "*preceded*" by the strikes but was directly inspired by them, was in **solidarity with them** and raised many of the same demands!

Similarly, he argues that the Kronstadters' "*insistence that they were fighting for a 'third revolution', freedom of expression and for 'soviets without parties' [although, in fact, they **never** raised that slogan and so we have to wonder who Rees is quoting here] 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. 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.*" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 63]

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). Given that the Kronstadt demands simply reflected those raised by the Petrograd strikers **themselves** we can safely say that Rees is talking nonsense (see [section 4](#)). Moreover, the sailors' resolution **had** meet with strong support from the workers of Kronstadt. Thus Rees' "class analysis" of the Kronstadt revolt is pathetic and has no bearing to the reality of the situation in Petrograd nor to the history of the revolt itself.

As can be seen, any attempt to use the relative inaction of the Petrograd workers as evidence of the class nature of the revolt has to do so by ignoring all the relevant facts of the situation. This can go so far as to selectively quote from academic accounts to present a radically false conclusion to that of the misused author's.

## 11 Were the Whites a threat during the Kronstadt revolt?

The lack of foreign intervention during the Kronstadt revolt suggests more than just the fact that the revolt was not a "White conspiracy." It also suggests that the White forces were in no position to take advantage of the rebellion or even support it.

This is significant simply because the Bolsheviks and their supporters argue that the revolt had to be repressed simply because the Soviet State was in danger of White and/or foreign intervention. How much danger was there? According to John Rees, a substantial amount:

*"The Whites, even though their armies had been beaten in the field, were still not finished -- as the emigre response to the Kronstadt rising shows . . . They had predicted a rising at Kronstadt and the White National Centre abroad raised a total of nearly 1 million French Francs, 2 million Finnish marks, £5000, \$25,000 and 900 tons of flour in just two weeks; 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."* [Op. Cit., pp. 63-4]

To back up his argument, Rees references Paul Avrich's book. We, in turn, will consult that work to evaluate his argument.

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). [Paul Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, p. 13]

Secondly, the Russian emigres *"remained as divided and ineffectual as before, with no prospect of co-operation in sight."* [Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, p. 219]

Thirdly, as far as Wrangel, the last of the White Generals, goes, his forces 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."* [Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, p. 219, p. 146 and p. 105]

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." [Op. Cit., pp. 117-9]

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.*" [Op. Cit., p. 105]

Thus, the claim that foreign intervention was likely seems without basis. Indeed, the Communist radio was arguing that "*the organisation of disturbances in Kronstadt have the sole purpose of influencing the new American President and changing his policy toward Russia. At the same time the London Conference is holding its sessions, and the spreading of similar rumours must influence also the Turkish delegation and make it more submissive to the demands of the Entente. The rebellion the **Petropavlovsk** crew is undoubtedly part of a great conspiracy to create trouble within Soviet Russia and to injure our international position.*" [quoted by Berkman, **The Russian Tragedy**, p. 71] Lenin himself argued on March 16th 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.*" [Lenin and Trotsky, **Op. Cit.**, p. 52] The demobilising of the Red Army seems to confirm this perspective.

Moreover, these governments had to take into account of its own working class. It was doubtful that they would, after years of war, been able to intervene, particularly if there was a clearly socialist revolt coming from below. Their own working class, in such a situation, would have prevented intervention by foreign capitalist states (a fact Lenin acknowledged in July 1921 [Lenin and Trotsky, **Op. Cit.**, p. 62]).

So in spite of massive social unrest and the revolt of a key fortress protecting Petrograd, the Western powers took no action. The Whites were disorganised and could only raise non-military supplies (none of which reached Kronstadt). Could this situation have changed if Kronstadt had spread to the mainland? It is doubtful simply because the Western governments, as Lenin argued, had to take into account the anti-interventionist position of their own working classes. The Whites had no military forces available (as the Bolsheviks themselves argued). Avrich notes it would have taken months for these forces to reach Kronstadt by which time soviet democracy would have been consolidated and ready to protect itself.

Even if we assume that Kronstadt had survived until the ice melted while Petrograd remained under Bolshevik dictatorship it, again, is doubtful that it would have been the basis for renewed White attacks. Neither Wrangel's troops nor foreign government forces would have been welcomed by Red Kronstadt. While non-military aid would have been welcome (i.e. food supplies and so on), it is hard to believe that the Conference of Delegates would have allowed troops to arrive or pass them by to attack Petrograd. Simply put, the Kronstadters were fighting for soviet power and were well aware that others may try to support the revolt for their own, anti-revolutionary, reasons (see [section 7](#)).

So it seems that the possibility of foreign intervention was not a real threat at the time. The

arguments of Lenin at the time, plus the demobilisation of the Red Army, points in that direction. Moreover, the total lack of response by Western governments during the revolt indicates that they were unlikely to take advantage of continuing unrest in Kronstadt, Petrograd and other towns and cities. Their working classes, sick of war and class consciousness enough to resist another intervention in Russia, would have been a factor in this apathetic response. Wrangel's troops, as the Bolsheviks were aware, were not a threat.

The only real threat to Bolshevik power was internal -- from the workers and peasants the Bolsheviks claimed to be representing. Many of the ex-soldiers swelled the ranks of peasant guerrilla forces, fighting the repressive (and counter-productive) food collection squads. In the Ukraine, the Bolsheviks were fighting the remnants of the Makhnovist army (a fight, incidentally, brought upon the Bolsheviks by themselves as they had betrayed the agreements made with the anarchist forces and attacked them once Wrangel had been defeated).

Thus the only potential danger facing the "soviet power" (i.e. Bolshevik power) was soviet democracy, a danger which had existed since the October revolution. As in 1918, when the Bolsheviks disbanded and repressed any soviet electorate which rejected their power, they met the danger of soviet democracy with violence. The Bolsheviks were convinced that their own dictatorship was equivalent to the revolution and that their power was identical to that of the working class. They considered themselves to be the embodiment of "soviet power" and it obviously did not bother them that the demand for free soviets can hardly be considered as actions against the power of the soviets.

In such circumstances, the Bolshevik government viewed the Kronstadt revolt **not** as socialists should but rather as a ruling class. It was suppressed for "reasons of state" and not to defend a revolutionary regime (which was, by this stage, revolutionary in name only). As Bakunin had argued decades before, the "workers' state" would not remain controlled by the workers for long and would soon become a dictatorship **over** the proletariat by an elite which claimed to know the interests of the working class better than they did themselves (see [section 15](#)).

The only possible justification for maintaining the party dictatorship was the argument that soviet democracy would have led to the defeat of the Communists at the polls (which would mean recognising it was a dictatorship **over** the proletariat and had been for some time). This would, it is argued, have resulted in (eventually) a return of the Whites and an anti-working class dictatorship that would have slaughtered the Russian workers and peasants en masse.

Such a position is self-serving and could have been used by Stalin to justify **his** regime. Unsurprisingly enough, the Hungarian Stalinists argued after crushing the 1956 revolution that *"the dictatorship of the proletariat, if overthrown, cannot be succeeded by any form of government other than fascist counter-revolution."* [quoted by Andy Anderson, **Hungary '56**, p. 101] And, of course, an even more anti-working class dictatorship than Lenin's did appear which did slaughter the Russian workers and peasants en masse, namely Stalinism. No other option was possible, once party dictatorship was fully embraced in 1921 (repression against dissidents was **more** extreme after the end of the Civil War than during it). It is utopian in the extreme to believe that the good intentions of the dictators would have been enough to keep the regime

within some kind of limits. Thus this argument is flawed as it seriously suggests that dictatorship and bureaucracy can reform itself (we discuss this in more detail in [section 13](#)).

## 12 Was the country too exhausted to allow soviet democracy?

Trotskyists have, in general, two main lines of attack with regards the Kronstadt revolt. The main one is the claim that the garrison in 1921 was not of the same class composition as the one in 1917. This meant that the 1921 revolt expressed the peasant counter-revolution and had to be destroyed. We have indicated that, firstly, the garrison was essentially the same in 1921 as it had been in 1917 (see [section 8](#)). Secondly, we have shown that politically the ideas expressed in its program were the same as those in 1917 (see [section 9](#)). Thirdly, that this program had many of the same points as strikers resolutions in Petrograd and, indeed, were **more** socialist in many cases by clearly calling for soviet democracy rather the constituent assembly (see [section 4](#)).

Now we turn to the second excuse, namely that the country was too exhausted and the working class was decimated. In such circumstances, it is argued, objective conditions meant that soviet democracy was impossible and so the Bolsheviks had to maintain their dictatorship at all costs to defend what was left of the revolution. Leninist Pat Stack of the British SWP is typical of this approach. It is worth quoting him at length:

*"Because anarchists dismiss the importance of material reality, events such as the 1921 Kronstadt rising against the Bolshevik government in Russia can become a rallying cry. The revolutionary Victor Serge was not uncritical of the Bolshevik handling of the rising, but he poured scorn on anarchist claims for it when he wrote, 'The third revolution it was called by certain anarchists whose heads were stuffed by infantile delusions.'*

*"This third revolution, it was argued, would follow the first one in February 1917 and the second in October. The second had swept away the attempts to create capitalist power, had given land to the peasants and had extracted Russia from the horrible imperialist carnage of the First World War. The revolution had introduced a huge literacy programme, granted women abortion rights, introduced divorce and accepted the rights of the various Russian republics to self determination. It had done so, however, against a background of a bloody and horrendous civil war where the old order tried to regain power. Sixteen imperialist powers sent armies against the regime, and trade embargoes were enforced.*

*"The reality of such actions caused huge suffering throughout Russia. The regime was deprived of raw materials and fuel, transportation networks were destroyed, and the cities began running out of food. By 1919 the regime only had 10 percent of the fuel that was available in 1917, and the production of iron ore in the same year stood at 1.6 percent of that in 1914. By 1921 Petrograd had lost 57 percent of its population and Moscow 44.5 percent. Workers were either dead, on the frontline of the civil war, or were fleeing the starvation of the city. The force that had made the revolution possible was*

being decimated. . .

*"The choice facing the regime in Russia was either to crush the uprising and save the revolution, or surrender to the rising and allow the forces of reaction to march in on their back. There was no material basis for a third way. A destroyed economy and infrastructure, a population faced with starvation and bloody war, and a hostile outside world were not circumstances in which the revolution could move forward. Great efforts would have to be made to solve these problems. There were no overnight solutions and preserving the revolutionary regime was crucial. Ultimately real solutions could only be found if the revolution were to spread internationally, but in the meantime to have any chance of success the regime had to survive. Only the right and the imperialist powers would have benefited from its destruction."* ["Anarchy in the UK?", **Socialist Review**, no. 246, November 2000]

Anarchists, in spite of Stack's assertions, were and are well aware of the problems facing the revolution. Alexander Berkman (who was in Petrograd at the time) pointed out the "[l]ong years of war, revolution, and civil struggle" which "had bled Russia to exhaustion and brought her people to the brink of despair." [**The Russian Tragedy**, p. 61] Like every worker, peasant, sailor and soldier in Russia, anarchists knew (and know) that reconstruction would not take place "overnight." The Kronstadters' recognised this in the first issue of their newspaper **Izvestiia**:

*"Comrades and citizens, our country is passing through a tough time. For three years now, famine, cold and economic chaos have trapped us in a vice-like grip. The Communist Party which governs the country has drifted away from the masses and proved itself powerless to rescue them from a state of general ruination . . . All workers, sailors and Red soldiers today can clearly see that only concentrated efforts, only the concentrated determination of the people can afford the country bread, wood and coal, can clothe and shoe the people and rescue the Republic from the impasse in which it finds itself."* [cited in **No Gods, No Masters**, vol. 2, p. 183]

In the Kronstadt **Izvestiia** of March 8 they wrote that it was "here in Kronstadt that the foundation stone was laid of the Third Revolution that will smash the last shackles on the toiler and open up before him the broad new avenue to socialist construction." They stress that the "new revolution will rouse the toiling masses of the Orient and Occident. For it will offer the example of fresh socialist construction as opposed to mechanical, governmental 'Communist' construction." [**Op. Cit.**, p. 194] Clearly, the Kronstadt rebels knew that construction would take time and were arguing that the only means of rebuilding the country was via the participation of what of left of the working class and peasantry in free class organisations like freely elected soviets and unions.

The experience of the revolt provides evidence that this analysis was far from "utopian." A Finish reporter at Kronstadt was struck by the "enthusiasm" of its inhabitants, by their renewed sense of purpose and mission. Avrich argues that for a "fleeting interval Kronstadt was shaken out of its listlessness and despair." [**Kronstadt**, p. 159] The sailors, soldiers and civilians sent their delegates to delegates, started to re-organise their trade unions and so on. Freedom and

soviet democracy was allowing the masses to start to rebuild their society and they took the opportunity. The Kronstadter's faith in *"direct mass democracy of and by the common people through free soviets"* did seem to be justified in the response of the people of Kronstadt. This suggests that a similar policy implemented by the workers who had just organised general strikes, demonstrations and protest meetings all across Russia's industrial centres was not impossible or doomed to failure.

Indeed, this wave of strikes refutes Stack's claim that *"[w]orkers were either dead, on the frontline of the civil war, or were fleeing the starvation of the city. The force that had made the revolution possible was being decimated."* Clearly, a sizeable percentage of the workers were still working and so not dead, on the frontline or fleeing the cities. As we discuss below, approximately one-third of factory workers were still in Petrograd (the overall decrease of urban working people throughout Russia exceeded 50 percent [Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, p. 24]). The working class, in other words, still existed and were able to organise strikes, meetings and mass demonstrations in the face of state repression. The fact, of course, is that the majority of what remained of the working class would not have voted Communist in free soviet elections. Thus political considerations have to be factored in when evaluating Stack's arguments.

The question for anarchists, as for the Kronstadt rebels, was what the necessary pre-conditions for this reconstruction were. Could Russia be re-built in a socialist way while being subject to a dictatorship which crushed every sign of working class protest and collective action? Surely the first step, as Kronstadt shows, would have to be the re-introduction of workers' democracy and power for only this would give allow expression to the creative powers of the masses and interest them in the reconstruction of the country. Continuing party dictatorship would never do this:

*"by its very essence a dictatorship destroys the creative capacities of a people. . . The revolutionary conquest could only be deepened through a genuine participation of the masses. Any attempt to substitute an 'elite' for those masses could only be profoundly reactionary."*

*"In 1921 the Russian Revolution stood at the cross roads. The democratic or the dictatorial way, that was the question. By lumping together bourgeois and proletarian democracy the Bolsheviks were in fact condemning both. They sought to build socialism from above, through skilful manoeuvres of the Revolutionary General Staff. While waiting for a world revolution that was not round the corner, they built a state capitalist society, where the working class no longer had the right to make the decisions most intimately concerning it."* [Mett, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 82-3]

The Russian revolution had faced economic crisis all through 1917 and 1918. Indeed, by the spring of 1918 Russia was living through an almost total economic collapse, with a general scarcity of all resources and mass unemployment. According to Tony Cliff (the leader of the SWP) in the spring of 1918 Russia's *"[w]ar-damaged industry continued to run down. 'The bony hand of hunger' . . . gripped the whole population . . . One of the causes of the famine was the breakdown of transport. . . Industry was in a state of complete collapse. Not only was there no food to feed the factory workers; there was no raw materials or fuel for industry. The oilfields of*

*the Baku, Grozny and Emba regions came to a standstill. The situation was the same in the coalfields. The production of raw materials was in no better a state . . . The collapse of industry meant unemployment for the workers.*" [Lenin: **The Revolution Besieged**, vol. 3, pp. 67-9] The industrial workforce dropped to 40% of its 1917 levels. The similarities to Stack's description of the situation in early 1921 is striking.

Does this mean that, for Leninists, soviet democracy was impossible in early 1918 (of course, the Bolsheviks **in practice** were making soviet democracy impossible by suppressing soviets that elected the wrong people)? After all, in the start of 1918 the Russian Revolution also faced a *"destroyed economy and infrastructure, a population faced with starvation and bloody war, and a hostile outside world."* If these *"were not circumstances in which the revolution could move forward"* then it also applied in 1918 as well as in 1921. And, if so, then this means admitting that soviet democracy is impossible during a revolution, marked as it will always be marked by exceptionally difficult circumstances. Which, of course, means to defend party power and not soviet power and promote the dictatorship of the party over the working class, positions Leninists deny holding.

Incredibly, Stack fails to even mention the power and privileges of the bureaucracy at the time. Officials got the best food, housing and so on. The lack of effective control or influence from below ensured that corruption was widespread. One of the leaders of the Workers' Opposition gives us an insight of the situation which existed at the start of 1921:

*"The rank and file worker is observant. He sees that so far . . . the betterment of the workers' lot has occupied the last place in our policy . . . We all know that the housing problem cannot be solved in a few months, even years, and that due to our poverty, its solution is faced with serious difficulties. But the facts of ever-growing inequality between the privileged groups of the population in Soviet Russia and the rank and file workers, 'the frame-work of the dictatorship', breed and nourish the dissatisfaction.*

*"The rank and file worker sees how the Soviet official and the practical man lives and how he lives . . . [It will be objected that] 'We could not attend to that; pray, there was the military front.' And yet whenever it was necessary to make repairs to any of the houses occupied by the Soviet institutions, they were able to find both the materials and the labour."* [Alexandra Kollontai, **The Workers' Opposition**, p. 10]

A few months earlier, the Communist Yoffe wrote to Trotsky expressing the same concerns. *"There is enormous inequality,"* he wrote, *"and one's material position largely depends on one's post in the party; you'll agree that this is a dangerous situation."* [quoted by Orlando Figes, **A People's Tragedy**, p. 695] To talk about anarchists dismissing the importance of material reality and a *"revolutionary regime"* while ignoring the inequalities in power and wealth, and the bureaucratisation and despotism which were their root, is definitely a case of the pot calling the kettle black!

Under the harsh material conditions facing Russia at the time, it goes without saying that the bureaucracy would utilise its position to gather the best resources around it. Indeed, part of the

factors resulting in Kronstadt was *"the privileges and abuses of commissars, senior party functionaries and trade union officials who received special rations, allocations and housing and . . . quite openly enjoying the good life."* [Getzler, **Op. Cit.**, p. 210] Stack fails to mention this and instead talks about the necessity of defending a "workers' state" in which workers had no power and where bureaucratic abuses were rampant. If anyone is denying reality, it is him! Thus Ciliga:

*"The Soviet Government and the higher circles in the Communist Party applied their own solution [to the problems facing the revolution] of **increasing the power of the bureaucracy**. The attribution of powers to the 'Executive Committees' which had hitherto been vested in the soviets, the replacement of the dictatorship of the class by the dictatorship of the party, the shift of authority even within the party from its members to its cadres, the replacement of the double power of the bureaucracy and the workers in the factory by the sole power of the former - to do all this was to 'save the Revolution!' [. . .] The Bureaucracy prevented the bourgeois restoration . . . by eliminating the proletarian character of the revolution."* [**Op. Cit.**, p. 331]

Perhaps, in light of this, it is significant that, in his list of revolutionary gains from October 1917, Stack fails to mention what anarchists would consider the most important, namely workers' power, freedom, democracy and rights. But, then again, the Bolsheviks did not rate these gains highly either and were more than willing to sacrifice them to ensure their most important gain, state power (see [section 15](#) for a fuller discussion of this issue). Again, the image of revolution gains a victory over its content!

When Stack argues that it was necessary to crush Kronstadt to *"save the revolution"* and *"preserv[e] the revolutionary regime"* we feel entitled to ask what was there left to save and preserve? The dictatorship and decrees of "Communist" leaders? In other words, party power. Yes, by suppressing Kronstadt Lenin and Trotsky saved the revolution, saved it for Stalin. Hardly something to be proud of.

Ironically, given Stack's assertions that anarchists ignore *"material reality"*, anarchists had predicted that a revolution would be marked by economic disruption. Kropotkin, for example, argued that it was *"certain that the coming Revolution . . . will burst upon us in the middle of a great industrial crisis . . . There are millions of unemployed workers in Europe at this moment. It will be worse when Revolution has burst upon us . . . The number of the out-of-works will be doubled as soon as barricades are erected in Europe and the United States . . . we know that in time of Revolution exchange and industry suffer most from the general upheaval . . . A Revolution in Europe means, then, the unavoidable stoppage of at least half the factories and workshops."* He stressed that there would be *"the complete disorganisation"* of the capitalist economy and that during a revolution *"[i]nternational commerce will come to a standstill"* and *"the circulation of commodities and of provisions will be paralysed."* [**The Conquest of Bread**, pp. 69-70 and p. 191]

Elsewhere, he argued that a revolution would *"mean the stoppage of hundreds of manufactures and workshops, and the impossibility of reopening them. Thousands of workmen will find no*



employment . . . The present want of employment and misery will be increased tenfold." He stressed that "the reconstruction of Society in accordance with more equitable principles **will necessitate a disturbed period**" and argued that any revolution will be isolated to begin with and so (with regards to the UK) "the imports of foreign corn will decrease" as will "exports of manufactured wares." A revolution, he argued, "is not the work of one day. It means a whole period, mostly lasting for several years, during which the country is in a state of effervescence." To overcome these problems he stressed the importance of reconstruction from the bottom up, organised directly by working people, with local action being the basis of wider reconstruction. The "immense problem -- the re-organisation of production, redistribution of wealth and exchange, according to new principles -- cannot be solved by . . . any kind of government. It must be a natural growth resulting from the combined efforts of all interested in it, freed from the bonds of the present institutions. It must grow naturally, proceeding from the simplest up to complex federations; and it cannot be something schemed by a few men and ordered from above. In this last shape it surely would have no chance of living at all." [Act for Yourselves, pp. 71-2, p. 67, pp, 72-3, pp. 25-6 and p. 26]

Anarchists had predicted the problems facing the Russian Revolution decades previously and, given the lack of success of Bolshevik attempts to solve these problems via centralism, had also predicted the only way to solve them. Far from ignoring "material reality" it is clear that anarchists have long been aware of the difficulties a revolution would face and had organised our politics around them. In contrast, Stack is arguing that these inevitable effects of a revolution create "circumstances" in which the revolution cannot "move forward"! If this is so, then revolution is an impossibility as it will always face economic disruption and isolation at some stage in its development, for a longer or shorter period. If we base our politics on the "best-case scenario" then they will soon be proven to be lacking.

Ultimately, Stack's arguments (and those like it) are the ones which ignore "material reality" by arguing that Lenin's state was a "revolutionary regime" and reconstruction could be anything but to the advantage of the bureaucracy without the active participation of what was left of the working class. Indeed, the logic of his argument would mean rejecting the idea of socialist revolution **as such** as the problems he lists will affect **every** revolution and had affected the Russian Revolution from the start.

The problems facing the Russian working class were difficult in the extreme in 1921 (some of which, incidentally, were due to the results of Bolshevik economic policies which compounded economic chaos via centralisation), but they could never be solved by someone else bar the thousands of workers taking strike action all across Russia at the time: "And if the proletariat was that exhausted how come it was still capable of waging virtually total general strikes in the largest and most heavily industrialised cities?" [Ida Mett, **Op. Cit.**, p. 81]

So, as far as "material reality" goes, it is clear that it is Stack who ignores it, not anarchists or the Kronstadt rebels. Both anarchists and Kronstadters recognised that the country was in dire straits and that a huge effort was required for reconstruction. The material basis at the time offered two possibilities for reconstruction -- either from above or from below. Such a reconstruction could



**only** be socialist in nature if it involved the direct participation of the working masses in determining what was needed and how to do it. In other words, the process had to start **from below** and no central committee utilising a fraction of the creative powers of the country could achieve it. Such a bureaucratic, top-down re-construction would rebuild the society in a way which benefited a few. Which, of course, was what happened.

John Rees joins his fellow party member by arguing that the working class base of the workers' state had "*disintegrated*" by 1921. The working class was reduced "*to an atomised, individualised mass, a fraction of its former size, and no longer able to exercise the collective power that it had done in 1917.*" The "*bureaucracy of the workers' state was left suspended in mid-air, its class base eroded and demoralised.*" He argues that Kronstadt was "*utopian*" as "*they looked back to the institutions of 1917 when the class which made such institutions possible no longer had the collective capacity to direct political life.*" [Rees, **Op. Cit.**, p. 65 and p. 70]

There are two problems with this kind of argument. Firstly, there are factual problems with it. Second, there are ideological problems with it. We will discuss each in turn.

The factual problems are clear. All across Russia in February 1921 the Russian working class were going on strike, organising meetings and demonstrations. In other words, **taking collective action** based on demands collectively agreed in workplace meetings. One factory would send delegates to others, urging them to join the movement which soon became a general strike in Petrograd and Moscow. In Kronstadt, workers, soldiers and sailors went the next step and organised a delegate conference. In other places they tried to do so, with various degrees of success. During the strikes in Petrograd "*workers from various plants elected delegates to the Petrograd Assembly of Plenipotentiaries*" which raised similar demands as that of Kronstadt. Its activities and other attempts to organise collectively were obviously hindered by the fact the Cheka arrested "*all delegates to other enterprises*" the strikers sent. Brovkin states that following the example of Petrograd, "*workers in some cities set up assemblies of plenipotentiaries*" as well. In Saratov "*such a council grew out of a strike co-ordination committee.*" [V. Brovkin, **Behind the Lines of the Russian Civil War**, p. 393, p. 396 and p. 398]

Any claim that the Russian working class had no capacity for collective action seems invalidated by such events. Not that Rees is not unaware of these strikes. He notes that the Kronstadt revolt was "*preceded by a wave of serious but quickly resolved strikes.*" [**Op. Cit.**, p. 61] An "*atomised, individualised mass*" which was "*no longer able to exercise the collective power*" being able to conduct a "*wave of serious . . . strikes*" all across Russia? That hardly fits. Nor does he mention the repression which "*quickly resolved*" the strikes and which, by its very nature, atomised and individualised the masses in order to break the collective action being practised.

The fact that these strikes did not last longer of course suggests that the strikers could not sustain this activity indefinitely. However, this was more a product of state repression and the lack of rations while on strike than any objectively predetermined impossibility of collective decision making. The workers may have been too exhausted to wage indefinite general strikes against a repressive state but that does not imply they could not practice continual collective decision

making in less extreme circumstances in a soviet democracy.

Of course, these striking workers would have been unlikely to voted Communist en mass if free soviet elections were organised (in Kronstadt, Communists made up one-third of the conference of delegates). Thus there were pressing **political** reasons to deny free elections rather than an objective impossibility. Moreover, the actions of the Soviet state were designed to break the collective resistance of the working force. The use of armed patrols on the streets and in the factories, and the closing and re-registration of an enterprise labour force were designed to break the strike and atomise the workforce. These actions would not have been needed if the Russian working class was, in fact, atomised and incapable of collective action and decision making.

The size of the working class in 1921 **was** smaller in 1921 than it was in 1917. However, the figures for May 1918 and 1920 were nearly identical. In 1920, the number of factory workers in Petrograd was 148,289 (which was 34% of the population and 36% of the number of workers in 1910). [Mary McAuley, **Op. Cit.**, p. 398] In January 1917, the number was 351,010 and in April 1918, it was 148,710. [S.A. Smith, **Red Petrograd**, p. 245] Thus factory worker numbers were about 40% of the pre-Civil War number and remained so throughout the Civil War. A proletarian core remained in every industrial town or city in Russia.

Nor was this work force incapable of collective action or decision making. All through the civil war they organised strikes and protests for specific demands (and faced Bolshevik repression for so doing). In March 1919, for example, tens of thousands of workers went on strike in Petrograd. The strikes were broken by troops. Strikes regularly occurred throughout 1919 and 1920 (and, again, usually met with state repression). In 1921, the strike wave resurfaced and became near general strikes in many cities, including Petrograd and Moscow (see [section 2](#)). If the workers could organise strikes (and near general strikes in 1921), protest meetings and committees to co-ordinate their struggles, what could stop them starting to manage their own destinies? Does soviet democracy become invalid once a certain number of workers is reached?

Given that Rees gets the key slogan of Kronstadt wrong (they called for all power to the soviets and not to parties rather than Rees' "*soviets without parties*") it is hard to evaluate whether Rees claims that without Bolshevik dictatorship the Whites would inevitably have taken power. After all, the Kronstadt delegate meeting had one-third Communists in it. Ultimately, he is arguing that working people cannot manage their own fates themselves without it resulting in a counter-revolution!

In addition, the logic of Rees' argument smacks of double-think. On the one hand, he argues that the Bolsheviks represented the "*dictatorship of the proletariat*." On the other hand, he argues that free soviet elections would have seen the Bolsheviks replaced by "*moderate socialists*" (and eventually the Whites). In other words, the Bolsheviks did not, in fact, represent the Russian working class and their dictatorship was **over**, not **of**, the proletariat. The basic assumption, therefore, is flawed. Rees and his fellow Trotskyists seriously want us to believe that a dictatorship will not become corrupt and bureaucratic, that it can govern in the interests of its subjects and, moreover, reform itself. And he calls the Kronstadters "*utopians*"!

Given these factors, perhaps the real reason for the lack of soviet democracy and political freedom and rights was that the Bolsheviks knew they would lose any free elections that would be held? As we noted in [section 2](#), they had not been shy in disbanding soviets with non-Bolshevik majorities before the start of the civil war nor in suppressing strikes and workers' protests before, during and after the Civil War. In effect, the Bolsheviks would exercise the dictatorship of the proletariat over and above the wishes of that proletariat if need be (as Trotsky made clear in 1921 at the Tenth Party Congress). Thus the major factor restricting soviet democracy was Bolshevik power -- this repressed working class collective action which promoted atomisation in the working class and the unaccountability of the Bolshevik leadership. The bureaucracy was "*left suspended in mid-air*" simply because the majority of the workers and peasants did not support it and when they protested against the party dictatorship they were repressed.

Simply put, objective factors do not tell the whole story.

Now we turn to these objective factors, the economic breakdown affecting Russia in 1921. This is the basis for the ideological problem with Rees' argument.

The ideological problem with this argument is that both Lenin and Trotsky had argued that revolution inevitably implied civil war, "*exceptional circumstances*" and economic crisis. For example, in **Terrorism and Communism** Trotsky argued that "*[a]ll periods of transition have been characterised by . . . tragic features*" of an "*economic depression*" such as exhaustion, poverty and hunger. Every class society "*is violently swept off [the arena] by an intense struggle, which immediately brings to its participants even greater privations and sufferings than those against which they rose.*" He gave the example of the French Revolution "*which attained its titanic dimensions under the pressure of the masses exhausted with suffering, itself deepened and rendered more acute their misfortunes for a prolonged period and to an extraordinary extent.*" He asked: "*Can it be otherwise?*" [**Terrorism and Communism**, p. 7]

Indeed, he stressed that "*revolutions which drag into their whirlpool millions of workers*" automatically affect the "*economic life of the country.*" By "*[d]ragging the mass of the people away from labour, drawing them for a prolonged period into the struggle, thereby destroying their connection with production, the revolution in all these ways strikes deadly blows at economic life, and inevitably lowers the standard which it found at its birth.*" This affects the socialist revolution as the "*more perfect the revolution, the greater are the masses it draws in; and the longer it is prolonged, the greater is the destruction it achieves in the apparatus of production, and the more terrible inroads does it make upon public resources. From this there follows merely the conclusion which did not require proof -- that a civil war is harmful to economic life.*" [**Ibid.**]

Lenin in 1917 argued the similarly, mocking those who argued that revolution was out of the question because "*the circumstances are exceptionally complicated.*" He noting that any revolution, "*in its development, would give rise to exceptionally complicated circumstances*" and that it 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. If there were no exceptionally complicated circumstances there would be no revolution.*" [**Will the Bolsheviks Maintain Power?**, p. 80 and p. 81]

A few months early, Lenin argues that "[w]hen unavoidable disaster is approaching, the most useful and indispensable task confronting the people is that of organisation. Marvels of proletarian organisation -- this is our slogan at the present, and shall become our slogan and our demand to an even greater extent, when the proletariat is in power. . . There are many such talents [i.e. organisers] among the people. These forces lie dormant in the peasantry and the proletariat, for lack of application. They must be mobilised from below, by practical work . . ." [**The Threatening Catastrophe and how to avoid it**, pp. 49-50]

The problem in 1921 (as during the war), of course, was that when the proletariat **did** organise itself, it was repressed as counterrevolutionary by the Bolsheviks. The reconstruction from below, the organisation of the proletariat, automatically came into conflict with party power. The workers and peasants could not act because soviet and trade union democracy would have ended Bolshevik dictatorship.

Therefore, Rees' and Stack's arguments fail to convince. As noted, their ideological gurus clearly argued that revolution without civil war and economic exhaustion was impossible. Sadly, the means to mitigate the problems of Civil War and economic crisis (namely workers' self-management and power) inevitably came into conflict with party power and could not be encouraged. If Bolshevism cannot meet the inevitable problems of revolution and maintain the principles it pays lip-service to (i.e. soviet democracy and workers' power) then it clearly does not work and should be avoided.

Stack's and Rees' argument, in other words, represents the bankruptcy of Bolshevik ideology rather than a serious argument against the Kronstadt revolt.

### **13 Was there a real alternative to Kronstadt's "*third revolution*"?**

Another Trotskyist argument against Kronstadt and in favour of the Bolshevik repression is related to the country was exhausted argument we discussed in the [last section](#). It finds its clearest expression in Victor Serge's argument:

*"the country was exhausted, and production practically at a standstill; there was no reserves of any kind, not even reserves of stamina in the hearts of the masses. The working-class elite that had been moulded in the struggle against the old regime was literally decimated. The Party, swollen by the influx of power-seekers, inspired little confidence . . . Soviet democracy lacked leadership, institutions and inspiration . . .*

*"The popular counter-revolution translated the demand for freely-elected soviets into one for 'Soviets without Communists.' If the Bolshevik dictatorship fell, it was only a short*

*step to chaos, and through chaos to a peasant rising, the massacre of the Communists, the return of the emigres, and in the end, through the sheer force of events, another dictatorship, this time anti-proletarian." [Memoirs of a Revolutionary, pp. 128-9]*

Serge supported the Bolsheviks, considering them as the only possible means of defending the revolution. Some modern day Leninists follow this line of reasoning and want us to believe that the Bolsheviks were defending the remaining gains of the revolution. What gains, exactly? The only gains that remained were Bolshevik power and nationalised industry -- both of which excluded the real gains of the Russian Revolution (namely soviet power, the right to independent unions and to strike, freedom of assembly, association and speech for working people, the beginnings of workers' self-management of production and so on). Indeed, both "gains" were the basis for the Stalinist bureaucracy's power.

Anarchists and libertarian Marxists who defend the Kronstadt revolt and oppose the actions of the Bolsheviks are not foolish enough to argue that Kronstadt's "*third revolution*" would have definitely succeeded. Every revolution is a gamble and may fail. As Ante Ciliga correctly argues:

*"Let us consider, finally, one last accusation which is commonly circulated: that action such as that at Kronstadt could have **indirectly** let loose the forces of the counter-revolution. It is **possible** indeed that even by placing itself on a footing of workers' democracy the revolution might have been overthrown; but what is **certain** is that it has perished, and that it has perished on account of the policy of its leaders. The repression of Kronstadt, the suppression of the democracy of workers and soviets by the Russian Communist party, the elimination of the proletariat from the management of industry, and the introduction of the NEP, already signified the death of the Revolution." [Op. Cit., p. 335]*

No revolution is guaranteed to succeed. The same with Kronstadt's "*Third Revolution*." Its call for soviet power may have lead to defeat via renewed intervention. That is possible -- just as it was possible in 1917. One thing is sure, by maintaining the Bolshevik dictatorship the Russian Revolution **was** crushed.

The only alternative to the "*third revolution*" would have been self-reform of the party dictatorship and, therefore, of the soviet state. Such an attempt was made after 1923 by the **Left Opposition** (named "*Trotskyist*" by the Stalinists because Trotsky was its main leader). John Rees discusses the **Left Opposition**, arguing that "*without a revival of struggle in Russia or successful revolution elsewhere*" it "*was doomed to failure.*" [Op. Cit., p. 68] Given the logic of Serge's arguments, this is the only option left for Leninists.

How viable was this alternative? Could the soviet dictatorship reform itself? Was soviet democracy more of a danger than the uncontrolled dictatorship of a party within a state marked by already serious levels of corruption, bureaucracy and despotism? History provides the answer with the rise of Stalin.

Unfortunately for the **Left Opposition**, the bureaucracy had gained experience in repressing

struggle in breaking the wave of strikes in 1921 and crushing the Kronstadt rebellion. Indeed, Rees incredulously notes that by 1923 *"the well-head of renewal and thorough reform -- the activity of the workers -- had dried to a trickle"* and yet does not see that this decline was aided by the example of what had happened to Kronstadt and the repression of the 1921 strike wave. The **Left Opposition** received the crop that Lenin and Trotsky sowed the seeds of in 1921.

Ironically, Rees argues that the Stalinist bureaucracy could betray the revolution without *"an armed counter-revolutionary seizure of power"* (and so *"no martial law, no curfew or street battles"*) because of *"the atomisation of the working class."* However, the atomisation was a product of the armed counter-revolutionary activities of Lenin and Trotsky in 1921 when they broke the strikes and crushed Kronstadt by means of martial law, curfew and street battles. The workers had no interest in which branch of the bureaucracy would govern and exploit them and so remained passive. Rees fails to see that the Stalinist coup simply built upon the initial counter-revolution of Lenin. There **was** martial law, curfew and street battles but they occurred in 1921, not 1928. The rise of Stalinism was the victory of one side of the new bureaucratic class over another but that class had defeated the working class in March 1921.

As for the idea that an external revolution could have regenerated the Soviet bureaucracy, this too was fundamentally utopian. In the words of Ida Mett:

*"Some claim that the Bolsheviks allowed themselves such actions (as the suppression of Kronstadt) in the hope of a forthcoming world revolution, of which they considered themselves the vanguard. But would not a revolution in another country have been influenced by the spirit of the Russian Revolution? When one considers the enormous moral authority of the Russian Revolution throughout the world one may ask oneself whether the deviations of this Revolution would not eventually have left an imprint on other countries. Many historical facts allow such a judgement. One may recognise the impossibility of genuine socialist construction in a single country, yet have doubts as to whether the bureaucratic deformations of the Bolshevik regime would have been straightened out by the winds coming from revolutions in other countries."* [Op. Cit., p. 82]

The Bolsheviks had already been manipulating foreign Communist Parties in the interests of their state for a number of years. That is part of the reason why the Left-Communists around Pannekoek and Gorter broke with the Third International later in 1921. Just as the influence of Lenin had been a key factor in fighting the anti-Parliamentarian and libertarian communist tendencies in Communist Parties all across the world, so the example and influence of the Bolsheviks would have made its impact on any foreign revolution. The successful revolutionaries would have applied such "lessons" of October such as the dictatorship of the proletariat being impossible without the dictatorship of the communist party, centralism, militarisation of labour and so on. This would have distorted any revolution from the start (given how obediently the Communist Parties around the world followed the insane policies of Stalinism, can we doubt this conclusion?).

Not that the Left Opposition's political platform could have saved the revolution. After all, it was

utopian in that it urged the party and state bureaucracy to reform itself as well as contradictory. It did not get at the root of the problem, namely Bolshevik ideology. The theoretical limitations of the "Left Opposition" can be found in more detail in [section 3](#) of the appendix on "[Were any of the Bolshevik oppositions a real alternative?](#)". Here we will restrict ourselves to looking at **The Platform of the Opposition** written in 1927 (unless otherwise specified all quotes come from this document).

It urged a *"consistent development of a workers' democracy in the party, the trade unions, and the soviets"* and to *"convert the urban soviets into real institutions of proletarian power."* It states that *"Lenin, as long ago as in the revolution of 1905, advanced the slogan of soviets as organs of the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasants."* The Kronstadt sailors argued the same, of course, and were branded *"White Guardists"* and *"counter-revolutionary"*. At the same time as this call for democracy, we find affirmation of the *"Leninist principle"* (*"inviolable for every Bolshevik"*) that *"the dictatorship of the proletariat is and can be realised only through the dictatorship of the party."* It repeats the principle by mentioning that *"the dictatorship of the proletariat demands a single and united proletarian party as the leader of the working masses and the poor peasantry."* It stresses that a *"split in our party, the formation of two parties, would represent an enormous danger to the revolution."* This was because:

*"Nobody who sincerely defends the line of Lenin can entertain the idea of 'two parties' or play with the suggestion of a split. Only those who desire to replace Lenin's course with some other can advocate a split or a movement along the two-party road."*

*"We will fight with all our power against the idea of two parties, because the dictatorship of the proletariat demands as its very core a single proletarian party. It demands a single party. It demands a proletarian party -- that is, a party whose policy is determined by the interests of the proletariat and carried out by a proletarian nucleus. Correction of the line of our party, improvement of its social composition -- that is not the two-party road, but the strengthening and guaranteeing of its unity as a revolutionary party of the proletariat."*

We can note, in passing, the interesting notion of party (and so *"proletarian"* state) policy *"determined by the interests of the proletariat and carried out by a proletarian nucleus"* but which is **not** determined **by** the proletariat itself. Which means that the policy of the "workers' state" must be determined by some other (unspecified) group and not by the workers. What possibility can exist that this other group actually knows what is in the interests of the proletariat? None, of course, as any form of democratic decision can be ignored when those who determine the policy consider the protests of the proletariat to be not *"in the interests of the proletariat."*

This was the opinion of Trotsky, who argued against the Workers' Opposition faction of the Communist Party who urged re-introducing some elements of democracy at the Tenth Party Conference at the time of the Kronstadt uprising (while, of course, keeping the Communist Party dictatorship intact). As he put it, they *"have come out with dangerous slogans. They have made a fetish of democratic principles. They have placed the workers' right to elect representatives*



*above the party. As if the Party were not entitled to assert its dictatorship even if that dictatorship clashed with the passing moods of the workers' democracy!"* He continued by stating that the *"Party is obliged to maintain its dictatorship . . . regardless of temporary vacillations even in the working class . . . The dictatorship does not base itself at every moment on the formal principle of a workers' democracy."* [quoted by M. Brinton, **The Bolsheviks and Workers' Control**, p. 78]

Thus the call for democracy is totally annulled by other arguments in the Platform, arguments which logically eliminates democracy and results in such acts as the repression of Kronstadt (see [section 15](#)).

The question, of course, arises as to how democracy can be introduced in the soviets and unions when party dictatorship is essential for the *"realisation"* of the "proletarian" dictatorship and there can only be **one** party? What happens if the proletariat vote for someone else (as they did in Kronstadt)? If "proletarian" dictatorship is impossible without the dictatorship of the party then, clearly, proletarian democracy becomes meaningless. All the workers would be allowed to do would be to vote for members of the same party, all of whom would be bound by party discipline to carry out the orders of the party leadership. Power would rest in the party hierarchy and definitively **not** in the working class, its unions or its soviets (both of which would remain mere fig-leaves for party rule). Ultimately, the only guarantee that the party dictatorship would govern in the interests of the proletariat would be the good intentions of the party. However, being unaccountable to the masses, such a guarantee would be worthless -- as history shows.

Kronstadt is the obvious end result of such politics. The starting point was the disbanding of soviets which had been elected with a majority of "wrong" parties (as the Bolsheviks did in early 1918, **before** the start of the civil war). While the Platform may be useful as an expression of the usual Leninist double-think on the "workers' state", its practical suggestions are useless. Unlike the Kronstadt Platform, it was doomed to failure from the start. The new bureaucratic class could only be removed by a "third revolution" and while this, possibly, could have resulted in a bourgeois counter-revolution the alternative of maintaining Bolshevik dictatorship would **inevitably** have resulted in Stalinism. When supporters of Bolshevism argue that Kronstadt would have opened the gate to counter-revolution, they do not understand that the Bolsheviks **were** the counter-revolution in 1921 and that by suppressing Kronstadt the Bolsheviks not only opened the gate to Stalinism but invited it in and gave it the keys to the house.

The Platform, moreover, smacks of the re-writing of history Trotsky correctly accused Stalinism of.

It argues, for example, that the urban soviets *"in recent years have been losing importance. This undoubtedly reflects a shift in the relation of class forces to the disadvantage of the proletariat."* In fact, the soviets had lost their importance since the October revolution (see [section 2](#) for details). The *"shift"* in the relation of class forces started immediately after the October revolution, when the **real** gains of 1917 (i.e. soviet democracy, workers' rights and freedom) were slowly and surely eliminated by the bureaucratic class forming around the new state -- a class who could justify their actions by claiming it was in the *"interests"* of the masses whose



wishes they were ignoring.

As regards the Communist Party itself, it argues for introducing ("*in deeds and not words*") "*a democratic regime. Do away with administrative pressure tactics. Stop the persecution and expulsion of those who hold independent opinions about party questions.*" No mention, of course, that these tactics were used by Lenin and Trotsky against Left-wing dissidents after the October revolution.

The Left-Communists in early 1918 were subject to such pressure. For example, they were ousted from leading positions in the Supreme Economic Council in March 1918. After their views were denounced by Lenin a "*campaign was whipped up in Leningrad which compelled **Kommunist** [their paper] to transfer publication to Moscow . . . After the appearance of the first issue of the paper a hastily convened Leningrad Party Conference produced a majority for Lenin and 'demanded that the adherents of **Kommunist** cease their separate organisational existence.*" The paper lasted four issues, with the last having to be published as a private factional paper. The issue had been settled by a high pressure campaign in the Party organisation, backed by a barrage of violent invective in the Party press and in the pronouncements of the Party leaders. [Maurice Brinton, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 39-40]

Similarly, the Workers' Opposition three years later also experienced them. At the Tenth Party congress, A. Kollontai (author of their platform) stated that the circulation of her pamphlet had been deliberately impeded. "*So irregular were some of these that the Moscow Party Committee at one stage voted a resolution **publicly** censuring the Petrograd organisation 'for not observing the rules of proper controversy.'*" The success of the Leninist faction in getting control of the party machine was such that "*there is serious doubt as to whether they were not achieved by fraud.*" [Brinton, **Op. Cit.**, p. 75 and p. 77] Victor Serge witnessed the rigging of an election to ensure Lenin's victory in the trade union debate. [**Memoirs of a Revolutionary**, p. 123] Kollontai herself mentions (in early 1921) that comrades "*who dare to disagree with decrees from above are **still** being persecuted.*" [our emphasis, **The Workers' Opposition**, p. 22]

The Platform states that "*the dying out of inner-party democracy leads to a dying out of workers' democracy in general -- in the trade unions, and in all other nonparty mass organisations.*" In fact, the opposite causation is correct. The dying out of workers' democracy in general leads to a dying out of inner-party democracy. The dictatorship of the party by necessity clashes with the "*democratic dictatorship of the working masses and the poor peasantry.*" As the party dictatorship replaces the working masses, eliminating democracy by the dictatorship of a single party, democracy in that party must wither. If the workers can join that party and influence its policies then the same problems that arose in the soviets and unions appear in the party (i.e. voting for the wrong policies and people). This necessitates a corresponding centralisation in power within the party as occurred in the soviets and unions, all to the detriment of rank and file power and control.

As Ida Mett argued:

*"There is no doubt that the discussion taking place within the [Communist] Party at this*

*time [in early 1921] had profound effects on the masses. It overflowed the narrow limits the Party sought to impose on it. It spread to the working class as a whole, to the soldiers and to the sailors. Heated local criticism acted as a general catalyst. The proletariat had reasoned quite logically: if discussion and criticism were permitted to Party members, why should they not be permitted to the masses themselves who had endured all the hardships of the Civil War?*

*"In his speech to the Tenth Congress -- published in the Congress Proceedings -- Lenin voiced his regret at having 'permitted' such a discussion. 'We have certainly committed an error,' he said, 'in having authorised this debate. Such a discussion was harmful just before the Spring months that would be loaded with such difficulties.'" [The Kronstadt Uprising, pp. 34-5]*

Unsurprisingly, the Tenth Congress voted to ban factions within the Party. The elimination of discussion in the working class led to its ban in the party. Having the rank-and-file of the Party discuss issues would give false hopes to the working class as a whole who may attempt to influence policy by joining the party (and, of course, vote for the wrong people or policies).

Thus the only alternative to Kronstadt's *"Third Revolution"* and free soviets was doomed to failure.

Lastly, we should draw some parallels between the fates of the Kronstadt sailors and the Left Opposition.

John Rees argues that the Left Opposition had *"the whole vast propaganda machine of the bureaucracy . . . turned against them,"* a machine used by Trotsky and Lenin in 1921 against Kronstadt. Ultimately, the Left Opposition *"were exiled, imprisoned and shot,"* again like the Kronstadters and a host of revolutionaries who defended the revolution but opposed the Bolshevik dictatorship. [Op. Cit., p. 68]

As Murray Bookchin argued:

*"All the conditions for Stalinism were prepared for by the defeat of the Kronstadt sailors and Petrograd strikers." ["Introduction", Ida Mett, The Kronstadt Uprising, p. 13]*

Thus, the argument that Kronstadt was *"utopian"* is false. The third revolution was the only **real** alternative in Bolshevik Russia. Any struggle from below post-1921 would have raised the same problems of soviet democracy and party dictatorship which Kronstadt raised. Given that the **Left Opposition** subscribed to the *"Leninist principle"* of *"the dictatorship of the party,"* they could not appeal to the masses as they would not vote for them. The arguments raised against Kronstadt that soviet democracy would lead to counter-revolution are equally applicable to movements which appealed, as Rees desires, to the Russian working class post-Kronstadt.

In summary, the claim that Kronstadt would inevitably have lead to an anti-proletarian dictatorship fails. Yes, it might have but the Bolshevik dictatorship itself was anti-proletarian (it had repressed proletarian protest, organisation, freedom and rights on numerous occasions) and it

could never be reformed from within by the very logic of its "*Leninist principle*" of "*the dictatorship of the party*." The rise of Stalinism was inevitable after the crushing of Kronstadt.

## 14 How do modern day Trotskyists misrepresent Kronstadt?

We have discussed how Trotskyists have followed their heroes Lenin and Trotsky in abusing the facts about the Kronstadt sailors and uprising in previous sections. In [section 8](#), we have indicated how they have selectively quoted from academic accounts of the uprising and suppressed evidence which contradicts their claims. In [section 7](#) we have shown how they have selectively quoted from Paul Avrich's book on the revolt to paint a false picture of the connections between the Kronstadt sailors and the Whites. Here we summarise some of the other misrepresentations of Trotskyists about the revolt.

John Rees, for example, asserts that the Kronstadters were fighting for "*soviets without parties*." Indeed, he makes the assertion twice on one page. [**Op. Cit.**, p. 63] Pat Stack goes one further and asserts that the "*central demand of the Kronstadt rising though was 'soviets without Bolsheviks', in other words, the utter destruction of the workers' state.*" ["Anarchy in the UK?", **Socialist Review**, no. 246, November 2000] Both authors quote from Paul Avrich's book **Kronstadt 1921** in their articles. Let us turn to that source:

*"Soviets without Communists' was not, as is often maintained by both Soviet and non-Soviet writers, a Kronstadt slogan."* [**Kronstadt 1921**, p. 181]

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.*" [**Ibid.**] The index for Avrich's work handily includes this page in it, under the helpful entry "*soviets: 'without Communists.'*"

The central demand of the uprising was simply soviet democracy and a return to the principles that the workers and peasants had been fighting the whites for. In other words, both Leninists have misrepresented the Kronstadt revolt's demands and so misrepresented its aims.

Rees goes one step further and tries to blame the Bolshevik massacre 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, the 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. [Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, p. 243] 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. Indeed, as one of Rees' sources indicates, the rebels "had refrained from taking any communist lives. The Soviet Government, on the other hand, as early as March 3, already had executed forty-five seamen at Oranienbaum -- a quite heavy proportion of the total personnel of the men at the Naval Aviation Detachment. These men had voted for the Kronstadt resolution, but did not take arms against the government. This mass execution was merely a prelude to those that took place after the defeat of the mutineers." These executions at Oranienbaum, it should be noted, exceeded the total of 36 seamen who had paid with their lives for the two large rebellions of the 1905 revolution at Kronstadt and Sveaborg. [D. Fedotoff-White, **The Growth of the Red Army**, p. 156]

Ted Grant, of the UK's **Socialist Appeal** re-writes history significantly in his work **Russia: From revolution to counter-revolution**. For example, he claims (without providing any references) that the "first lie" of anti-Bolshevik writers on the subject "is to identify the Kronstadt mutineers of 1921 with the heroic Red sailors of 1917." As we have indicated in [section 8](#), research has **proven** that over 90% of the sailors on the two battleships which started the revolt had been recruited before and during the 1917 revolution and at least three-quarters of the sailors were old hands who had served in the navy through war and revolution. So was the majority of the Provisional Revolutionary Committee. Grant asserts that the sailors in 1917 and 1921 "had nothing in common" because those "of 1917 were workers and Bolsheviks." In fact, as we indicated [section 9](#), the Bolsheviks were a minority in Kronstadt during 1917 (a fact even Trotsky admitted in 1938). Moreover, the demands raised in the revolt matched the politics dominant in 1917.

Grant then claims that "almost the entire Kronstadt garrison volunteered to fight in the ranks of the Red Army during the civil war." Are we to believe that the Bolshevik commanders left Kronstadt (and so Petrograd) defenceless during the Civil War? Or drafted the skilled and trained (and so difficult to replace) sailors away from their ships, so leaving them unusable? Of course not. Common sense refutes Grant's argument (and statistical evidence supports this common sense position -- on 1st January, 1921, at least 75.5% of the Baltic Fleet was likely to have been drafted before 1918 and over 80% were from Great Russian areas and some 10% from the Ukraine. [Gelzter, **Op. Cit.**, p. 208]).

Not to be outdone, he then states that the "*Kronstadt garrison of 1921 was composed mainly of raw peasant levies from the Black Sea Fleet. A cursory glance at the surnames of the mutineers immediately shows that they were almost all Ukrainians.*" According to Paul Avrich, "[s]ome three or four hundred names appear in the journal of the rebel movement . . . So far as one can judge from these surnames alone . . . Great Russians are in the overwhelming majority." Of the 15 person Provisional Revolutionary Committee, "three . . . bore patently Ukrainian names and two others. . . Germanic names." [Paul Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 92-3] Of the three Ukrainians, two were sailors of long standing and "*had fought on the barricades in 1917.*" [Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, p. 91] So much for a "*cursory glance at the surnames of the mutineers.*" To top it off, he states: "*That there were actual counter-revolutionary elements among the sailors was shown by the slogan 'Soviets without Bolsheviks'.*" Which, of course, the Kronstadt sailors **never** raised as a slogan!

And **Grant** talks about the "[m]any falsifications. . . written about this event," that it "*has been virtually turned into a myth*" and that "*these allegations bear no relation to the truth.*" Truly amazing. As can be seen, his words apply to his own inventions.

Another SWP member, Abbie Bakan, asserts that, for example, "*more than three quarters of the sailors*" at Kronstadt "*were recent recruits of peasant origin*" but refuses to provide a source for this claim. ["*A Tragic Necessity*", **Socialist Worker Review**, no. 136, November 1990, pp. 18-21] As noted in [section 8](#), such a claim is false. The likely source for the assertion is Paul Avrich, who noted that more than three-quarters of the sailors were of peasant origin but Avrich does **not** say they were all recent recruits. While stating that there could be "*little doubt*" that the Civil War produced a "*high turnover*" and that "*many*" old-timers had been replaced by conscripts from rural areas, he does not indicate that all the sailors from peasant backgrounds were new recruits. He also notes that "*there had always been a large and unruly peasant element among the sailors.*" [**Op. Cit.**, pp. 89-90]

Bakan asserts that anti-semitism "*was vicious and rampant*" yet fails to provide **any** official Kronstadt proclamations expressing this perspective. Rather, we are to generalise from the memoirs of **one** sailor and the anti-semitic remark of Vershinin, a member of the Revolutionary Committee. Let us not forget that the opinions of these sailors and others like them were irrelevant to the Bolsheviks when they drafted them in the first place. And, more importantly, this "*vicious and rampant*" anti-semitism failed to mark the demands raised nor the Kronstadt rebels' newspaper or radio broadcasts. Nor did the Bolsheviks mention it at the time.

Moreover, it is true that the "*worse venom of the Kronstadt rebels was levelled against Trotsky and Zinoviev*" but it was **not** because, as Bakan asserts, they were "*treated as Jewish scapegoats.*" Their ethnical background was not mentioned by the Kronstadt sailors. Rather, they were strong **political** reasons for attacking them. As Paul Avrich argues, "*Trotsky in particular was the living symbol of War Communism, of everything the sailors had rebelled against. His name was associated with centralisation and militarisation, with iron discipline and regimentation.*" As for Zinoviev, he had "*incurred the sailors' loathing as the party boss who had suppressed the striking workers and who had stooped to taking their own families as*

hostages." Good reasons to attack them and nothing to do with them being Jewish. [Op. Cit., p. 178 and p. 176]

Bakan states that the *"demands of the Kronstadt sailors reflected the ideas of the most backward section of the peasantry."* As can be seen from [section 3](#), such a comment cannot be matched with the actual demands of the revolt (which, of course, he does not provide). So what ideas did these demands of the *"most backward section of the peasantry"* state? Free elections to the Soviets, freedom of speech and of the press for workers and peasants, right of assembly, freedom for trade union and peasant organisations, a conference of workers, soldiers and sailors, liberation of all political, worker and peasant prisoners, equalisation of rations, freedom for peasants as long as they do not employ hired labour, and so on. What would, in other words, be included in most socialist parties programmes and was, in fact, key elements of Bolshevik rhetoric in 1917. And, of course, all of the political aspects of the Kronstadt demands reflected key aspects of the Soviet Constitution.

How *"backward"* can you get! Indeed, these *"backward"* peasants send a radio message marking International Woman's Day, hoping that women would *"soon accomplish"* their *"liberation from every form of violence and oppression."* [quoted by Alexander Berkman, **The Russian Tragedy**, p. 85]

Bakan pathetically acknowledges that their demands included *"calls for greater freedoms"* yet looks at the *"main economic target"* (not mentioning they were points 8, 10 and 11 of the 15 demands, the bulk of the rest are political). These, apparently, were aimed at *"the programme of forced requisitioning of peasant produce and the roadblock detachments that halted the black market in grain."* Given that he admits that the Bolsheviks were *"already discussing"* the end of these features (due to their lack of success) it must be the case that the Bolsheviks also *"reflected the ideas of the most backward section of the peasantry"*! Moreover, the demand to end the roadblocks was also raised by the Petrograd and Moscow workers during their strikes, as were most of the other demands raised by Kronstadt. [Paul Avrich, **Op. Cit.**, p. 42] Surely the *"most backward section of the peasantry"* was getting around in those days, appearing as they were in the higher reaches of the Bolshevik party bureaucracy and the factories of Petrograd and other major cities!

In reality, of course, the opposition to the forced requisitioning of food was a combination of ethical and practical considerations -- it was evil and it was counterproductive. You did not have to be a peasant to see and know this (as the striking workers show). Similarly, the roadblocks were also a failure. Victor Serge, for example, recollected he would *"have died without the sordid manipulations of the black market."* [**Memoirs of a Revolutionary**, p.79] He was a government official. Think how much worse it would have been for an ordinary worker. The use of roadblock detachments harmed the industrial workers -- little wonder they struck for their end and little wonder the sailors expressed solidarity with them and included it in their demands. Therefore, **nothing** can be drawn from these demands about the class nature of the revolt.

In an interesting example of double-think, Bakan then states that the sailors *"called for the abolition of Bolshevik authority in the army, factories and mills."* What the resolution demanded



was, in fact, "the abolition Party combat detachments in all military groups" as well as "Party guards in factories and enterprises" (point 10). In other words, to end the intimidation of workers and soldiers by armed communist units in their midst! When Bakan states that "the real character of the rebellion" can be seen from the opening declaration that "the present soviets do not express the will of the workers and peasants" he could not have made a truer comment. The Kronstadt revolt was a revolt for soviet democracy and against party dictatorship. And soviet democracy would only abolish "Bolshevik authority" if the existing soviets, as the resolution argued, did not express the will of their electors!

Similarly, he asserts that the Provisional Revolutionary Committee was "non-elected" and so contradicts every historian who acknowledges it was elected by the conference of delegates on March 2nd and expanded by the next conference a few days later. He even considers the fact the delegate meeting's "denial of party members' usual role in chairing the proceedings" as one of many "irregularities" while, of course, the **real** irregularity was the fact that **one** party (the government party) had such a "usual role" in the first place! Moreover, given that that Petrograd soviet meeting to discuss the revolt had Cheka guards (Lenin's political police) on it, his notion that sailors guarded the conference of delegates meeting (a meeting held in opposition to the ruling party) was "irregular" seems ironic.

Lastly, he raises the issue of the "Memorandum" of the White "National Centre" and uses it as evidence that "Lenin's suspicion of an international conspiracy linked up with the Kronstadt events has been vindicated." Needless to say, he fails to mention that the historian who discovered the document rejected the notion that it proved that Kronstadt was linked to such a conspiracy (see [section 6](#) for a full discussion). Ironically, he mentions that "[t]wo weeks after the Kronstadt rebellion the ice was due to melt." Two weeks **after** the rebellion was crushed, of course, and he fails to mention that the "Memorandum" he uses as evidence assumes that the revolt would break out **after** the ice had melted, not before. While he claims that "[h]olding out until the ice melted was identified as critical in the memorandum," this is not true. The Memorandum in fact, as Paul Avrich notes, "assumes that the rising will occur after the ice has melted." [Op. Cit., p. 237f] No other interpretation can be gathered from the document.

Altogether, Bakan's article shows how deeply the supporters of Leninism will sink to when attempting to discuss the Kronstadt rebellion. Sadly, as we have indicated many, many times, this is not an isolated occurrence.

## 15 What does Kronstadt tell us about Bolshevism?

The rationales used by Lenin, Trotsky and their followers are significant aids to getting to the core of the Bolshevik Myth. These rationales and activities allow us to understand the limitations of Bolshevik theory and how it contributed to the degeneration of the revolution.

Trotsky stated that the "Kronstadt slogan" was "soviets without Communists." [Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, p. 90] This, of course, is factually incorrect. The Kronstadt slogan was "all power to the soviets but not to the parties" (or "free soviets"). From this incorrect assertion,

Trotsky argued as follows:

*"to free the soviets from the leadership [!] of the Bolsheviks would have meant within a short time to demolish the soviets themselves. The experience of the Russian soviets during the period of Menshevik and SR domination and, even more clearly, the experience of the German and Austrian soviets under the domination of the Social Democrats, proved this. Social Revolutionary-anarchist soviets could only serve as a bridge from the proletarian dictatorship. They could play no other role, regardless of the 'ideas' of their participants. The Kronstadt uprising thus had a counterrevolutionary character."* [Op. Cit., p. 90]

Interesting logic. Let us assume that the result of free elections would have been the end of Bolshevik "leadership" (i.e. dictatorship), as seems likely. What Trotsky is arguing is that to allow workers to vote for their representatives would "only serve as a bridge from the proletarian dictatorship"! This argument was made (in 1938) as a **general point** and is **not** phrased in terms of the problems facing the Russian Revolution in 1921. In other words Trotsky is clearly arguing for the dictatorship of the party and contrasting it to soviet democracy. So much for "All Power to the Soviets" or "workers' power"!

Indeed, Trotsky was not shy in explicitly stating this on occasion. As we noted in [section 13](#), the **Left Opposition** based itself on "*Leninist principle*" ("*inviolable for every Bolshevik*") that "*the dictatorship of the proletariat is and can be realised only through the dictatorship of the party.*" Trotsky stressed ten years later that the whole working class cannot determine policy in the so-called "workers' state" (as well as indicating his belief that one-party dictatorship is an inevitable stage in a "proletarian" revolution):

*"The revolutionary dictatorship of a proletarian party is for me not a thing that one can freely accept or reject: It is an objective necessity imposed upon us by the social realities -- the class struggle, the heterogeneity of the revolutionary class, the necessity for a selected vanguard in order to assure the victory. The dictatorship of a party belongs to the barbarian prehistory as does the state itself, but we can not jump over this chapter, which can open (not at one stroke) genuine human history. . . The revolutionary party (vanguard) which renounces its own dictatorship surrenders the masses to the counter-revolution . . . Abstractly speaking, 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. The reason for the revolution comes from the circumstance that capitalism does not permit the material and the moral development of the masses."* [Trotsky, **Writings 1936-37**, pp. 513-4]

This is the very essence of Bolshevism. Trotsky is clearly arguing that the working class, as a class, is incapable of making a revolution or managing society itself -- hence the party must step in on its behalf and, if necessary, ignore the wishes of the people the party claims to represent. To re-quote Trotsky's comments against the **Workers' Opposition** at the Tenth Party Congress in early 1921: "*They have made a fetish of democratic principles! They have placed the workers'*



*right to elect representatives above the Party. As if the Party were not entitled to assert its dictatorship even if that dictatorship clashed with the passing moods of the workers' democracy!"* He stressed that the *"Party is obliged to maintain its dictatorship . . . regardless of temporary vacillations even in the working class . . . The dictatorship does not base itself at every moment on the formal principle of a workers' democracy."* [quoted by M. Brinton, **The Bolsheviks and Workers' Control**, p. 78]

In 1957, after crushing the 1956 workers' revolution, the Hungarian Stalinists argued along **exactly** the same lines as Trotsky had after the Bolsheviks had crushed Kronstadt. The leader of the Hungarian Stalinist dictatorship argued that *"the regime is aware that the people do not always know what is good for them. It is therefore the duty of the leadership to act, not according to the will of the people, but according to what the leadership knows to be in the best interests of the people."* [quoted by Andy Anderson, **Hungary '56**, p. 101]

Little wonder, then, that Samuel Farber notes that *"there is no evidence indicating that Lenin or any of the mainstream Bolshevik leaders lamented the loss of workers' control or of democracy in the soviets, or at least referred to these losses as a retreat, as Lenin declared with the replacement of War Communism by NEP in 1921."* [**Before Stalinism**, p. 44]

Such a perspective cannot help have disastrous consequences for a revolution (and explains why the Bolsheviks failed to pursue a peaceful resolution to the Kronstadt revolt). The logic of this argument clearly implies that when the party suppressed Kronstadt, when it disbanded non-Bolshevik soviets in early 1918 and robbed the workers and soviets of their power, the Bolsheviks were acting in the best interests of masses! The notion that Leninism is a revolutionary theory is invalidated by Trotsky's arguments. Rather than aim for a society based on workers' power, they aim for a "workers' state" in which workers **delegate** their power to the leaders of the party. Which confirmed Bakunin's argument that Marxism meant *"the highly despotic government of the masses by a new and very small aristocracy of real or pretended scholars. The people are not learned, so they will be liberated from the cares of government and included in entirety in the governed herd."* [**Statism and Anarchy**, pp. 178-9]

Such an approach is doomed to failure -- it cannot produce a socialist society as such a society (as Bakunin stressed) can only be built from below by the working class itself.

As Vernon Richards argues:

*"The distinction between the libertarian and authoritarian revolutionary movements in their struggle to establish the free society, is the means which each proposes should be used to this end. The libertarian maintains that the initiative must come from below, that the free society must be the result of the will to freedom of a large section of the population. The authoritarian . . . believes that the will to freedom can only emerge once the existing economic and political system has been replaced by a dictatorship of the proletariat [as expressed by the dictatorship of the party, according to Trotsky] which, as the awareness and sense of responsibility of the people grows, will wither away and the free society emerge.*

*"There can be no common ground between such approaches. For the authoritarian argues that the libertarian approach is noble but 'utopian' and doomed to failure from the start, while the libertarian argues on the evidence of history, that the authoritarian **methods** will simply replace one coercive state by another, equally despotic and remote from the people, and which will no more 'wither away' than its capitalist predecessor."*  
[**Lessons of the Spanish Revolution**, p. 206]

Modern day Leninists follow Trotsky's arguments (although they rarely acknowledge where they logically led or that their heroes explicitly acknowledged this conclusion and justified it). They do not state this position as honestly as did Trotsky.

Chris Bambery of the British SWP, for example, argues in his article "*Leninism in the 21st century*" that "*in Lenin's concept of the party, democracy is balanced by centralism*" and the first of three reasons for this is:

*"The working class is fragmented. There are always those who wish to fight, those who will scab and those in between. Even in the soviets those divisions will be apparent. Revolutionary organisation does not aspire to represent the working class as a whole. It bases itself on those workers who want to challenge capitalism, and seeks to organise those to win the majority of workers to the need to take power."* [Socialist Review, no. 248, January 2001]

This, of course, has **exactly** the same basis of Trotsky's defence of the need of party dictatorship and why Kronstadt was counterrevolutionary. Bambery notes that even "*in the soviets*" there will be "*divisions*." Thus we have the basic assumption which, combined with centralisation, vanguardism and other aspects of Bolshevism, leads to events like Kronstadt and the destruction of soviet power by party power. The arguments for centralisation mean, in practice, the concentration of power in the centre, in the hands of the party leaders, as the working masses cannot be trusted to make the correct ("revolutionary") decisions. This centralised power is then used to impose the will of the leaders, who use state power against the very class they claim to represent:

*"Without revolutionary coercion directed against the avowed enemies of the workers and peasants, it is impossible to break down the resistance of these exploiters. On the other hand, revolutionary coercion is bound to be employed towards the wavering and unstable elements among the masses themselves."* [Lenin, **Collected Works**, vol. 42, p. 170]

In other words, whoever protests against the dictatorship of the party.

Of course, it will be replied that the Bolshevik dictatorship used its power to crush the resistance of the bosses (and "*backward workers*"). Sadly, this is not the case. First, we must stress that anarchists are **not** against defending a revolution or expropriating the power and wealth of the ruling class, quite the reverse as this is about **how** a revolution does this. Lenin's argument is flawed as it confuses the defence of the revolution with the defence of the party in power. These are two totally different things.

The "revolutionary coercion" Lenin speaks of is, apparently, directed against one part of the working class. However, this will also intimidate the rest (just as bourgeois repression not only intimidates those who strike but those who may think of striking). As a policy, it can have but one effect -- to eliminate **all** workers' power and freedom. It is the violence of an oppressive minority against the oppressed majority, not vice versa. Ending free speech harmed working class people. Militarisation of labour did not affect the bourgeoisie. Neither did eliminating soviet democracy or union independence. As the dissident (working class) Communist Gavrii Miasnokov argued in 1921 (in reply to Lenin):

*"The trouble is that, while you raise your hand against the capitalist, you deal a blow to the worker. You know very well that for such words as I am now uttering hundreds, perhaps thousands, of workers are languishing in prison. That I myself remain at liberty is only because I am a veteran Communist, have suffered for my beliefs, and am known among the mass of workers. Were it not for this, were I just an ordinary mechanic from the same factory, where would I be now? In a Cheka prison or, more likely, made to 'escape,' just as I made Mikhail Romanov 'escape.' Once more I say: You raise your hand against the bourgeoisie, but it is I who am spitting blood, and it is we, the workers, whose jaws are being cracked."* [quoted by Paul Avrich, **G. T. Miasnikov and the Workers' Group**]

This can be seen from the make-up of Bolshevik prisoners. Of the 17 000 camp detainees on whom statistical information was available on 1 November 1920, peasants and workers constituted the largest groups, at 39% and 34% respectively. Similarly, of the 40 913 prisoners held in December 1921 (of whom 44% had been committed by the Cheka) nearly 84% were illiterate or minimally educated, clearly, therefore, either peasants or workers. [George Leggett, **The Cheka: Lenin's Political Police**, p. 178] Unsurprisingly, Miasnikov refused to denounce the Kronstadt insurgents nor would he have participated in their suppression had he been called upon to do so.

Thus, the ideas of centralisation supported by Leninists are harmful to the real gains of a revolution, namely working class freedom and power (as we noted in [section 12](#), some of them do not even mention these when indicating the gains of 1917). Indeed, this can be seen all through the history of Bolshevism.

Bamberg states (correctly) that "*Lenin and the Bolsheviks initially opposed*" the spontaneously formed soviets of 1905. Incredulously, however, he assigns this opposition to the assertion that their "*model of revolution was still shaped by that of the greatest previous revolution in France in 1789.*" [**Ibid.**] In reality, it was because they considered, to quote a leading Bolshevik, that "*only a strong party along class lines can guide the proletarian political movement and preserve the integrity of its program, rather than a political mixture of this kind, an indeterminate and vacillating political organisation such as the workers council represents and cannot help but represent.*" [P. N. Gvozdev, quoted by, Oskar Anweiler, **The Soviets**, p. 77]

The soviet, in other words, could not represent the interests of the working class because it was elected by them! Trotsky repeated this argument almost word for word in 1920 when he argued

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" and that there is "no substitution at all" when the "power of the party" replaces that of the working class. The party, he stressed, "has afforded to the Soviets the possibility of becoming transformed from shapeless parliaments of labour into the apparatus of the supremacy of labour." [**Communism and Terrorism**] How labour could express this "supremacy" when it could not even vote for its delegates (never mind manage society) is never explained.

In 1905, the Bolsheviks saw the soviets as a rival to their party and demanded it either accept their political program or simply become a trade-union like organisation. They feared that it pushed aside the party committee and thus led to the "subordination of consciousness to spontaneity." [Oskar Anweiler, **Op. Cit.**, p. 78] This was following Lenin in **What is to be Done?**, where he had argued that the "*spontaneous development of the labour movement leads to it being subordinated to bourgeois ideology.*" [**Essential Works of Lenin**, p. 82] This perspective is at the root of all Bolshevik justifications for party power after the October revolution.

Such a combination of political assumptions inevitably leads to such events as Kronstadt. With the perception that spontaneous developments inevitably leads to bourgeois domination, any attempt to revoke Bolshevik delegates and elect others to soviets **must** represent counter-revolutionary tendencies. As the working class is divided and subject to "vacillations" due to "wavering and unstable elements among the masses themselves," working class people simply cannot manage society themselves. Hence the need for "the Leninist principle" of "the dictatorship of the party." And, equally logically, to events like Kronstadt.

Thus Cornelius Castoriadis:

*"To manage the work of others -- this is the beginning and the end of the whole cycle of exploitation. The 'need' for a specific social category to manage the work of others in production (and the activity of others in politics and in society), the 'need' for a separate business management and for a Party to rule the State -- this is what Bolshevism proclaimed as soon as it seized power, and this is what it zealously laboured to impose. We know that it achieved its ends. Insofar as ideas play a role in the development of history -- and, in the final analysis, they play an enormous role -- the Bolshevik ideology (and with it, the Marxist ideology lying behind it) was a decisive factor in the birth of the Russian bureaucracy."* [**Political and Social Writings**, vol. 3, p. 104]

Moreover, the logic of the Bolshevik argument is flawed:

*"if you consider these worthy electors as unable to look after their own interests themselves, how is it that they will know how to choose for themselves the shepherds who must guide them? And how will they be able to solve this problem of social alchemy, of producing a genius from the votes of a mass of fools? And what will happen to the minorities which are still the most intelligent, most active and radical part of a society?"* [Malatesta, **Anarchy**, p. 53]

Hence the need for soviet democracy and self-management, of the demands of the Kronstadt revolt. As Malatesta put it, "[o]nly freedom or the struggle for freedom can be the school for freedom." [Life and Ideas, p. 59] The "epic of Kronstadt" proves "**conclusively that what belongs really to the workers and peasants can be neither governmental nor statist, and what is governmental and statist can belong neither to the workers nor the peasants.**" [Voline, **The Unknown Revolution**, p. 503]

Anarchists are well aware that differences in political perspective exists within the working class. We are also aware of the importance of revolutionaries organising together to influence the class struggle, raising the need for revolution and the creation of working class organisations which can smash and replace the state with a system of self-managed communes and workers' councils. However, we reject the Bolshevik conclusion for centralised power (i.e. power delegated to the centre) as doomed to failure. Rather, we agree with Bakunin who argued that revolutionary groups must "*not seek anything for themselves, neither privilege nor honour nor power*" and reject "*any idea of dictatorship and custodial control.*" The "*revolution everywhere must be created by the people, and supreme control must always belong to the people organised into a free federation of agricultural and industrial associations . . . organised from the bottom upwards by means of revolutionary delegations . . . [who] will set out to administer public services, not to rule over peoples.*" [Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings, p. 172]

Anarchists seek to influence working people directly, via their natural influence in working class organisations like workers' councils, unions and so on. Only by discussion, debate and self-activity can the political perspectives of working class people develop and change. This is impossible in a centralised system based on party dictatorship. Debate and discussion are pointless if they have no effect on the process of the revolution nor if working people cannot elect their own delegates. Nor can self-activity be developed if the government uses "*revolutionary coercion*" against "*waving or unstable elements*" (i.e. those who do not unquestioningly follow the orders of the government or practice initiative).

In other words, the fact Bolshevism uses to justify its support for party power is, in fact, the strongest argument against it. By concentrating power in the hands of a few, the political development of the bulk of the population is hindered. No longer in control of their fate, of **their** revolution, they will become pray to counter-revolutionary tendencies.

Nor was the libertarian approach impossible to implement during a revolution or civil war. Anarchists applied their ideas very successfully in the Makhnovist movement in the Ukraine. In the areas they protected, the Makhnovists refused to dictate to the workers and peasants what to do:

*"The freedom of the peasants and workers, said the Makhnovists, resides in the peasants and workers themselves and may not be restricted. In all fields of their lives it is up to the workers and peasants to construct whatever they consider necessary. As for the Makhnovists -- they can only assist them with advice, by putting at their disposal the intellectual or military forces they need, but under no circumstances can the Makhnovists prescribe for them in advance."* [Peter Arshinov, **The History of the Makhnovist**

**Movement**, p. 148]

The Makhnovists urged workers to form free soviets and labour unions and to use them to manage their own fates. They organised numerous conferences of workers' and peasants' delegates to discuss political and military developments as well as to decide how to re-organise society from the bottom up in a self-managed manner. After they had liberated Aleksandrovsk, for example, they *"invited the working population to participant in a general conference of the workers of the city . . . and it was proposed that the workers organise the life in the city and the functioning of the factories with their own forces and their own organisations."* [Op. Cit., p. 149] In contrast, the Bolsheviks tried to **ban** congresses of workers', peasants' and soldiers' delegates organised by the Makhnovists (once by Dybenko and once by Trotsky). [Op. Cit., pp. 98-104 and 120-5]

The Makhnovists replied by holding the conferences anyway, asking *"[c]an there exist laws made by a few people who call themselves revolutionaries, which permit them to outlaw a whole people who are more revolutionary than they are themselves?"* and *"[w]hose interests should the revolution defend: those of the Party or those of the people who set the revolution in motion with their blood?"* Makhno himself stated that he *"consider[ed] it an inviolable right of the workers and peasants, a right won by the revolution, to call conferences on their own account, to discuss their affairs."* [Op. Cit., p. 103 and p. 129]

These actions by the Bolsheviks should make the reader ponder if the elimination of workers' democracy during the civil war can be fully explained by the objective conditions facing Lenin's government or whether Leninist ideology played an important role in it. Indeed, the Kronstadt revolt occurred, in part, because in February 1921 the administration of the Baltic Fleet and the Communist Party organisation had collapsed, so allowing *"unauthorised meetings of ships' crews . . . [to] tak[e] place behind the backs of their commissars, there being too few loyal rank and file party members left to nip them in the bud."* [I. Getzler, **Kronstadt 1917-1921**, p. 212]

Thus, the anarchist argument is no utopian plan. Rather, it is one which has been applied successfully in the same circumstances which Trotskyists argue forced the Bolsheviks to act as they did. As can be seen, a viable alternative approach existed and was applied (see the appendix on ["Why does the Makhnovist movement show there is an alternative to Bolshevism?"](#) for more on the Makhnovists).

The terrible objective circumstances facing the revolution obviously played a key role in the degeneration of the revolution. However, this is not the whole story. The **ideas** of the Bolsheviks played a key role as well. The circumstances the Bolsheviks faced may have shaped certain aspects of their actions, but it cannot be denied that the impulse for these actions were rooted in Bolshevik theory.

In regards to this type of analysis, the Trotskyist Pierre Frank argues that anarchists think that bureaucratic conceptions *"beget bureaucracy"* and that *"it is ideas, or deviations from them, that determine the character of revolutions. The most simplistic kind of philosophical idealism has laid low historical materialism."* This means, apparently, that anarchists ignore objective factors

in the rise of the bureaucracy such as *"the country's backwardness, low cultural level, and the isolation of the revolution."* [Lenin and Trotsky, **Kronstadt**, pp. 22-3]

Nothing could be further from the truth, of course. What anarchists argue (like Lenin before the October revolution) is that **every** revolution will suffer from isolation, uneven political development, economic problems and so on (i.e. *"exceptional circumstances,"* see [section 12](#)). The question is whether your revolution can survive them and whether your political ideas can meet these challenges without aiding bureaucratic deformations. As can be seen from the Russian Revolution, Leninism fails that test.

Moreover, Frank is being incredulous. If we take his argument seriously then we have to conclude that Bolshevik ideology played **no** role in how the revolution developed. In other words, he subscribes to the contradictory position that Bolshevik politics were essential to the success of the revolution and yet played no role in its outcome.

The facts of the matter is that people are faced with choices, choices that arise from the objective conditions 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 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 "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 and federalism. In other words, political ideas do matter in society. Nor do anarchists leave our analysis at this obvious fact, we also argue that the types of organisation people create and work in shapes the way they think and act. This is because specific kinds of organisation have specific authority relations and so generate specific social relationships. These obviously affect those subject to them -- a centralised, hierarchical system will create authoritarian social relationships which shape those within it in totally different ways than a decentralised, egalitarian system. That Frank denies this obvious fact suggests he knows nothing of materialist philosophy and subscribes to the distinctly lobotomised (and bourgeois) "historical materialism" of Lenin (see Anton Pannekoek's **Lenin as Philosopher** for details).

The attitude of Leninists to the Kronstadt event shows quite clearly that, for all their lip-service to history from below, they are just as fixated with leaders as is bourgeois history. As Cornélius Castoriadis argues:

*"Now, we should point out that it is not workers who write history. It is always the **others**. And these others, whoever they may be, have a historical existence only insofar as the masses are passive, or active simply to support them, and this is precisely what 'the others' will tell us at every opportunity. Most of the time these others will not even possess eyes to see and ears to hear the gestures and utterances that express people's autonomous activity. In the best of instances, they will sing the praises of this activity so*

long as it *miraculously* coincides with their own line, but they will radically condemn it, and impute to it the basest motives, as soon as it strays therefrom. Thus Trotsky describes in grandiose terms the anonymous workers of Petrograd moving ahead of the Bolshevik party or mobilising themselves during the Civil War, but later on he was to characterise the Kronstadt rebels as 'stool pigeons' and 'hirelings of the French High Command.' They lack the categories of thought -- the brain cells, we might dare say -- necessary to understand, or even to record, this activity as it really occurs: to them, an activity that is not instituted, that has neither boss nor program, has no status; it is not even clearly perceivable, except perhaps in the mode of 'disorder' and 'troubles.' The autonomous activity of the masses belongs by definition to what is **repressed** in history." [Op. Cit., p. 91]

The Trotskyist accounts of the Kronstadt revolt, with their continual attempts to portray it as a White conspiracy, proves this analysis is correct. Indeed, the possibility that the revolt was a spontaneous mass revolt with political aims was dismissed by one of them as "absurd" and instead was labelled the work of "backward peasants" being misled by SRs and spies. Like the capitalist who considers a strike the work of "outside agitators" and "communists" misleading their workers, the Trotskyists present an analysis of Kronstadt reeking of elitism and ideological incomprehension. Independence on behalf of the working class is dismissed as "backward" and to be corrected by the "proletarian dictatorship." Clearly Bolshevik ideology played a key role in the rise of Stalinism.

Lastly, the supporters of Bolshevism argue that in suppressing the revolt "the Bolsheviks only did their duty. They defended the conquests of the revolution against the assaults of the counterrevolution." [Wright, Op. Cit., p. 123] In other words, we can expect more Kronstadts if these "revolutionaries" gain power. The "temporary vacillations" of future revolutions will, like Kronstadt, be rectified by bullets when the Party "assert[s] its dictatorship even if its dictatorship clashes even with the passing moods of the workers' democracy." [Trotsky, quoted by M. Brinton, Op. Cit., p. 78] No clearer condemnation of Bolshevism as a socialist current is required.

And, we must ask, what, exactly, **were** these "conquests" of the revolution that must be defended? The suppression of strikes, independent political and labour organisations, elimination of freedom of speech, assembly and press and, of course, the elimination of soviet and union democracy in favour of part dictatorship? Which, of course, for all Leninists, is the **real** revolutionary conquest. Any one who attacks that is, of course, a counter-revolutionary (even if they are workers). Thus:

*"Attitudes to the Kronstadt events, expressed . . . years after the event often provide deep insight into the political thinking of contemporary revolutionaries. They may in fact provide a deeper insight into their conscious or unconscious aims than many a learned discussion about economics, or philosophy or about other episodes of revolutionary history.*

*"It is a question of one's basic attitude as to what socialism is all about. what are*



*epitomised in the Kronstadt events are some of the most difficult problems of revolutionary strategy and revolutionary ethics: the problems of ends and means, of the relations between Party and masses, in fact whether a Party is necessary at all. Can the working class by itself only develop a trade union consciousness? . . .*

*"Or can the working class develop a deeper consciousness and understanding of its interests than can any organisations allegedly acting on its behalf? When Stalinists or Trotskyists speak of Kronstadt as 'an essential action against the class enemy' when some more 'sophisticated' revolutionaries refer to it as a 'tragic necessity,' one is entitled to pause for thought. One is entitled to ask how seriously they accept Marx's dictum that 'the emancipation of the working class is the task of the working class itself.' Do they take this seriously or do they pay mere lip service to the words? Do they identify socialism with the autonomy (organisational and ideological) of the working class? Or do they see themselves, with their wisdom as to the 'historic interests' of others, and with their judgements as to what should be 'permitted,' as the leadership around which the future elite will crystallise and develop? One is entitled not only to ask . . . but also to suggest the answer!" ["Preface", Ida Mett's **The Kronstadt Uprising**, pp. 26-7]*

The issue is simple -- either socialism means the self-emancipation of the working class or it does not. Leninist justifications for the suppression of the Kronstadt revolt simply means that for the followers of Bolshevism, when necessary, the party will paternalistically repress the working class for their own good. The clear implication of this Leninist support of the suppression of Kronstadt is that, for Leninism, it is dangerous to allow working class people to manage society and transform it as they see fit as they will make wrong decisions (like vote for the wrong party). If the party leaders decide a decision by the masses is incorrect, then the masses are overridden (and repressed). So much for "*all power to the soviets*" or "*workers' power.*"

Ultimately, Wright's comments (and those like it) show that Bolshevism's commitment to workers' power and democracy is non-existent. What is there left of workers' self-emancipation, power or democracy when the "workers state" represses the workers for trying to practice these essential features of any real form of socialism? It is the experience of Bolshevism in power that best refutes the Marxist claim that the workers' state "will be democratic and participatory." The suppression of Kronstadt was just one of a series of actions by the Bolsheviks which began, **before** the start of the Civil War, with them abolishing soviets which elected non-Bolshevik majorities, abolishing elected officers and soldiers soviets in the Red Army and Navy and replacing workers' self-management of production by state-appointed managers with "*dictatorial*" powers (see sections [H.4](#) and [2](#) for details).

As Bakunin predicted, the "workers' state" did not, could not, be "participatory" as it was still a state. Kronstadt is part of the empirical evidence which proves Bakunin's predictions on the authoritarian nature of Marxism. These words by Bakunin were confirmed by the Kronstadt rebellion and the justifications made at the time and afterwards by the supporters of Bolshevism:

*"What does it mean, 'the proletariat raised to a governing class?' Will the entire proletariat head the government? The Germans number about 40 million. Will all 40*

*million be members of the government? The entire nation will rule, but no one would be ruled. Then there will be no government, there will be no state; but if there is a state, there will also be those who are ruled, there will be slaves.*

*"In the Marxists' theory this dilemma is resolved in a simple fashion. By popular government they mean government of the people by a small number of representatives elected by the people. So-called popular representatives and rulers of the state elected by the entire nation on the basis of universal suffrage -- the last word of the Marxists, as well as the democratic school -- is a lie behind which the despotism of a ruling minority is concealed, a lie all the more dangerous in that it represents itself as the expression of a sham popular will.*

*"So . . . it always comes down to the same dismal result: government of the vast majority of the people by a privileged minority. But this minority, the Marxists say, will consist of workers. Yes, perhaps, of **former** workers, who, as soon as they become rulers or representatives of the people will cease to be workers and will begin to look upon the whole workers' world from the heights of the state. They will no longer represent the people but themselves and their own pretensions to govern the people. . .*

*"They say that this state yoke, this dictatorship, is a necessary transitional device for achieving the total liberation of the people: anarchy, or freedom, is the goal, and the state, or dictatorship, the means. Thus, for the masses to be liberated they must first be enslaved. . . . They claim that only a dictatorship (theirs, of course) can create popular freedom. We reply that no dictatorship can have any other objective than to perpetuate itself, and that it can engender and nurture only slavery in the people who endure it. Liberty can only be created by liberty, by an insurrection of all the people and the voluntary organisation of the workers from below upward." [Statism and Anarchy, pp. 178-9]*